

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Commentary

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Let's Ask More of Our Students—and of Ourselves

By Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa

College graduates in general do much better economically than those who do not complete college, which is not particularly surprising given both the level of economic inequality in our society and the role of higher education in sorting, selecting, and signaling differences in prior academic ability. But when we look at how well college graduates have been prepared for a successful transition to adulthood, the results are decidedly more mixed.

For our book *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*, we followed approximately 1,000 students for two years after college graduation to document their successes and failures. We learned that while it certainly still pays to go to college, even with the high costs and debts students often assume, a large proportion of students have not been particularly well served by higher education in their transitions to adulthood.

In terms of economic outcomes, two years after graduation 23 percent of those in the labor market were either unemployed or underemployed (working fewer than 20 hours per week or in jobs where the majority of workers had not completed even a year of college), and less than half had full-time jobs that paid \$30,000 or more per year. They also were struggling to become independent: 24 percent were living at home with their parents, and 74 percent reported receiving continued financial assistance from parents. And although it's tempting to simply blame poor economic conditions for the difficulties recent college graduates have faced, we are less sanguine about the long-term future for college graduates for at least two reasons.

First, they are also failing to make successful transitions to adulthood in other aspects of their lives. Consider democratic

students for their lack of commitment and focus. Instead, colleges, which have often focused more on delivering improved social amenities to students rather than high-quality academic programs, must bear a good deal of responsibility for the low levels of student performance. Rather than challenge students who come in with limited academic interests and overly narrow ideas about the purpose of college, we too often ask little in terms of commitment and offer little in terms of direction. Institutions rarely impress upon students that college is not just about obtaining a credential for a job, but also about accepting adult responsibility and participating in democratic citizenship.

We find it implausible that in a globalized knowledge economy, the current state of affairs will continue indefinitely. Not just because the growth in college costs is unsustainable, but also because legislators, families, and students will have difficulties justifying why resources are increasingly allocated not to improving instruction but to building new dormitories, student centers, and athletic facilities. While this might be an effective institutional strategy for attracting 17-year-olds as consumers and keeping them satisfied with "bread and circuses" once enrolled, it has produced a competition to provide the best amenities and student services money can buy and the least challenging academic demands and expectations.

It is high time for educators to say enough is enough. If we continue to sit on our hands, the public's faith in higher education will continue to erode, and poorly designed accountability frameworks will likely be imposed upon the system. And we will have ourselves to blame.

Rather than passively wait for such an undesirable fate, we must come together on campuses and in professional associations to collectively commit ourselves to raise academic standards, design rigorous curriculum programs, and work to improve instruction, advising and mentoring. This is in the best interest of our students, our institutions, and society at large.

If we are to ask more of our students, we will also have to ask more of ourselves. We have too often responded to accreditors' demands to demonstrate learning outcomes through half-hearted

citizenship: Two years after graduation, 36 percent of our respondents reported never reading a newspaper in print or online or doing so only once a month; 39 percent reported discussing politics at similarly low frequencies.

Second, there is mounting evidence that U.S. colleges need to do a better job improving 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and complex reasoning. For example, the level of general competencies demonstrated by American college graduates on the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies in areas including quantitative reasoning and problem solving are below the performance level of their peers in most European countries. The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, as well as our own research in our previous book, *Academically Adrift*, has documented that U.S. colleges and universities are not particularly effective in improving student competence in those areas.

While American students' poor performance might be surprising to those who have come to assume that quality can be inferred from price, these disappointing results will hardly be a surprise to those who have grappled with research that tracks college students' academic experiences. After all, the average full-time four-year college student in this country spends only about an hour per day studying alone and overall spends less time on academics than students attending college in Europe. Students in U.S. colleges rarely take courses that ask them to read more than 40 pages per week or write more than 20 pages per semester.



More on 'Aspiring Adults Adrift'

When low standards and inadequate performance are so widespread, it becomes increasingly inappropriate to blame

compliance exercises, which were focused on little more than satisfying visiting evaluation teams and achieving a passing grade that would keep accreditors at bay for another five years. It's the kind of approach to an assignment that, before grade inflation, we would not accept from our students. Instead, we should approach learning assessment with the same rigor that we ask of our students in their coursework.

As educators, our only chance of avoiding being accountable to external parties is to take greater institutional responsibility for our own performance. Taking seriously the task of improving learning in higher education is not only a responsibility to our students and communities, but is in our own self-interest as professionals. Decisions about curriculum and learning should be our prerogative, and unless we make them our priority, they'll move further and further out of reach.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa are the authors of Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates (University of Chicago Press, September 2014).

MGMT 436: Analyzing and Planning for Change

Instructions: Read the commentary “Let’s Ask More of Our Students – and of Ourselves.” In the commentary the authors suggest that higher educational institutions, including faculty members, need to address several pertinent issues to improve learning in higher education: **students failing to engage in democratic citizenship (e.g. reading newspapers, discussing politics, voting, etc.), students lacking 21st century skills such as critical thinking and complex reasoning, and universities providing inadequate academic standards and rigor.** Your group’s task is to analyze and develop a change plan for AIU to address one of the three issues identified in the commentary. **Type and print out answers to the questions below and be prepared to present your project in class for the Final.**

1. Part I: Define the Problem:

- A. Write a brief description of the problem and your change plan’s goals (write this part last).

2. Part II: Plan for Change:

- a. How will you help AIU to understand the need for change (how will you convince the University to change)? What information (e.g. data, research, etc.) will you use to support your position to convince the University to change?

- b. Identify as many alternative approaches (to the problem identified) as you can without evaluating each (brainstorm).

- c. Evaluate each solution carefully; consider the positive and negative aspects of each. Who is likely to be affected if the solutions are implemented? Who will resist? Do they fully address the problem?

- d. Select the one "best" approach to address the identified problem (it does not have to be perfect, just based on your team's analysis). Explain why it is the best solution.

- e. How will you implement your solution? Consider people and resources, technology, major obstacles, potential solutions, key people to be involved, training needs, etc.

- f. How will you communicate your plan to the organization?

3. Part III: Presentation:

- a. Make a brief presentation on your plan for change (Part I D and all of Part II).
 - i. Use PowerPoint
 - ii. Address each of the components of Part I and Part II (just use bullet points)