

Reviews

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, with Jeannie Kim, Daniel Potter, and Melissa Velez

Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. 259 pp.

Editor's note: Given the national attention received by the volume *Academically Adrift*, especially its conclusions about the success (or lack of same) of our writing programs, I invited four scholars to share with us their views of this study.

Methodologically Adrift

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Adrift: afloat but not steered or anchored

In 1975, Derek Bok, president of Harvard, asked Dean K. Whitla, director of the Office of Students, to verify the widespread belief that undergraduates were leaving Harvard-Radcliffe as writers no better than when they entered. Whitla ran a meticulous study of first-year and fourth-year students at five institutions and concluded that the ability of Harvard-Radcliffe students “to present an organized, logical, forceful argument increased dramatically over the college

years” (35). Whitla’s unexpected finding was followed by what I will call the Bok maneuver. Forced to report to Harvard’s Board of Overseers the unpopular news that their undergraduates really were developing their writing skills, President Bok said the gains were not “substantial” enough, and that “many students showed no improvement” (13–14). Bok’s maneuver has remained common in attacks on US education. The USS *Academia* is off course, the argument goes, and any evidence to the contrary is belittled, or just jettisoned.

The authors of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* execute the Bok maneuver skillfully, with an additional twist. The evidence they dismiss they gathered themselves. They compared the performance of 2,322 students at twenty-four institutions during the first and fourth semesters on one Collegiate Learning Assessment task. Surprisingly, their group as a whole recorded statistically significant gain. More surprisingly, every one of their twenty-seven subgroups recorded gain. Faced with this undeniable improvement, the authors resort to the Bok maneuver and conclude that the gain was “modest” and “limited,” that learning in college is “adrift.” Not one piece of past research showing undergraduate improvement in writing and critical thinking—and there are hundreds—appears in the authors’ discussion or their bibliography, although both are aswim with think-tank books and blue-ribbon papers opining the opposite.

I should be clear that my final sounding of this book is not that the authors misinterpret their own findings. I believe that their findings cannot be interpreted at all. As regards the significance of their research and its methodology to the college composition profession, my conclusion is terse. If you want to cite these authors in support of the failings of undergraduate writing, don’t. If you want to cite these authors in support of the successes of undergraduate writing, don’t. *Academically Adrift’s* data—as generated and analyzed—cannot be relied on.

Harsh judgment on a book published by the University of Chicago Press. But consider two research scenarios. Research Team A wants to test the null hypothesis that students do not gain in writing skills during college. What do the researchers do? Whether using a cross-sectional or longitudinal design, they make sure the earlier group of writers is equivalent to the later group. They randomly select participants rather than let them self-select. They create writing prompts that fit the kind of writing that participants are currently learning in courses. They apply measures of the writing that are transparent and interpretable. They space pretest and post-test as far apart as they can to

allow participants maximum chance to show gain. They control for retest effects. They limit measures and discussion to no more than what their statistical testing and empirical findings allow. Meanwhile Team B is testing the same hypothesis. What do they do? They create a self-selected set of participants and show little concern when more than half of the pretest group drops out of the experiment before the post-test. They choose to test that part of the four academic years when students are least likely to record gain, from the first year through the second year, ending at the well-known “sophomore slump.” They choose prompts that ask participants to write in genres they have not studied or used in their courses. They keep secret the ways that they measured and rated the student writing. They disregard possible retest effects. They run hundreds of tests of statistical significance looking for anything that will support the hypothesis of nongain and push their implications far beyond the data they thus generate.

I am not speculating about the intentions or motives of the authors of *Academically Adrift* (AA). I am just noting that AA follows the methodology of Team B and not Team A. The book may have fifty-plus pages of pure data, and its conclusions about the failings of higher education may jibe with our own. But AA is simply not anchored in a research method readers can either trust or challenge. Consider a few salient instances.

Like the refrain from a sea chantey, the phrase “critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing” runs unvaried throughout the book. The phrase is unvaried because, amazingly, the authors fuse all three together into one lump. Their one and only measure of this lump is CLA’s Performance Task, which gives students ninety minutes to read some documents and then write a genre-specific response. Readers of AA are not allowed to know the actual prompts used or genres required—CLA test security. Nor can readers know what, if any, writing skills entered into that unitary CLA score (apparently raters filled out a mix of analytical scales and dichotomous checklists, a different mix for each prompt, but how these ratings were cross-validated or translated into a final number is a holistic mystery known only to CLA and the raters, who by contract can never tell). One number to represent “critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing”! The methodology is antediluvian from the perspective of development and composition experts—none mentioned in AA—who have studied undergraduates’ growth in critical and literacy skills and found it interactive, differential, and sometimes regressive.

Perhaps the most crucial finding of AA is mentioned only once, and immediately—the Bok maneuver again—turned against students. Between two and

four semesters after the first test, over half the volunteer participants did not show up to take the second. AA says that this “selective attrition” likely would “overestimate the overall rate of academic growth” (146), apparently assuming that the dumber students tended to drop out. An alternate assumption, of course, is that wiser students might drop out of an experiment not worth the time or the meager reward offered by the institution to finish. Either way, this disastrous attrition opens the strong likelihood that AA did not measure learners in college but persists in test taking. This uninvestigated bias is similar to two others, to which AA devotes not one word: the effect of taking the same kind of test again and the effect of writing to a new prompt, either of which could have raised or lowered post-test scores across the board. Effects of persistence, retesting, and prompt probably account for the surprising fact, noted above, that gain was recorded by every one of twenty-seven subgroups (some of which could have been quite small—but AA does not report N of groups). In college, experimental academic performance rarely proceeds so uniformly across groups. When it does, look for bias produced by the experiment.

Finally, I note two statistical ploys particularly outrageous. One is the large number of tests for significant difference. AA reports 1,190 of them, about one for every two participants. With a confidence level of .05, for every 1,000 tests run, odds are that 50 are false positives. One such could easily be the antipodean finding that students tended to do better on the CLA task who reported fewer hours “studying with peers” and more “studying alone,” a statistical output that AA offers in support of building dorms with private rooms (129). The other ploy forms the argumentative pivot for the entire book, its central Bok maneuver, the overgeneralization that gains on a ninety-minute CLA prompt recorded from first to second year means “that many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing *during their journeys through higher education*” (35; my emphasis). But what is “many” and what is “minimally”? AA claims that 45 percent are not learning, a figure that Alexander Astin concludes “is simply not justified by the data and analyses.” As for amount of learning, AA argues that the average improvement shown by seniors will be only 0.5 standard deviations over their first-year performance. But that figure is based on the assumption of “constant rates of growth through the senior year” (219), an assumption that runs counter to the findings of college-span research, which repeatedly has found qualitative and quantitative leaps in literacy, reasoning, and critical thinking with students during their last two years of college.

As I have said, I am not addressing the intentions or motives of the authors who have steered this book. At the end they say that further research “is needed to determine the character and robustness of the associations identified in our research” (140), a most sea-worthy look at the horizon. The fact is, though, that AA’s findings will never be tested because the dependent variable to which its entire investigation is moored—the CLA Performance Task score—can’t be replicated. It is a phantom anchor, a number whose meaning the book does not explain because it cannot, a number whose consequential validity in terms of writing quality has never been calculated and never will be (especially since the CLA has now turned to machine scoring of the Performance Task), a number buried and lost from the beginning and therefore one on which a research exploration never should have relied.

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Everything That Rises ...

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If only the authors had started from Montaigne instead of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). In Montaigne’s essays, “Que sais-je?” is an assessment question wielded to the end of an extraordinary complexity, amplitude, and depth of knowledge. In the CLAs, not so much. But if you feel the need for another go-round in the “Why Johnny Can’t Write” cycle; if the current state of the economy and environment simply isn’t enough crisis mode for you; or if you’d like to see the outcomes movement hoisted by its own petard, then please do add your dollars to the University of Chicago Press coffers (did someone say “Milton Friedman?”).

Judged by the CLA core values of analytic reasoning and evaluation, writing effectiveness, writing mechanics, and problem solving, or by the authors’

repetitious referencing of their core monoliths—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills—*Academically Adrift* has left many informed reviewers hovering between 2 and 3 on a 6-point scale (you can be a third reader by accessing the full scoring criteria at <http://www.collegiatelearningassessment.org/files/CLAScoringCriteria.pdf>). A simpler scale can be had by counting “duh!” points (students with highly educated parents have a higher retention rate; fewer women than men take STEM courses) and “huh?” points (bad sentences; the anticlimactic assertion of a moral warrant). But the sticking point is clear: unless you’re willing to accept the CLA as a highly meaningful measurement of student learning, then little in this book will impress you, in claim or style of making it. For all the data and methodological discussion (sixty-six pages of it), the ideas are surprisingly inert. While there is much duly reported/recycled sociological content, what is disheartening and telling is how little incisive thought the study provoked in the authors themselves, an observation amplified by reading the cascades of reviews and reactions, within the field and beyond. The book does not inspire inspired conversation. It does not push us to insights or new questions. It inspires at best further methodological discussion, further attention to questions of measurement—needed considerations, to be sure, but all in a direction substantively removed from the topic the book purports to address.

Most seriously, the book lacks integration with more complex studies of the state of higher education, especially those grounded in economic critique (Slaughter and Rhoades’s *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, or Evan Watkins’s *Class Degrees*, for example), even as the authors offer a final chapter titled “A Mandate for Reform.” Thus, just as the CLA positions students in a simulated environment of questionable relevance to their knowledge base, the argument of the book asks readers to accept an ideological construct pointing back to a happier time of academic rigor and middle-class virtues and invokes a faintly Jonathan Edwards–like accusation of current turpitude: “Many higher-education administrators and faculty today have largely turned away from earlier conceptions of their roles that recognized that providing support for student academic and social development was a moral imperative worth sacrificing for personally, professionally, and institutionally” (127). This view enables the authors to ignore or discount the material conditions of faculty work, especially in fields such as composition. Faculty, as depicted here, are secure tenure-line researchers who allocate their time according to the research university system of rewards. What they should do, according to the authors, is assign pages of reading (more than forty) and of writing (more

than twenty), even though, as the authors admit, “[t]here are only twenty-four hours in a day, and time spent in one activity is time not spent in another” (96), a claim to be disputed only by quantum physics. Throughout, the authors use very limited means of measurement to dismiss decades of historical and theoretical accounts of social inequality. The genre of the social science report allows the authors to establish their claims as givens, *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which thus shapes the discussion of the topic, moving it forward syllogistically and limiting its frame of reference.

Unfortunately, *Academically Adrift* is as appropriate to the consumption-based culture of the day as Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* was to the culture wars environment of the 1980s. But the works of Bloom, Hirsch, and other comparatively recent crises of literacy and moral decline entered a populous fray, a contested cultural space within higher education; *Academically Adrift* appears at a time when higher education is far along in its evolution to what Slaughter and Rhoades call the academic capitalist regime, characterized in part by the enormous expansion of the academic administrator echelon, the displacement of faculty from the center of education, and the dominance of an assessment industry that has bought itself into favor by absorbing the “waste labor” that academic capitalism produces. In *Class Degrees*, Evan Watkins analyzes how assessment can serve to naturalize this waste labor system in which a very few among those with equivalent qualifications will rise economically:

Assessment attempts to legitimize competitive distance for the winners in whatever evaluative grids *and* simultaneously to ensure the equally complex skills necessary across the boards to produce as large as possible a labor resource. In short, it falls primarily to the range of university middle management and its assessment imperatives to provide the middle ground that both manages and sustains the contradictory imperatives imposed by class processes. Waste labor conditions for exploitation must be produced, while at the same time the upper reaches of university education can be persistently symbolized as the producer of highly successful competitive individuals, distinguished from others at this peak of success. (104)

Few current students, despite the number of pages read and written, will find themselves on the side of the income gap they are culturally induced to desire so strongly; like 70 percent of their instructors, they will be contingent. And despite the assessment results adduced to validate the inequities of the system, they will be, like their instructors, “a large, skilled, and, from the point of view of capital, a largely undifferentiated pool of discards or waste labor awaiting reactivation in a second-order entry into an actual labor process” (Watkins

89). All must seem to rise, but then all must converge in serving an exploitative labor market. But the system isn't broken in *Academically Adrift*, for as the authors see it, "all higher-education institutions could focus increased attention on the academic component of undergraduate learning without fundamental challenges to the existing system" (129).

Acknowledging and then sidestepping the economic realities that have shaped student disaffection with intellectual effort, largely skirting the communication transformation wrought by technology, and factoring out ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, the authors alight on morality as the prime mover now stalled and in need of a jump start:

In an interview, Arum said that the problems outlined in the book should be viewed as a moral challenge to higher education. Students who struggle to pay for college and emerge into a tough job market have a right to know that they have learned something, he said. "You can't have a democratic society when the elite—the college-educated kids— don't have these abilities to think critically," he said. (Jaschik)

Democracy depends on the elite? The economic struggles students face are moral in nature? Arum's own words do not demonstrate the critical thinking and complex reasoning he and his co-author expect of college sophomores. It is important, therefore, to read *Academically Adrift* in the cultural contexts its authors work so hard to mask or discount.

I do not mean to insult scholars who have done extensive and serious work. And as reception theory or even New Criticism reminds us, the authors are separate from the text, and the media read that has been given to *Academically Adrift* is more powerfully shaping of how contemporary readers understand its argument than authorial intention or methodology can be. Taking as definitive proof the implication that faculty are lazy, incompetent, undemanding—liberal, in sum—many general readers will accept the foregrounded claims and scant the authors' underplayed concessions that the CLA is "not at a stage of scientific knowledge where college students' learning outcomes can be measured with sufficient precision" (141). In the current K–16 environment, already overtaken by a mechanistic notion of learning characterized by decontextualized and commodified skill sets and indefensible testing methods, the book does damage. It helps support and justify an increasingly inequitable economic system, one that we in composition and rhetoric know in an embodied way. The design of higher education implicit in *Academically Adrift* is a behaviorist knowledge factory. As Tony Scott has noted, "The philosophy is in the architecture" (182).

And the money would be, too, if the authors had their way: “While public investment in research supporting knowledge production is a worthy end, federal and state governments would do well to balance these institutional incentives with greater funding commitments tied to the improvement of undergraduate learning” (141)—improvements to come from tracking and measuring, not from investment in teachers and students.

We in composition and rhetoric have accommodated the contemporary assessment regime, heeding the dire warnings of “do it or have it be done to you.” Nevertheless, even as an academic administrator, I feel pretty “done to.” I see the institutional budget figures for assessment and the budget figures for faculty development, and I consider the gap obscene. I attend accreditation team meetings and colleagues’ lectures, and I wonder how each came to be equally accepted as serious academic work. I see the lash that this text offers administrators, and am repelled by the idea that faculty should work harder and bleed more. I grow old, I grow old, and possibly nostalgic; but the idea of the university, even in a posthuman age, could encompass a more complexly understood, more richly nuanced, and more ethically construed sense of a social compact than a compensated CLA administration can be expected to measure.

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Important Focus, Limited Perspective

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Academically Adrift, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, takes on a well-worn theme—the failure of the U.S. education system, in this case, higher education. For generations now, employers, policymakers, and faculty themselves have complained about college students. They socialize too much, don’t study enough, and leave college woefully ill-equipped for productive citizenship

and employment. On that topic, Arum and Roksa cover familiar ground and arrive at similar conclusions. Of course, students aren't the only problem in higher education highlighted in *Academically Adrift*: tenured faculty attend to their own research interests rather than undergraduate education; faculty and administrators cater to "consumers," privileging "customer satisfaction" over academic quality and rigor; policymakers, seeking greater accountability, turn to standardization and ranking systems (with disappointing results and often punitive consequences, at least in K–12 education); and, culturally, increased commercialization of education means "credentials" are valued over competency. For the most part, these critiques are legitimate and well substantiated. What makes Arum's and Roksa's study unique, however, is its attempt to measure student *learning*, characterized by students' improvement in core skills, such as writing, critical thinking, and problem solving, as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a "value-added" performance test designed to assess students' learning gains over the course of their general education requirements—in this case, their first two years of college.

To that end, the authors make a compelling case that students spend minimal time studying, often with limited academic consequence, and, as a result, learn little. Their argument is extensively researched, and unlike many other studies on student achievement, Arum and Roksa control for a wide range of nonschool factors to arrive at their conclusions. They recognize and explore various factors that cause limited learning as well as the achievement gaps that persist and may be perpetuated in higher education. Acknowledging that higher education is not in crisis per se—and that many are satisfied with the status quo (124)—the authors recognize that many factors must be addressed, from student preparation to instruction and curriculum and higher education leadership, in order to truly transform colleges and universities into institutions of higher *learning*.

That said, the authors' claims about student learning are undercut by the fact that the student cohort studied does not accurately reflect today's college student body. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, "half of the students who receive a baccalaureate degree attend community college in the course of their undergraduate studies." Despite the fact that community colleges educate nearly half of all undergraduates and that the authors' study focused on students' learning gains during their first two years of college, community colleges are essentially absent from *Academically Adrift*. In fact, two-year colleges are mentioned only twice—once Arum and Roksa note that students from less educated families often choose to attend

community college (44), and later they assert that “[underprepared] students are often required to enroll at nearby community colleges for these [remedial] classes” (74), perpetuating reductive two-year college stereotypes. The authors neither acknowledge the neglect nor recognize the significance of this omission in their work. Arum and Roksa lament contemporary colleges’ failure to prioritize undergraduate learning (122) while ignoring the work of community colleges that does just that, from scholarship on teaching and learning, such as Tinberg and Nadeau’s *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations*, to the numerous examples of authentic assessment of student learning, such as we see inside LaGuardia Community College’s ePortfolio.

Not only are two-year colleges missing from this large-scale study, but some of the realities of college students today seem to be ignored as well. Arum and Roksa studied traditional eighteen-year-old first-year students, failing to take into account the rapidly growing population of students twenty-five years and older in both two- and four-year colleges (National Center). Their study considered only traditional face-to-face schooling, overlooking the proliferation of online education. Moreover, the research focused on very narrow and traditional views of learning inconsistent with what educators know about “twenty-first century literacies.” For instance, Arum and Roksa express alarm that more than 80 percent of college freshman and 50 percent of college seniors report never writing a paper over twenty pages in length (71), without questioning the value or utility of such a task for contemporary learners. The authors also tend to conflate peer study groups with collaborative learning (101–2) and social media and other online tools with “geeking out” on the Internet (61–62) and suggest that learning is most effective in isolation (100).

The National Council of Teachers of English defines contemporary literate practices as those involving, among other things, proficiency with the tools of technology; collaborative problem solving, management, and analysis of multiple and simultaneous information sources; and ethical creation and evaluation of multimedia texts. Solely assessing twenty-first-century literacy and critical thinking with a “twentieth-century” tool—and equating that skill development with learning—seems unproductive and irresponsible. The CCCC statement “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” argues for multiple measures, authentic tasks, and locally developed tools. Similarly, the American Association of Colleges and Universities recommends measuring student learning through “curriculum-embedded methods of assessment that would address a wide range of the most important learning outcomes within a student’s regular curriculum requirements,” asserting that both assessment and

accountability should be measured in the context of the students' own best work. Single, decontextualized assessments likely measure students' limited engagement and effort rather than their learning. The authors did not seem to take into account how students' motivation and investment in the tool may negatively impact the results.

Despite its faults, *Academically Adrift*'s focus on student learning (even though both *student* and *learning* are too narrowly defined) is praiseworthy because learning is largely absent from most previous large-scale research on postsecondary education. In response to calls for greater accountability in higher education, Arum and Roksa put student learning front and center, focusing attention on higher education's purpose. Also, because the authors define learning in terms of literacy and critical thinking gains, abilities at the core of writing instruction (and abilities highlighted in *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*), *Academically Adrift* indirectly supports effective writing programs. Not only do the authors validate our work by defining increased rigor, one of their central recommendations in terms of intensive reading and writing, but their conclusions also support the need for strong WAC/WID programs and writing centers and a solid liberal arts education.

Academically Adrift also offers a number of reasonable recommendations for improving the quality of higher education. Although national elementary and secondary education reforms have focused on externally imposed standards and standardized testing, Arum and Roksa instead call for systemic, internal changes to educational practices—for instance, institution-wide focus on learning, improved curriculum and instruction, and learning-centered institutional assessment with clear communication to stakeholders about results. Such solutions provide opportunity to target other troubling trends on college campuses. For instance, academic rigor cannot be addressed without also considering faculty working conditions, especially pertinent in two-year colleges, where approximately two-thirds of the faculty are adjunct (Millward, Powers, and Crump). Improving curriculum and instruction necessitates more attention to preparing faculty for their work as instructors by valuing pedagogical research and assessment and institutionalizing teacher training. Many effective models exist, particularly within the field of composition, ranging from graduate teaching assistant training to Preparing Future Faculty programs or teaching internships at local community colleges.

Ultimately, the limited learning demonstrated in *Academically Adrift* is troubling and demands attention regardless of the study's limitations. Rather than resist Arum's and Roksa's findings, we should embrace *Academically Adrift*

for its focus on what matters most: learning. The book demonstrates the need for a more complete and coherent body of research that gives a full, rich picture of student learning and provides a valuable starting point for national dialogue on improving student learning on college campuses.

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An HBCU Perspective on *Academically Adrift*

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At first, I cheered when I started reading Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. In their study of more than 2,300 college students who took the College Learning Assessment (CLA), Arum and Roksa had presented a compelling case for expanding Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) across U.S. campuses: they had documented how limited reading and writing across the curriculum had resulted in limited

learning as well. Thus, their work made my job easier since I was directing Writing Across the Curriculum and faculty development at a historically black university (HBCU).

However, as I continued to read, I stopped cheering, for the statistics that jumped off page after page were deeply disturbing—especially the statistics about African American college students. For example:

- At least 45 percent of students in our sample did not demonstrate any statistically significant improvement in CLA performance during the first two years of college. (121)
- Fifty percent of students in our sample reported that they had not taken a single course during the prior semester that required more than twenty pages of writing, and one third had not taken one that required even forty pages of reading per week. Combining these two indicators, we found that a quarter of the students in the sample had not taken any courses that required either of these two requirements. (71)

Now Arum and Roksa's report about African American college students:

- African-American students not only entered higher education with lower CLA scores than their white peers, they also gained less over time. (39)
- African-American students were particularly likely to enroll in courses that did not require at least twenty pages of writing for the semester or forty pages of reading per week. Consequently, they were almost one third less likely to take courses with both of these requirements than white students (32 percent compared to 46 percent respectively). (71)

These statistics are particularly troubling since Arum and Roksa discovered that high faculty expectations and rigorous reading/writing requirements were significantly associated with improvement in students' critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills (93).

Despite the study's methodological weaknesses, we cannot easily dismiss Arum and Roksa's findings since they are corroborated by studies such as the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education and the National Survey of Student Engagement (36, 131). Nor can we dismiss the black-white test gap as yet another case of culturally biased testing. A regression analysis of scores of 10,000 first-year students and 4,000 seniors who took the CLA showed no

evidence that the CLA favored one racial/ethnic, gender, or English language group over another (Klein et al. 14). Nor can we dismiss the gap because socioeconomic disparities have left many African Americans academically behind. As Roy Beasley argues, because of these disparities, Arum and Roksa should not have expected African Americans to achieve the same *absolute* gains as white students, but they should have expected the same *relative* gains (“Wrong Message”). However, when Beasley recalculated Arum and Roksa’s scores to compare the relative gains, the gap persisted (“P.S.”).

If we assume, then, that Arum and Roksa’s data are reasonably accurate and reliable, what accounts for their results and what should colleges and universities do?

What Accounts for the Results?

Lack of academic preparation, Arum and Roksa contend, plays a critical role in the black-white gap in CLA scores. African Americans enter college with the lowest high school GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, and level of AP experience (46–47), and the impact is far-reaching: After adjusting the CLA data for differences in academic preparation, Arum and Roksa discovered that the black-white gap dropped by a third (50). They attribute much of African American underpreparedness to racially segregated schools and poverty (45). Citing research by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, they also suggest that “stereotype threat” (i.e., the fear of confirming a negative stereotype) may have contributed to the black-white gap (113). However, they note that, once in college, the African Americans in their sample were also less likely than white students to attend selective institutions or to have professors with high expectations, especially those who demand extensive reading and writing (112–13).

So are Arum and Roksa right about college writers, including African Americans?

Faculty Expectations

Although there is plenty of evidence that successful researchers can be effective teachers (see Kelly-Woessner and Woessner), I still agree with Arum and Roksa’s claim that the institutional culture at many research universities does not *encourage* faculty members to set high expectations for student learning. I also agree with Arum and Roksa’s argument that the lack of high faculty expectations limits student learning (93). Not only do Arum and Roksa’s data (see Table A4.1) show that faculty’s high expectations are the most statistically

significant predictor of high CLA scores, but there are decades of empirical research documenting the impact of teachers' expectations on student performance. Although the impact is typically small for other groups, Lee Jussim and Kent Harber conclude from their review that "powerful self-fulfilling prophecies may selectively occur among students from stigmatized social groups," and they find some of the largest effects on African Americans (131).

These findings have profound implications for college writers and African American students in particular because of the social stigma attached to African American Language (AAL) and stereotypical beliefs about African Americans' intelligence. Research on language education suggests that teachers' expectations about African American students' language use can be powerful. Citing some of those research findings, Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels observe that "even the best available teaching methods can fail when implemented by teachers who lack genuine, fundamental appreciation for what students can already do with language" (52). On the other hand, educational researchers have found that teachers who hold positive attitudes toward African Americans' language may facilitate the students' acquisition of academic writing skills (Ball; Ball and Lardner; Foster; Ladson-Billings; Moore).

Writing Requirements

At the same time, I question Arum and Roksa's definition of high writing standards. Consider the "CLA Student Questionnaire" that Arum and Roksa administered during the study (207–12). The questionnaire asks only one question related to students' writing experiences. Students were asked to indicate how many times in the previous semester (fall 2006) they had done each of the following:

Gone to the writing center or attended a writing workshop

Met with a tutor

Written a research paper

Taken a writing-intensive course (wrote more than 20 pages over the course of the semester)

Certainly, I would expect students who seek assistance from a writing center, workshop, or tutor to improve their learning, but is the research paper the gold standard for student learning? In its analysis of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College

(CSWC) found that writing assignments that stimulated deep learning “encouraged interactive writing activities (peer response, teacher response, visits to a writing center, etc.), specified ‘meaning-constructed writing’ (synthesizing information, writing to a specific audience), and included clear explanations of the instructor’s expectations” (Anderson et al.). But how many faculty across the disciplines design such assignments? Not enough. According to Joanne Addison and Sharon James McGee, surveys of college writing suggest that many faculty across the curriculum are designing assignments that “intend to promote deep learning,” but provide few opportunities for exploratory or work-place writing (162–63)—writing that could also facilitate meaning making. Moreover, from their own comparison of faculty and student survey responses, Addison and McGee conclude that “the setting of clear expectations, specifically for writing, does not occur that often across the curriculum” (162).

I also question Arum and Roksa’s focus on page counts. On their questionnaire, the sociologists define a “writing-intensive course” as a course where students write more than twenty pages per semester. Granted, these page counts are included in the NSSE, but even NSSE’s director, Alexander McCormick, questions Arum and Roksa’s narrow focus: “I’m all in favor of writing-intensive courses,” he told a reporter. “But that doesn’t necessarily have to mean a huge number of pages. What we’ve discovered is that it is often more important to ask students to write multiple drafts and to get feedback on each draft” (Glenn). Hence, the NSSE includes questions about drafts and feedback as well as shorter papers. In fact, after analyzing the responses to these questions, the CSWC concluded: “In all but one example, the amount of pages students wrote was less important for deep learning and gains than interactive writing, meaning-making, and clear expectations” (Anderson et al.). Therefore, I wish that Arum and Roksa had included more NSSE writing questions or at least listed “writing”—not simply “studying”—below the question “How many hours in a typical week do you spend doing each of the following?” Knowing how much time students spent writing might have proved more useful than knowing how long their papers were.

Lack of Preparation

As for Arum and Roksa’s contention that many students enter college unprepared for significant reading and writing requirements, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer have reported similar findings. From their analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), they conclude that students are not writing enough to prepare for college. “Some 40% of

twelfth-grade students,” they observe, “report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of three pages or more” (26). Moreover, despite the cultural bias of some standardized tests (Hoover and Politzer; White and Thomas), few educational researchers would contest Arum and Roksa’s conclusion that African Americans are, on average, the least prepared because of poverty and inadequate primary and secondary schooling. New evidence comes from the college testing organization, ACT, which just released a report showing that ACT-tested 2011 African American high school graduates were less likely to meet ACT’s “College Readiness Benchmarks” than any other racial or ethnic group. Indeed, not even half of African American students met any of the benchmarks in English, reading, mathematics, or science (5). Why? Only 69 percent of African American students (compared to 76 percent of whites and 81 percent of Asians) had completed a minimum core curriculum—four years of English and three of math, social studies, and science (15). An analysis of 2011 SAT scores also confirms that students who did not complete a core curriculum did not perform as well on the SAT (Banchero).

What Should Colleges and Universities Do?

When all is said and done, increasing student learning on our campuses will require more or better writing across the curriculum. As Addison and McGee declare in their synthesis of national studies of writing, “Now more than ever, there is an urgency to demonstrate the value of writing across the curriculum at local and national levels” (148). But we still have a long way to go. According to Chris Thaiss and Tara Porter, the availability of WAC programs on U.S. four-year campuses has grown from 38 percent to 51 percent during the last twenty years, but that means 49% of schools still have not adopted WAC. Moreover, as a long-time member of the International Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs, I have found that too many WAC programs impact a limited number of dedicated faculty who volunteer to undergo WAC training and teach writing-intensive courses. For the majority of faculty, teaching remains “business as usual.”

That is why, with the support of our interdisciplinary Writing Across the Curriculum Committee, I launched a “Writing Matters Campaign” at my university in August, citing Arum and Roksa’s finding that students learn more when faculty communicate high expectations—especially about reading and writing. The campaign asked faculty (1) to state high expectations for student writing in their fall 2011 syllabus, (2) to hold students accountable for writing

well by deducting points or requiring revisions, and (3) to refer students to our WAC website for assistance (e.g., online tutoring, handbooks, self-scoring exercises, writing samples, and writing guides to the disciplines). Volunteers signed a pledge, wore a blue and white "Writing Matters" button to class the first week of the term, and promised to post their syllabi in the university's syllabus database for all to see. At the end of the term, we will assess whether the volunteers followed through, whether more faculty sought WAC training, and whether students devoted more effort to their writing or sought more assistance. If any of these changes occur, we will have taken a small but significant step toward cultivating the kind of institutional culture that Arum and Roksa recommend.

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Review Essay

Resisting Entropy

The Evolution of College English: Literacy Studies from the Puritans to the Postmoderns

Thomas Miller

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Byron Hawk

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Toward A Composition Made Whole

Jody Shipka

Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2011. 192 pp.

Teaching with Student Texts: Essays toward an Informed Practice

Joseph Harris, John D. Miles, Charles Paine, editors

Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. 280 pp.

I sit here after long weeks . . . with an inward accumulation of material of which I feel the wealth, and as to which I can only invoke my familiar demon of patience, who always comes, doesn't he?, when I call. He is here with me in front of this green Pacific—he sits close and I feel his soft breath, which cools and steadies and inspires, on my cheek. Everything sinks in: nothing is lost; everything abides and fertilizes and renews its golden promise.

—Henry James, *Notebooks*, March 29, 1905