

Book Review

Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College.
Richard Arum & Josipa Roksa. Chicago, IL:
University of Chicago Press, 2014. 264 pp.
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In *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates* (2014), a follow-up to *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011), Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa take a close look at the class of 2009 as they graduate from college. The book's primary purpose is to highlight collegiate experiences from student perspectives, while examining relationships between their college experiences and transitions into post-collegiate adulthood. Although not receiving similar levels of attention and critique as their first work, *Aspiring Adults Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2014) provides useful information to higher education practitioners as we refine our efforts to collect valid and reliable data on post-college outcomes. As the national discussion about higher education outcomes and value continues, this study provides a few tools to improve the measurement of learning outcomes. The book provides a solid examination of student perspectives on transitions from college while re-emphasizing calls for greater academic rigor and attention to data collection from new graduates.

In the first chapter, the authors present current criticisms of higher education similar to those in *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011). These critiques include their observations on a general lack of rigor in student academic work and increased administrator hiring as a function of the continued growth of the "personnel perspective" (p. 9) model of higher education that emphasizes customer support and student services rather than academic achievement. The authors note that the economic landscape plays a significant factor in the transitions from college to emerging adulthood because the recent recession was well underway when the population in this study was graduating and seeking employment. The authors restate their opinion that the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) remains one of the only functional measurements of critical thinking skills currently in broad use. Those familiar with *Academically Adrift* will find some repeated themes in the opening chapter. For others, presented is a solid foundation of the authors' perspectives of higher education while laying out their intentions for this study. Reading their first study is not a pre-requisite to engaging with this material.

In the second chapter, qualitative interview data support the ongoing analysis of CLA results. Arum and Roksa quote students throughout the study to portray typical undergraduate experiences, job search challenges,

and overwhelming optimism for the next stages in life. Interview data support the authors' claims of the power of social networks, life balance, and getting along with others during the undergraduate experience. The qualitative data also suggest that academic experiences are of secondary importance, after socializing, for most students. The second chapter re-states many conclusions from *Academically Adrift* regarding limited learning gains as measured by the CLA, before presenting new information on how those academic limitations affect transition into graduate school. Graduates who scored highly on the CLA were more likely to enroll full-time in post-graduate programs than peers with lower CLA scores, after controlling for other factors that might affect this outcome. Institutions that participate in the CLA have a model to use in testing these results and perhaps a method to integrate national test outcomes into campus learning assessment conversations.

Chapter three presents student transitions into the labor market and opens with a brief review of three contemporary reasons why college matters: developing cognitive capabilities (human capital), the receipt of the degree (credentialism), and the establishment of relationship networks (social capital). The authors suggest that students in their study are "struggling" two years after their 2009 graduation, categorized as either unemployed (7%) or underemployed (4%), with an additional 13% of the class employed in "occupations requiring only minimal education" (p. 54). The authors report on how CLA scores may predict some labor market outcomes, stating that "CLA performance is significantly associated with the likelihood of experiencing unemployment" (p. 61) though the practical difference is small; moving from five to seven percent unemployment for lower CLA scorers. However,

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neither CLA scores nor selectivity of institutions are associated with income of full-time employed graduates. The authors emphasize the importance of using on campus career services, internships, formal and informal personal connections, and formal job advertisements and search services to identify a first job after graduation. The third chapter provides evidence that students who demonstrate greater capacity for critical thinking, as measured by the CLA, fare better in the labor market than those who do not. For assessment practitioners this chapter provides some potentially useful guidelines on how to pair CLA results with graduates' outcomes to supplement student academic experiences and inform campus discussions on outcome measurement. As small private colleges debate

their purposes of education for its own sake versus career preparation, this section provides evidence that academic rigor, particularly with developing critical thinking abilities, may lead to success in outcomes.

Graduates' lives after college are examined via qualitative data in the fourth chapter as the authors present findings on living arrangements, romantic relationships, and limited world engagement encased by overwhelming optimism about their individual futures. Unsurprisingly, higher unemployment is strongly related to higher rates of living at home with parents. Most graduates who had romantic partners after two years met as students (40%). The authors note the continuing decline in community engagement and reading current events reported by recent graduates. College selectivity matters more than CLA scores in reported civic and political awareness. Demonstrating unbridled optimism, despite the bleak economic situation as students entered the labor market in 2009, most report that their lives were better, or they expect improved outcomes compared to their parents when the same age. Using the evidence presented in this chapter including delayed attainment of financial independence and limited civic engagement, the authors claim that new college graduates are aimlessly drifting into adulthood, carrying their collegiate attitudes "characteristic more of meandering than of purposeful discovery" (p. 112) into life after college. Projects such as the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (<http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/research/nslve/>) are attempting to provide more evidence to support or refute some of the conclusions in this chapter. Arum and Roksa seemed to be bothered more by the "drifting" than the students themselves, who maintained hope and positive outlooks for their futures.

The final chapter, using more qualitative data, focuses on new graduate challenges and experiences in searching for employment and graduate school outcomes. The authors reiterate their criticism that contemporary colleges have permitted themselves to be defined by the preferences of their undergraduates, rather than promote a rigorous intellectual and social development atmosphere for students. Regardless of the validity of that claim, assessment professionals will appreciate the conclusions that attempt to clearly define learning outcomes and call for better tools to measure student learning, ultimately leading to improved performance for colleges and universities. The authors conclude the study with three recommended institutional strategies that might lead to improved early labor market outcomes for graduates. First is an admittedly cynical approach to simply increase the proportion of students who major in particular fields with high early career payoffs. The second approach, slightly less cynical, is to expand career readiness programs on campus while increasing internships and relationships with potential employers. Lastly, and probably most genuinely, the authors propose that institutions enhance academic rigor and improve student learning in both subject-specific content and "generic competencies such as critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication" (p. 134).

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Aspiring Adults Adrift concludes with notes on the methodology, detailed tables of results from their analyses of the survey, and interview data and examples of the instruments used to collect both the qualitative and quantitative data from the students. The authors' intent to highlight student experiences in transitions to adults benefitted from their mixed method approach. Student words help to emphasize struggles facing graduates while linking those experiences to college settings. New graduate optimism seems odd to Arum and Roksa in light of the myriad challenges in finding jobs, living arrangements, social engagement, and romantic partners. Assessment professionals can use studies such as *Aspiring Adults Adrift* to continue arguing for better measures of post-collegiate outcomes for more than simple reporting to external agencies, but to support ongoing efforts

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on campuses to measure and improve learning. The cohort of students Arum and Roksa examine is rather small and not representative of the variety of institutions that produce post-secondary graduates each year; however, their conclusions to focus academic experiences on learning and engagement with the community are worthy of any young adult. Though much less controversial than *Academically Adrift*, perhaps due to the focus more on post-collegiate outcomes than on undergraduate experiences, *Aspiring Adults Adrift* is certainly worth adding to the reading list of higher education professionals who are involved in measuring and improving student outcomes.

References

- Arum, R., & Roksa J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Arum, R., & Roksa J. (2014). *Aspiring adults adrift: Tentative transitions of college graduates*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.