

BOOK REVIEW:

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 272 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-2260-2856-9. Paperback, \$25.00

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To say that *Academically Adrift* is the “must read” for every assessment professional for 2011 is an understatement. Richard Arum and Josipa Roska’s book has received more attention than most publications about student learning in higher education, which means the work of assessment on college and university campuses will once again be under scrutiny from a varied group of constituents and otherwise interested parties. As such, careful reading and consideration of *Academically Adrift* may prove essential to all assessment professionals attending committee meetings and cocktail parties alike. While the overall message of the book – that institutions must take greater responsibility for student learning – resonates, it is in the details of the research design and subsequent conclusions that one must proceed cautiously before extrapolating beyond the logical limits of the study.

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The relatively short book is organized into five chapters plus a detailed “Methodological Appendix,” leading the reader first through a brief history of *College Cultures and Student Learning* (the title of the first chapter) to highlight “four core ‘important lessons’”, specifically that:

1. Colleges and universities, and the students who attend them, are ‘academically adrift’;
2. Gains in student performance, as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), are disturbingly low;
3. Individual learning is characterized by persistent and/or growing inequality; and
4. Student performance on the CLA varies greatly both within and across institutions.

(Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 30)

The three following chapters serve to delineate each lesson. The second chapter guides the reader through such topical minefields as racial and ethnic inequality

in CLA performance, educational experiences, and outcomes. Chapter three examines students’ academic engagement and their experience of college life by looking at self-reported data on their interaction with faculty and peers, courses taken, amount of homework completed, as well as how they were financing college. Both chapters lay the groundwork for the fourth chapter, in which they explore the relationship between the self-reported data, other available student information (e.g., SAT/ACT scores, GPA, demographics), and CLA scores. These relationships coalesce as the proposed conceptual framework (p. 118), which visually represents the relationships between pre-college factors, pre-test scores on the CLA, college factors, and CLA post-test scores. Chapter four essentially concludes that not only is American undergraduate education broken, but everyone – administrators, policy makers, faculty, parents, and the students themselves – is complicit.

The final chapter, with its charge-taking title *Mandate for Reform*, argues that rather than dismantling the entire higher education system within the United States, “all higher education institutions could focus increased attention on the academic component of undergraduate learning without fundamental challenge to the existing system” (p. 129). Appropriate changes – and by appropriate, the authors remind the reader that they mean changes designed to improve students’ performance on the CLA’s measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication (p. 141) – include such things as having students take more courses that require 40 pages of reading per week and 20 pages of writing per semester, and de-emphasizing current trends toward collaborative learning in classes. Throughout the book, Arum and Roksa artfully intersperse results from a variety of other studies of higher education, from empirical investigations of student engagement to one faculty member’s anthropological exploration of students’ experiences of their first year at her own institution, to make their case. *Academically Adrift* makes for a very compelling narrative.

Because the book is so compelling, it is important to proceed cautiously in how one uses it. As a touchstone for important, perhaps even difficult conversations about what a college or university values educationally and how it translates those values into measurable and meaningful student learning outcomes for *all* students, *Academically Adrift* holds great promise. As a specific roadmap toward reforming undergraduate education, it is less powerful. Despite the tone of its title, the final chapter of the book is more circumspect, as the authors reference some of the limitations of the study by explicitly acknowledging the need to move beyond using observational data of the kind they examined to longitudinal studies that

utilize experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Furthermore, they stipulate that while the CLA is a promising measure from a “sociological perspective”, they admit that “we are not at a stage of scientific knowledge where college students’ learning outcomes can be measured with sufficient precision to justify embracing a coercive accountability system without significant reservations” (p. 141). But do such admonitions and caveats go far enough to acknowledge the limitations of the CLA specifically, or the challenges and limitations of assessing student learning more generally?

One of the most compelling lessons supposedly learned from this study is compromised by sample size issues. The authors note that while there is variation between institutions, there is even more variation within institutions, and that there are high-performers (students who scored in the top 10% of the CLA growth distribution) at every campus in the sample. The next logical step would be to look within and carefully examine the data at individual institutions to see what worked and what did not when it came to developing critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills. Due to issues with the sample, however, such an analysis is not possible. So while institutions matter, and while at every institution in the sample something worked to help develop students’ learning as measured by the CLA, it is difficult to know what else might help explain variance within institutions otherwise absent the conceptual framework from *Academically Adrift*.

While the authors go to great lengths to demonstrate the representativeness of the convenience sample used in their study, they give less attention to the myriad specific psychometric issues raised about standardized testing for accountability in general (e.g., Banta, 2008) and the CLA specifically (Pike, 2006; Shermis, 2008). Without rehashing in detail territory well-covered by measurement experts, instead it may be helpful to remember a few words of advice offered by Patrick Terenzini in his piece “Assessment with Open Eyes: Pitfalls in Studying Student Outcomes”. First published in 1989, and reprinted in 2010, this thoughtful essay holds several nuggets of truth applicable to any reading of *Academically Adrift*. First and foremost, the reader must remember that “research design is a series of compromises” (Terenzini, 2010, p. 38).

The authors’ major compromise was in the use of the dataset itself; they themselves admit to feeling frustrated at the lack of existing longitudinal datasets for

higher education like those found for K-12 education (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 19). Key to this data was the use of the CLA as the sole performance measure of student learning. The CLA utilizes a *value-added* framework; that is, it is designed to try to isolate the change in student learning that is attributable to or *caused* by the institution. Again, Terenzini reminds us that value-added is both metaphor and research design. As a metaphor, it borders on the intuitive, but as a statistical operation, value-added is more problematic, and “potentially more dangerous” (Terenzini, 2010, p. 42). The danger rests in its unreliability, whether due to a lack of random assignment (despite idiosyncrasies in admissions processes, students are not randomly assigned to attend different institutions), ceiling effect, or regression toward the mean from the pre- to the post-test (Terenzini, 2010), never mind the question of student motivation on performance measures devoid of context or connection to their courses or other educational experiences. And while the authors suggest that institutional “internal self-assessment efforts ideally would be built on a diverse set of measures tracking teaching

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and learning within an institution” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 139), of which the CLA may be one measure, they give short shrift to what such diverse measures beyond the CLA might include. For example, they make passing reference to research commissioned by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) about the potential power of capstones and portfolios for student learning outcomes assessment without any mention

of that same organization’s national effort to develop a common set of rubrics to measure outcomes like critical thinking and written communication, among others, under the auspices of the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project. From an assessment perspective, that omission is a glaring one when writing about measuring student learning and, more importantly, improving the educational experience at the undergraduate level—an area in which AAC&U is arguably and increasingly viewed as the primary organizational voice from an advocacy and policy perspective.

The disconnect, from an assessment perspective, is not that *Academically Adrift* explored potentially ugly truths about undergraduate education, but that its very tone and tenor lends itself to grander generalizations than current data supports. For the assessment professional, the power behind *Academically Adrift* is that it raises critical questions and posits directions for future research that should be explored by institutions. In turn, the assessment

challenge of *Academically Adrift* will be identifying its strengths while addressing its limitations to others without killing the messengers. Arum and Roksa's work, if viewed as a thought-provoking first step in what should be a long line of research, may be another opportunity for promoting student learning assessment on campus.

References

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