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The Economic Price of Colleges' Failures

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Four years ago, the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa dropped a bomb on American higher education. Their groundbreaking book, “Academically Adrift,” found that many students experience “limited or no learning” in college. Today, they released a follow-up study, tracking the same students for two years after graduation, into the workplace, adult relationships and civic life. The results suggest that recent college graduates who are struggling to start careers are being hamstrung by their lack of learning.

“Academically Adrift” studied a sample of students who enrolled at four-year colleges and universities in 2005. As freshmen, they took a test of critical thinking, analytic reasoning and communications skills called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (C.L.A.). Colleges promise to teach these broad intellectual skills to all students, regardless of major. The students took the C.L.A. again at the end of their senior year. On average, they improved less than half of one standard deviation. For many, the results were much worse. One-third improved by less than a single point on a 100-point scale during four years of college.

This wasn't because some colleges simply enrolled smarter students. The

nature of the collegiate academic experience mattered, too. Students who spent more time studying alone learned more, even after controlling for their sociodemographic background, high school grades and entrance exam scores. So did students whose teachers enforced high academic expectations. People who studied the traditional liberal arts and sciences learned more than business, education and communications majors.

Yet despite working little and learning less — a third of students reported studying less than five hours a week and half were assigned no long papers to write — most continued to receive good grades. Students did what colleges asked of them, and for many, that wasn't very much.

“Academically Adrift” called into question what college students were actually getting for their increasingly expensive educations. But some critics questioned whether collegiate learning could really be measured by a single test. Critical thinking skills are, moreover, only a means to an end. The end itself is making a successful transition to adulthood: getting a good job, finding a partner, engaging with society. The follow-up study, “Aspiring Adults Adrift,” found that, in fact, the skills measured by the C.L.A. make a significant difference when it comes to finding and keeping that crucial first job.

The students in the study graduated in the teeth of the post-Great Recession labor market, in mid-2009. Two years later, 7 percent were unemployed, consistent with national studies finding that recession-era college graduates were more likely to be unemployed than recent college grads in better economic times, but much *less* likely to be jobless than young adults with no college degree. An additional 16 percent were underemployed, working less than 20 hours a week or in an unskilled job such as grocery store cashier.

Even after statistically controlling for students' sociodemographic characteristics, college majors and college selectivity, those who finished school with high C.L.A. scores were significantly less likely to be unemployed than those who had low C.L.A. scores. The difference was even larger when it came to success in the workplace. Low-C.L.A. graduates were twice as likely as high-C.L.A. graduates to lose their jobs between 2010 and 2011, suggesting that employers can tell who got a good college education and who didn't. Low-C.L.A. graduates were also 50 percent more likely to end up in an unskilled occupation, and were less likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

Remarkably, the students had almost no awareness of this dynamic. When asked during their senior year in 2009, three-quarters reported gaining high levels of critical thinking skills in college, despite strong C.L.A. evidence to the contrary. When asked again two years later, nearly half reported even *higher* levels of learning in college. This was true across the spectrum of students, including those who had struggled to find and keep good jobs.

Through diplomas, increasingly inflated grades and the drumbeat of college self-promotion, these students had been told they had received a great education. The fact that the typical student spent three times as much time socializing and recreating in college as studying and going to class didn't change that belief. Nor did unsteady employment outcomes and, for the large majority of those surveyed, continued financial dependence on their parents.

Students who were interviewed in depth by Mr. Arum and Ms. Roksa put great stock in collegiate social experiences that often came at the expense of academic work, emphasizing the value of the personal relationships they built. But only 20 percent found their most recent job through personal contacts, and of those, less than half came from college friends. And while the recent graduates were gloomy about the state of the nation, they professed strong belief in their own future success. The vast majority thought their lives would be better than that of their parents. "They learned from the experts that they can do well with little effort," Mr. Arum told me, "so they're optimistic."

On average, college graduates continue to fare much better in the job market than people without degrees. But Mr. Arum and Ms. Roksa's latest research suggests that within the large population of college graduates, those who were poorly taught are paying an economic price. Because they didn't acquire vital critical thinking skills, they're less likely to get a job and more likely to lose the jobs they get than students who received a good education.

Yet those same students continue to believe they got a great education, even after two years of struggle. This suggests a fundamental failure in the higher education market — while employers can tell the difference between those who learned in college and those who were left academically adrift, the students themselves cannot.

Correction: September 3, 2014

An earlier version of this article incorrectly used a male courtesy title for Josipa Roksa. She is a woman.

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