

College the Easy Way

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The cost of college has skyrocketed and a four-year degree has become an ever more essential cornerstone to a middle-class standard of living. But what are America's kids actually learning in college?

For an awful lot of students, the answer appears to be not much.

A provocative new book, “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,” makes a strong case that for a large portion of the nation's seemingly successful undergraduates the years in college barely improve their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing.

Intellectual effort and academic rigor, in the minds of many of the nation's college students, is becoming increasingly less important. According to the authors, Professors Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia: “Many students come to college not only poorly prepared by prior schooling for highly demanding academic tasks that ideally lie in front of them, but — more troubling still — they enter college with attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors that are often at odds with academic commitment.”

Students are hitting the books less and partying more. Easier courses and easier majors have become more and more popular. Perhaps more now than ever, the point of the college experience is to have a good time and walk away with a valuable credential after putting in the least effort possible.

What many of those students are not walking away with is something that has long been recognized as invaluable — higher order thinking and reasoning skills. They can get their degrees without putting in more of an effort because in far too many instances the colleges and universities are not demanding more of them.

The authors cite empirical work showing that the average amount of time spent studying by college students has dropped by more than 50 percent since the early 1960s. But a lack of academic focus has not had much of an effect on grade point averages or the ability of the undergraduates to obtain their degrees.

Thirty-six percent of the students said they studied alone less than five hours a week. Nevertheless, their transcripts showed a collective grade point average of 3.16. “Their G.P.A.'s are between a B and a B-plus,” said Professor Arum, “which says to me that it's not the students, really — they share some of the blame — but the colleges and universities have set up a system so that there are ways to navigate through it without taking difficult courses and still get the credential.”

The book is based on a study, led by Professor Arum, that followed more than 2,300 students at a broad range of schools from the fall of 2005 to the spring of 2009. The study (available at

highered.ssrc.org) showed that in their first two years of college, 45 percent of the students made no significant improvement in skills related to critical thinking, complex reasoning and communication. After the full four years, 36 percent still had not substantially improved those skills.

The development of such skills is generally thought to be the core function of a college education. The students who don't develop them may leave college with a degree and an expanded circle of friends, but little more. Many of these young men and women are unable to communicate effectively, solve simple intellectual tasks (such as distinguishing fact from opinion), or engage in effective problem-solving.

"This is a terrible disservice, not only to those students, but also to the larger society," said Professor Arum. "I really think it's important to get the word out about the lack of academic rigor and intellectual engagement that's occurring at colleges and universities today."

While there are certainly plenty of students doing very well and learning a great deal in college, this large increase in the number of students just skating by should be of enormous concern in an era in which a college education plays such a crucial role in the lifetime potential of America's young people. It can leave the U.S. at a disadvantage in the global marketplace. But, more important, the students are cheating themselves — and being cheated — of the richer, more satisfying lives that should be the real payoff of a four-year college experience.

"You have to ask what this means for a democratic society," said Professor Arum. "This is the portion of the population that you would expect to demonstrate civic leadership in the future, civic engagement. They are the ones we would expect to be struggling to understand the world, to think critically about the rhetoric out there, and to make informed, reasoned decisions.

"If they're not developing their higher order skills, it means they're not developing the attitudes and dispositions that are needed to even understand that that's important."