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Why Students Don't Write

Educating in the Era of Credentialing

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

By Kristine Johnson

In 2005, the Spellings Commission declared a crisis in American higher education: at the same time that colleges and universities are becoming less accessible and less accountable, they are failing to prepare the workforce and struggling to maintain international status. Extending the national focus on educational accountability into higher education, the Spellings Report called for information about the quality and cost of college degrees. Policymakers and government officials are questioning how much undergraduates learn and, in the interest of greater accountability, are urging colleges to publicize data about student success.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) has gained

great capital in this crisis narrative. The authors claim that American students are learning very little—at best—during their first two years of college. Although the book may be criticized on methodological grounds, it is helpful reading for faculty and administrators at Jesuit colleges and universities, institutions with aims that Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa argue have been lost in American higher education: educating with intellectual rigor and a commitment to society.

Academically Adrift reports on a study of 2,322 students enrolled at twenty-four four-year American colleges and universities. These students were nationally representative of traditional-age undergraduate students in terms of

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racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds; high school grades; and scores on standardized college entrance exams. Arum and Roksa used the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to measure learning during the first two years of college; students were tested in Fall 2005 as incoming freshman and in Spring 2007 at the end of their sophomore year. Through a performance task and two analytical writing tasks, the CLA claims to measure general skills such as critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing rather than specific content knowledge. The mean gain in CLA scores was seven percentile points, and the authors conclude that “many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their journeys through higher education.” Yet the top ten percent of students improved forty-three percentile points, and these high-performing students came from all family backgrounds, academic preparations, and racial/ethnic groups. Because some students did indeed make remarkable gains during their first two years of college, Arum and Roksa go on to ask how “specific college experiences and contexts can shape” growth after students enter college.

Three factors emerged as significant for learning growth: spending time studying alone, taking classes from faculty with high expectations, and taking classes that require more than forty pages of reading per week and more than twenty pages of writing during the semester. For those who teach college writing and rhetoric courses, the last finding—that writing positively correlates with growth in learning—is certainly not surprising because it confirms decades of composition research. However, Arum and Roksa found that fifty percent of students reported not taking a single course requiring more than twenty pages of writing in a semester. This finding is especially troubling if we assume that more than fifty percent of students take a writing course during their first two years of college, and it may also indicate that opportunities to undertake substantial writing projects have dissipated in postsecondary classrooms as they have in secondary classrooms.

Moral authority, or just a credential?

Though Arum and Roksa ultimately draw narrow conclusions, their work suggests a broader claim: higher education has shifted from an institution that embraced moral authority for student development to an institution that simply credentials workers. They identify a shift in the way faculty and administrators view their roles: “Many higher-education administrators and faculty today have largely turned away from earlier conceptions of

their roles that recognized that providing supporting for student academic and social development was a moral imperative worth sacrificing for personally, professionally, and institutionally.” Students leave college not only academically adrift but perhaps morally and socially adrift, without the virtues to become engaged citizens. Arum and Roksa do not argue for a return to these values, but they contend that envisioning American higher education as credentialing neglects the moral, social, and intellectual factors that are integral to thinking, reasoning, and writing—to *eloquentia perfecta* in the classroom and in the world.

Within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, *Academically Adrift* has received significant criticism for its bold claims about student writing. The entire study is based on results from the CLA, which assesses writing in ways that are neither authentic nor perhaps valid—a ninety-minute test that now scores analytical writing by machine. Composition scholars argue that the authors manufacture an educational crisis by interpreting their results quite negatively and citing only studies that found similarly discouraging results. Though the sample group as a whole and each subgroup recorded statistically significant gains, they nonetheless conclude the gains were limited, overlooking other studies that show improvement throughout the undergraduate years. Arum and Roksa use these results to call for deeper dedication to undergraduate education: more rigorous classes, more contact between faculty and students, and more faculty time devoted to teaching. These goals are certainly admirable, but they also obscure economic and material realities. Many of the courses students take during the first years of college are taught by teaching assistants or contingent faculty, and the credentialing model directing American higher education may not allow for this dedication to undergraduate education.

Academically Adrift calls attention to the widespread perception—one held by faculty, administrators, and students—that a college degree is simply a credential to be deployed in the economic market. Policy statements such as the Spellings Report reinforce this perception, focusing on student learning as a way to assign value to the credential. In this educational landscape, faculty and administrators from Jesuit colleges and universities may reflect on the ways in which their work challenges this perception by aiming to educate students ethically, morally, and intellectually. Although standardized assessment instruments cannot measure these ethical and moral goals, *Academically Adrift* highlights their importance not only for student learning but also for the continued existence of American higher education as a public good. ■