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

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The George Washington University

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Source (University of Chicago Press, January 2011):

Academically adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa
Research Questions

- Are students improving their critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during college?
- Are students’ ascriptive characteristics associated with inequality in college learning?
- What specific experiences and college contexts are associated with student learning?
- What are recent graduates’ experiences after completing college?
Determinants of College Learning Dataset

- Longitudinal Design
  - College surveys: Fall 2005, Spring 2007, Spring 2009
  - Post-college surveys: Spring 2010 and Spring 2011

- Large Scale
  - 2005–2007: 24 diverse four-year institutions; 2,341 students (*Academically Adrift*)
  - 2005–2009: 29 diverse four-year institutions, 1,666 students

- Breadth of Information
  - Family background and high school information, college experiences and contexts, college transcripts
  - Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)
Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)

- **Dimensions of learning assessed**
  - critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication

- **Distinguishing characteristics**
  - Direct measures (as opposed to student reports)
  - NOT multiple choice
  - Holistic assessment based on open-ended prompts representing “real-world” scenarios

- **Used in other contexts**
  - One of the measures of learning used by VSA
  - Will be utilized in 2016 by OECD–AHELO project
Performance Task (example)

Jamie Eager is a candidate who is opposing Pat Stone for reelection. Eager critiques the mayor’s solution to reducing crime by increasing the number of police officers. Eager proposes the city support a drug education program for addicts because, according to Eager, addicts are the major source of the city’s crime problem.
Performance Task (example, cont.)

Students are provided with a set of materials (e.g. newspaper articles, crime and drug statistics, research briefs, internal administrative memos, etc.) and asked to prepare a memo that addresses several issues, including a) evaluate the validity of Eager’s proposal and b) assess the validity of Eager’s criticism of the mayor’s plan to increase the number of officers.

http://www.collegiatelearningassessment.org/
Course Requirements

Note: Based on Spring 2007 survey.
Students’ Time Use

- Attending class/lab: 9%
- Studying: 7%
- Working, volunteering, fraternities/sororities, and student clubs: 9%
- Sleeping (estimated): 24%
- Socializing, recreating, and other: 51%

Note: Based on Spring 2007 survey.
Academic Commitment Over Time
(source: Phillip Babcock and Mindy Marks, forthcoming 2010)

Academic time from 1925-1965 in time diaries relatively constant (39.2 to 34.1)
CLA Gains 2005–2007 (performance task)

- 0.18 standard deviations – 7 percentile point gain (0.47 sd, 18 percentile points, 2005–2009)

- No statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills for 45 percent of the students in the sample (36 percent, 2005–2009)
Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores, student characteristics, and institutions attended.
Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores, student characteristics, and institutions attended.
Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores.
Inequality in CLA Performance: Parental Education

Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Inequality in CLA Performance: African American vs. White

Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Institutional Variation

23 percent of CLA growth between 2005 and 2009 occurs across institutions
Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Graduate Transitions

- **Status – Spring 2011 follow-up (about 2 yrs. out)**
  - 31% enrolled in graduate school full-time
  - 52% full-time employment ($35,000 mean earnings)
  - 11% part-time employment (16% of non FT students)
  - 5% unemployed (7% of non FT students)

- **Other outcomes**
  - 66% report college loans ($26,000 mean)
  - 24% are living with parents/relatives
  - Low civic engagement
    - 32% monthly or never read newspapers on-line/in-print
    - 39% monthly or never discuss politics/public affairs
Transitions by 2009 CLA Performance Task Score

- Living at home
  - Top quintile
  - Middle (3) quintiles
  - Bottom quintile

- Unemployed
  - Top quintile
  - Middle (3) quintiles
  - Bottom quintile
Transitions by Academic Engagement/Growth in College

- **Living at home**
  - High engagement/growth
  - Medium engagement/growth
  - Low engagement/growth

- **Unemployed**
  - Medium engagement/growth
  - Low engagement/growth
Policy Recommendations

- Federal imposed accountability would be counterproductive (existing measurements are imperfect; unintended consequences likely)

- Accountability should operate at lower levels in the system

- Federal resources could provide incentives for institutional improvement, innovation and assessment

- Federal resources needed to develop research infrastructure to advance scientific knowledge of learning in higher education
Recommendations for Institutional Improvement

- Institutional leadership to emphasize learning, develop plans for improvement and support ongoing assessment of both program quality and student learning outcomes.

- Faculty collective responsibility for ensuring academic rigor across programs and classes (i.e., course requirements and appropriate grading standards).

- Promote organizational cultures emphasizing student academic engagement, not just social engagement and student retention.
### Institutional Characteristics 2005–2007

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<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>CLA Analysis Sample</th>
<th>IPEDS – CLA Schools</th>
<th>IPEDS – All Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Scores</th>
<th>CLA Analysis Sample</th>
<th>IPEDS – CLA Schools</th>
<th>IPEDS – All Schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAT, 25&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; percentile</td>
<td>1052.83</td>
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<td>26.29</td>
<td>25.77</td>
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</table>
Recommendations for Institutional Improvement – Administrative Leadership

- Promote organizational cultures emphasizing student learning – both symbolically and substantively:
  ◦ Evaluate internal incentive structures
  ◦ Support ongoing assessment of program quality and student learning outcomes
  ◦ Develop plans for improvement
  ◦ Monitor implementation of improvement plans
  ◦ Align resource allocation decisions with academic goals

- Work collaboratively – improvement of academic rigor and undergraduate learning are issues that faculty, students and administrators should work on together.
Faculty must assume individual and collective responsibility for ensuring adequate academic rigor across programs and classes – with reviews at course, department and school level:
- course requirements (e.g., levels of reading and writing)
- course expectations (i.e., study hours)
- grading standards
- core curriculum

Faculty should have high expectations for their students and communicate expectations clearly and consistently.
Internal deliberations warranted to review criteria used for decisions related to tenure, promotion and compensation:

- Do we have the right balance in our weighting of faculty teaching, research and service?

- Are we using multiple indicators to assess teaching quality (e.g., syllabi review, peer observation, samples of student work)?

- Are the measures of instructional quality used properly aligned with the goal of promoting academic rigor and student learning outcomes (i.e., not simply measures of student satisfaction)?
Recommendations for Institutional Improvement – Administrative Support Services

- Institutional research required for ongoing assessment of student academic experiences and learning outcomes. [Since students move across programs, institutional-level mechanisms required to monitor overall student academic experiences/outcomes].

- Institutional teaching and learning support services for faculty improvement efforts. [Since faculty often are not trained to teach in their graduate programs].

- Align student support services with goal of promoting student academic performance, not just social engagement or student retention, wellbeing and consumer satisfaction.
The Wabash Study

**Four-Year Change**

- **Critical Thinking**: Start: -0.6, Year 1: 0.11, Year 2: 0.2, Year 3: 0.37, Year 4: 0.44
- **Academic Motivation**: Start: -0.45, Year 1: -0.45, Year 2: -0.45, Year 3: -0.45, Year 4: -0.45

*Effect size (sd)*