Book review: Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses

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What do college students learn as a result of the college experience? According to the authors of "Academically Adrift," not too much. The book describes a longitudinal study of the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication abilities of a sample of 2,322 students enrolled at 24 four-year institutions across the United States who completed the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The CLA was administered to a cohort of first-year students during the fall of 2005 (first semester of study) and during the spring of 2007 (end of the second year). The instrument measures critical thinking and written communication by prompting students to analyze an argument. The responses are then objectively scored using a rubric.

The book is separated into five chapters. The first chapter, College Cultures and Student Learning, introduces the reader to the problem of limited learning in higher education. The authors describe today's colleges and universities as places of limited student engagement in academic activities, where students have a hedonistic approach to college life and the professor is more concerned with researching and publishing than promoting student learning. The authors use this backdrop to justify the need for longitudinal research on student learning in higher education and proceed to describe the CLA. The chapter ends with a discussion of other assessments on student learning, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and an overview of the subsequent chapters in "Academically Adrift."

Chapter 2, Origins and Trajectories, describes the inequality in student learning based on student demographics. Among other analyses, the authors compare the CLA performance of participants by parental education, academic preparation, and racial/ethnic background. The analyses revealed that unprepared students, students with parents who did not earn a post-secondary education, and students of color tend to earn lower CLA scores than their academically advantaged peers.

The third chapter, Pathways through Colleges Adrift, explores how various measures of academic and social engagement relate to student learning. The authors discovered that high faculty expectations and student peer cultures that emphasize academic achievement promote student learning. Specifically, students who were enrolled in courses that required reading more than 40 pages per week and writing more than 20 pages scored higher on the CLA than students who were required to read and write fewer pages.

The fourth chapter, Channeling Students’ Energies toward Learning, explores how the intersections of students’ academic and demographic backgrounds, use of time, and engagement levels affect their gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication abilities. Among other findings, the authors found that studying alone was positively related to CLA scores and studying with peers and fraternity/sorority involvement were negatively related to CLA scores. The authors encourage administrators to recognize that while student involvement opportunities may promote persistence and satisfaction, they may not positively promote student learning.

The last chapter, A Mandate for Reform, describes implications for practice based on the CLA findings. The authors call for improved academic preparation in high schools across the United States, a culture of learning on college and university campuses, and more rigorous instruction in the classroom. Concerning the student affairs profession, the authors insist administrators should focus on promoting learning and not just persistence.

"Academically Adrift" will appeal to some audiences and disenchant others. Even though the book is presented in the form of a research study, the language and tone tend to be biased. Moreover, many of the findings are similar to the results found in previous studies. As such, the finding that student engagement in academic activities is limited should not shock or infuriate anyone. The reality is we do have to do a better job of ensuring our students are learning. Concerning the fraternity/sorority advising profession, the results revealed that group study hours, a common requirement in fraternal organizations, may actually limit student learning. We have to ensure our organizations are fostering constructive study environments. Furthermore, the results revealed an academically oriented peer culture positively influenced student learning. Even though fraternity/sorority engagement was negatively related to student learning, I believe fraternal organizations can have a positive effect on student learning if advisors and student leaders foster an environment of high academic standards and support.

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