

Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 7

January 2011

Review of Richard Arum's Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

Matthew Johnson

University of Mary Washington, matthew.j.johnson@ttu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Matthew (2011) "Review of Richard Arum's Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.58809/REAI7541

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol3/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roska. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. xi, 259 p. ISBN 9780226028569. \$25.

In *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roska ask a simple question: how much do students learn in the United States' four-year colleges and universities? They suggest that the answer is "not much" (p. 34). In their study, forty-five percent of students showed no significant gain in "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills" (p. 36) during their first two years in college. After surveying course requirements and students' study habits, the authors are not surprised by their findings. According to the authors, the average college student spends only about

twelve hours per week studying and about twenty percent of seniors and freshmen report coming to class “frequently unprepared and indicate that their institutions gave little emphasis to academic work” (p. 37). Furthermore, less than half of students take a class that requires them both to read more than forty pages per week and to write more than twenty pages during the semester.

Arum and Roska argue that there is plenty of blame to go around. They blame elementary and secondary school teachers for focusing on standardized tests, rather than imparting to students a “love of learning for learning’s sake” (p. 127); higher education faculty for accepting mediocre work from students and emphasizing research, rather than teaching effectiveness; students for seeking out the least rigorous courses; and higher education administrators for pitching the university as a social setting, rather than a place for rigorous study. In other words, higher education is in crisis and low academic standards in colleges and universities and poor preparation at the primary and secondary levels are at the root of the problem.

Arum and Roska join a growing group of scholars, including Derek Bok, Andrew Hacker, Claudia Dreifus, and Marc Taylor, who have investigated the value of higher education and suggested that higher learning is in crisis in the United States. It is perhaps no coincidence that these studies are growing during a period of economic uncertainty; a time when many college graduates are walking off the graduation stage into the difficult world of student loan debt and unemployment or underemployment. The economic recession of the 1970s also sparked critiques of higher education. Readers might remember popular appraisals of higher education, such as Richard Freeman’s *The Overeducated American* (1976). These works, however, questioned whether the economic benefits of a post-secondary degree were worth the cost. In contrast, the emerging group of critics primarily measures the value of higher education based on what students learn, rather than on what students will eventually earn after college.

Academically Adrift stands out in this new crowd. Whereas most of the recent critics of post-secondary institutions largely rely on anecdotal evidence, Arum and Roska use data from 2,322 students who took the College Learning Assessment (CLA) during the first semester of their freshman year (Fall 2005) and the final semester of their sophomore year (Spring 2007) to support their arguments. The CLA assesses “core outcomes espoused by all of education—critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and writing” through a performance task and two analytical essays. The results, mentioned above, paint a bleak picture of higher learning.

Arum and Roska’s application of CLA data does invite some criticism.

For example, the CLA evaluates students' progress over only two years, which limits the findings of the study; however, the authors often want to stretch their data to show that students make little progress over their entire college experience. In one instance, they clumsily use survey data showing upper-classmen often report coming to class unprepared and that their institutions do not emphasize academic work in order to suggest that under these circumstances "students are likely to learn no more in the last two years than they did in the first two" (p. 37). Furthermore, the authors undervalue other skills and knowledge sets that students gain in higher education by focusing exclusively on writing and critical thinking.

The growing cohort of authors who argue that post-secondary institutions are failing to effectively educate students have received criticism for proposing extreme or impractical reforms. For example, Marc Taylor has suggested that post-secondary institutions should abolish traditional departments and create "problem-focused programs" around issues, such as water and time. Arum and Roska's solutions are moderate in comparison. Surprisingly, in a study that relies on a standardized test to measure learning outcomes, the authors do not suggest that colleges and universities should adopt similar tests. In sum, Arum and Roska are reluctant to propose a No Child Left Behind model for higher education. Nevertheless, they still use a word that many within higher education are uncomfortable with: accountability. Because they connect learning gains to a rigorous curriculum, the authors suggest that institutions of higher education need to be held accountable for creating a rigorous learning environment. Arum and Roska suggest that accrediting organizations might be the best bodies to hold colleges and universities accountable, but the authors do not lay out the methods accrediting organizations should use to measure whether higher education institutions are effectively educating students. As a result, the final section of *Academically Adrift*, which points to possible solutions is much weaker, than the previous chapters that analyze CLA data.

Despite the book's moderate proposals, some critics have painted this book as misguided punditry. Readers of *Teacher-Scholar*, however, would be remiss not to take this book seriously. Arum and Roska's use and analysis of CLA data, although sometimes flawed, lift this book out of punditry and into serious scholarship. They show that almost half of college students do not improve on important skills that they should gain in their first years in college, and they convincingly connect this problem to the lack of academic rigor at many universities. Likewise, although their recommendations for more accountability are vague and incomplete, they raise an important question about whether we are entering a new era where the federal government or accrediting agencies will find new ways to hold universities accountable for learning

outcomes. The future regulatory environment is uncertain and faculty members and administrators should take note of the growing critique of higher learning as well as these new conversations about accountability.

Matthew Johnson
University of Mary Washington