

RICHARD ARUM
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Co-author, *Academically Adrift*

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Dear Trustee:

It is painful to report the research findings of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.

My co-author, Josipa Roksa, and I have devoted ourselves to teaching and learning throughout our careers in higher education, and we dedicated our book to our students. Indeed, we dedicate this book to America's college students, present and future, as we earnestly hope that it will prompt higher education policymakers to bring colleges and universities back to the standards of academic excellence upon which these institutions' claim to legitimacy is dependent.

As we stress in our book, our findings confirm earlier warning signs that college students on average are learning less, even as tuition costs in many institutions have risen sharply and competition for jobs has increased. With a large and diverse sample of over 3,000 students drawn from 29 four-year accredited colleges and universities, our study has broad implications.

We can confirm, sadly, that problems of learning in higher education are real, deepening, and demand urgent attention.

I will point to a few of our key findings. We tested the intellectual growth of students in our study with the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a state-of-the-art measure of reasoning and writing ability.

The results revealed that:

- 45% of our sample showed little or no evidence of improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing after two years.
- After four years at college, 36% showed no significant growth.

It is a deeply disturbing set of findings: in simple language, these students were allowed to largely squander their educational opportunity and the investments made to support their college enrollment.

If your association is with a highly selective institution, you may be thinking that these findings only apply to other colleges and universities. That is not so. There is more variation within institutions than across institutions: in other words, even students at the "best" schools have too often been provided with ways to navigate through four years of college with little academically asked of them. If students are not exposed to rigorous academic courses, they are likely to leave

college with limited growth in the core collegiate skills that we measured. We found that certain programs and majors were consistently less successful in building reasoning and writing skills. Students in education, communications, and business had the lowest measurable gains.

Institutions that fail to set meaningful expectations, a rigorous curriculum and high standards for their students are actively contributing to the degradation of teaching and learning. They are putting these students and our country's future at risk.

Among the full-time students we studied, 12 to 13 hours of preparation was the average amount of time spent per week preparing for class. That is, as best we can estimate, half of the norm of 50 years ago. 36 percent of students in our study reported studying alone less than five hours per week. Grade inflation and light reading and writing assignments have facilitated the decline in student academic culture.

But this is not the end of the problem. After this collegiate experience, comes the reality check of an unforgiving job market.

Our longitudinal study reveals that 31% of our sample from the Class of 2009 moved back in with their parents after graduation; the majority now earns less than \$30,000 per year, and 9% are without jobs and actively looking for work.

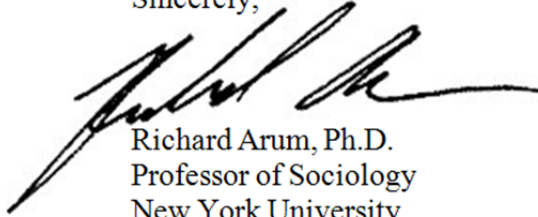
Trustees are the key to restoring American higher education to the international eminence it has traditionally enjoyed. I urgently hope you will do the following:

- 1) Demand that your institution assess student learning with a valid and clear instrument that shows the value that your institution adds to the core skills that every graduate needs. I have used the Collegiate Learning Assessment for *Academically Adrift*, but there are other assessment tools available as well. Using one of these instruments is eminently feasible and will cost a fraction of the amount spent on many activities that have no bearing on student success.
- 2) Make sure that administrators use assessment findings to target academic areas that need improvement. These findings can show achievement in different academic areas, and even sub-areas. A responsive chief academic officer can use these reports to begin to hold faculty in these academic units accountable for student learning and provide information to guide resource allocation to improve student performance.
- 3) Do not take no for an answer. Current assessments of teaching and learning have proven themselves insufficient at ensuring program quality. Current classroom assessments, such as student course evaluations, have contributed to the rampant grade inflation seen on so many campuses. Trustees must remember that students come first.
- 4) Take a hard look at your general education requirements. Does your institution have meaningful core requirements for graduation that ensure a rigorous education regardless of major? Are students pushed to read and write at a college level?

- 5) Remember that you are the fiduciary responsible for not only the financial health of your institution, but more importantly for its core mission, which is educating students.

Your leadership has never been more important.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Arum", written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Richard Arum, Ph.D.
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New York University