**Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses**

[Richard Arum](http://www.amazon.com/Richard-Arum/e/B001IOBLZK/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1)  and Josipa Roksa

**Review**

"Academically Adrift might be the most important book on higher education in a decade. Combined with students' limited effort and great disparities in benefits among students, Arum and Roksa's findings raise questions that should have been raised long ago about who profits from college and what colleges need to do if they are to benefit new groups of students. In this new era of college for all, their analysis refocuses our attention on higher education's fundamental goals." - James Rosenbaum, Northwestern University"

**Product Description**

In spite of soaring tuition costs, more and more students go to college every year. A bachelor’s degree is now required for entry into a growing number of professions. And some parents begin planning for the expense of sending their kids to college when they’re born. Almost everyone strives to go, but almost no one asks the fundamental question posed by *Academically Adrift*: are undergraduates really learning anything once they get there?  For a large proportion of students, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s answer to that question is a definitive no. Their extensive research draws on survey responses, transcript data, and, for the first time, the state-of-the-art Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardized test administered to students in their first semester and then again at the end of their second year. **According to their analysis of more than 2,300 undergraduates at twenty-four institutions, 45 percent of these students demonstrate no significant improvement in a range of skills—including critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing—during their first two years of college.** As troubling as their findings are, Arum and Roksa argue that for many faculty and administrators they will come as no surprise—instead, they are the expected result of a student body distracted by socializing or working and an institutional culture that puts undergraduate learning close to the bottom of the priority list. *Academically Adrift* holds sobering lessons for students, faculty, administrators, policy makers, and parents—all of whom are implicated in promoting or at least ignoring contemporary campus culture. Higher education faces crises on a number of fronts, but Arum and Roksa’s report that colleges are failing at their most basic mission will demand the attention of us all.

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**A Bombshell!**, January 21, 2011

By

[**Loyd E. Eskildson "Pragmatist"**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A22RY8N8CNDF3A/ref=cm_cr_dp_pdp) (Phoenix, AZ.) - [See all my reviews](http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A22RY8N8CNDF3A/ref=cm_cr_dp_auth_rev?ie=UTF8&sort_by=MostRecentReview) [(TOP 50 REVIEWER)](http://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html/ref=cm_rn_bdg_help?ie=UTF8&nodeId=14279681&pop-up=1#TR)    [(REAL NAME)](http://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html/ref=cm_rn_bdg_help?ie=UTF8&nodeId=14279681&pop-up=1#RN)

**This review is from: Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (Paperback)**

This book couldn't be more potentially explosive if its contents were 100% highly-enriched uranium; unfortunately, the vested interests realize this and are already hard at work smothering the authors' findings. Authors Richard Arum (sociology and education professor at New York University) and Josipa Roksa (professor of sociology at the University of Virginia) studied over 2,000 undergraduates from Fall 2005 to Spring 2009 at two dozen universities (large public flagship institutions, highly selective liberal-arts colleges, and institutions that historically serve blacks and Hispanics). They determined that 45% "demonstrated no significant gains in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communications during the first two years of college," and 36% showed no improvement over the entire four years. Including dropouts would have made the findings even worse. Further, those that did improve did so only modestly on average - eg. moving from the 50th percentile to the 68th in those four years. These findings severely undermine President Obama's proposal to boost the proportion of U.S. college graduates from 40% to 60% in ten years, parents' sacrifices to send their children to college, students incurring crushing amounts of college debt, and the rationale for average tuitions now having risen to 257% of their 1986 levels.   The author's assessment was made using the respected 'Collegiate Learning Assessment' (CLA) from the Council for Aid to Education. That group adds that "Academically Adrift" confirms their own findings, and that when combined with our 47 million high school dropouts and the fact that 40% of entering college students cannot read, write, or compute at a college-ready level makes our overall education outputs even dimmer - despite world-leading per-pupil expenditure levels.   The main culprit, per Arum and Roksa, is lack of academic rigor. The authors also found that 32% of the students they studied did not take any courses with 40 pages or more of reading/week, and 50% did not take a single course in which they wrote more than 20 pages during the semester. The authors also report that students spend an average of only 12-14 hours/week studying - 50% less than a few decades ago (per Babcock and Marks), and much of that study took place in fashionable but inefficient groups (per the data analysis). Another conclusion from the authors - instructors tend to be more focused on their own research than teaching. Despite this lack of effort, professor Arum also noes that the students studied averaged a 3.2 GPA. The 'good news' is that students reporting high expectations from faculty members did better, and 23% of the variation in CLA performance occurred across institutions.   The authors' findings are also consistent, per the New York Times (1/17/2010), with the National Survey of Student Engagement's previous review of thousands of students at almost six hundred colleges. That survey found that 12% of first-year students did essentially no quantitative reasoning activity in their coursework, and 51% of seniors had not written a paper during their final year that was at least 20 pages long - even at the top 10% of schools in the study. Similarly, The American Council of Trustees and Alumni study of more than 700 top educational institutions found that students can graduate with ever having exposure to composition, American history, or economics ("The Washington Post, 1/19/2011), while the National Assessment of Adult Literacy found the percentage of college graduates proficient in prose literacy decline from 40% to 31% in the past decade.   The authors found that students in traditional liberal-arts fields improved more on the CLA, education, business and social-work students didn't do so well.   Authors Arum and Roksa recommend increased measurement of student learning, increased faculty expectations from their pupils, improved K-12 performance, and less emphasis on group study. They conclude with a question: "How much are students actually learning in higher education?" Their answer - "for many, not much." They may graduate (57%), but they're failing to develop higher-order cognitive skills - exactly the skills that educators use to excuse our dismal comparative performance on international assessments of K-12 learning.   Bottom-Line: "Academically Adrift's" findings are also consistent with studies of K-12 international achievement that found we're out-worked by our competitors. Why then do so many Asians come to American colleges: weekend observations at nearby Arizona State University indicate they're much more internally motivated, evidenced by my repeated observations that almost all the students in the library then are Asians, even though their overall enrollment is relatively small. American students must similarly become much more motivated. Meanwhile, Kevin Care, policy director of independent think tank Education Sector summarizes the situation well - colleges can no longer say "Trust Us" in response to questions about how much their students learn ("The Chronicle of Higher Education," 1/18/2011).

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I deeply admire and appreciate this book. I have taught at the college level for over fifteen years and this book confirms my long-held suspicion about the crisis of undergraduate education in this country (especially in the humanities). As an educator, I felt obligated to pay close attention to this book. Many people will not be happy with its findings, yet as a society we must pay attention to brutal facts: our students are failing in the areas of critical reading and thinking. Is a liberal arts education truly a social priority? My students struggle with basic composition and expressing ideas in writing. I wish these findings were in some way exaggerated or false. I've taught at over a dozen community colleges, UC campuses, and at two private universities--these findings are no surprise and do not contradict my classroom teaching experiences. In an era of education budget cuts, classroom down-sizing, and class cancellations are we really surprised by the results? Are we really surprised as higher education is becoming more 'McDonaldized' by a 'consumerism' corporate model? How about the ever-increasing trend of universities exploiting adjunct faculty and lecturers? In many English depts the part-time faculty ('freeway flyers') outnumber full-time faculty. This book is not an alarmist 'Closing of the American Mind.' However, it draws a similar conclusion: We are failing in the democratic project of an informed citizenry. But do we care? This book begs the question of our values and socio-economic priorities. Are we ruled by secular nihilism? What is the intrinsic value of a college education these days? Can we put a price on higher education? What's the value of incurring debt for a college education? Also, how is higher education really serving student interests? WHAT ABOUT ALL THE BUREACRATIC RHETORIC OF 'STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES'?? In California, community colleges were required to make curriculum changes based on revised 'critical thinking' student learning outcomes (SLO's). And the benefits?? Do such policy changes truly improve student academic performance and achievement?? Most university literature depts are increasingly under the influence of hodge podge 'cultural studies.' What if we teach canonical literature!? (And not literature for other means). Fancy that. We need to teach critical thinking in courses that focus on 'how to read' difficult books (at the proper level). We need to skip lessons on the simulacra of shopping malls or the semiotics of billboards; we need to teach individual pupils how to closely read actual books and print material. That is, we need to return to the basics--teach the next generation how to read and write! I'll recommend a few excellent books: Hubert Dreyfus's 'All Things Shining,' Anthony O'Hear's 'Great Books,' and Terry Eagleton's 'How to Read a Poem.'