

Editors' Introduction

Righting the Ship

Jennifer L. Holberg and Marcy Taylor

"I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone." That is, I won't make you work too hard (read a lot, write a lot) so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well. The existence of this bargain is suggested by the fact that at a relatively low level of effort, many students get decent grades — B's and sometimes better. There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning — on the part of faculty members who allow students to get by with far less than maximum effort, and on the part of students who are not taking full advantage of the resources institutions provide.

— George D. Kuh, "What We're Learning about Student Engagement from NSSE" (2003)

The "bargain" George Kuh describes above feels increasingly like the norm in higher education. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2010), Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa provocatively detail how the situation Kuh describes has developed in response to a systemwide educational culture in which the mission of undergraduate education is devalued across the board, especially as evidenced in the reward structures in place. We find their ideas worth considering in more depth here.

By their own reports, students seem to be working less. In their book, Arum and Roksa explain the limited effort of students, who self-reported, for example, that they spent less than one-fifth (16 percent) of their time each week on academics (including time spent in classes and labs and time spent

studying) (97). Furthermore, in a talk the authors gave at Central Michigan University in October 2011, they reported that this time spent studying has declined over the last four decades from a reported twenty-five hours per week in 1960 to twelve hours on average today, and a whopping 36 percent of students in their sample reported studying alone five or fewer hours per week or less than one hour per day. And yet, for students such behavior is not resulting in calamity—just the opposite: when examining the transcripts for those students, the researchers found that even spending fewer than five hours per week studying, the students' cumulative GPA averaged 3.16.

Rebekah Nathan's ethnography of college culture, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (2005), refers to this situation as the “art of college management,” in which students with a “credentialist-collegiate orientation” “control college by shaping schedules, taming professors, and limiting workload” (113). Limiting workload is achieved not only by skipping the assigned reading, ditching class, or spending time “studying” in groups rather than in focused solo sessions, but also by selecting courses that don't require the work in the first place. Arum and Roksa (2011: 76) support studies like Nathan's that suggest that “students . . . are choosing courses to minimize short-term investments of individual commitment required to obtain high course marks—not making deliberate rational calculations about courses' ‘perceived returns’ aligned with long-term personal goals.” But can we really blame the students for manipulating a system to their benefit?

If the payoff for students of a “college management” mentality is a credential in return for limited effort (and the perception that a diploma with a decent GPA and the promise of a high-paying job *is* the product that colleges supply in return for the tuition), what is the payoff for faculty? Arum and Roksa describe the reward structures in higher education that place value on research output and, when teaching is factored at all into tenure and promotion decisions, that evaluate teaching primarily by student satisfaction and not by student learning. Arum and Roksa argue that “undergraduate education in many colleges and universities is only a limited component of a much broader set of faculty professional interests, and one that generally is not perceived as being significantly rewarded” (10). Their analysis goes deeper, but at the base is the premise that faculty are not sufficiently concerned with student learning—and therefore are complicit in creating a culture of ease rather than one of engagement—precisely because they have bigger fish to fry (research grants to procure, graduate programs to run, books and articles to write) in order to earn the rewards offered by the academy. Whether this is equally true in all disciplines is a matter of debate, of course,

and the humanities fare well in the book precisely because the criteria Arum and Roksa are most concerned with—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing—are qualities that humanities programs value and promote directly through our reading- and writing-rich curriculum. Still, the faculty (including humanities faculty) are not innocent in creating the drift away from undergraduate education.

If the rewards for focusing on undergraduate education are few for faculty, they are even fewer for academic administrators, and the book is clear about the role that academic leaders play in producing a culture that values (or doesn't value) undergraduate learning. Arum and Roksa (2010) cite former Harvard University president Derek Bok, who notes that “success in increasing student learning is seldom rewarded, and its benefits are usually hard to demonstrate, far more so than success in lifting the SAT scores of the entering class or in raising the money to build new laboratories or libraries” (qtd. on 11). But if students, who report spending only 16 percent of their time on academic pursuits, are never going to use those labs or libraries, what's the point? Mightn't the whole system need an overhaul?

One conclusion that Arum and Roksa draw from their research is pretty bleak:

Standing in the way of significant reform efforts are, of course, a set of entrenched organizational interests and deeply ingrained institutional practices. While the lack of undergraduate academic learning has generated increased hand-wringing in various quarters, efforts to address the problem have been feeble and ineffective to date. A primary reason is that undergraduate education is peripheral to the concerns of the vast majority of those involved with the higher-education system. Limited learning is in no way perceived as a formidable crisis that threatens the survival of organizational actors, institutions, or the system as a whole. We believe that students, parents, faculty, and administrators are not overly concerned with the lack of academic learning currently occurring in college and universities, as long as other organizational outcomes more important to them are being achieved. (2010: 142–43)

What would it take for the “limited learning” Arum and Roksa document to rise to the level of “crisis” that would actually redirect focus and resources to undergraduate education?

At *Pedagogy*, we deal in the specifics of learning where the rubber meets the road: in individual classes. This issue of the journal includes five articles and four From the Classroom pieces that focus on undergraduate courses, and while we care also about graduate education (in fact, issue 13.3 will be focused on the theme of graduate education in English), a large part of

our mission is dedicated to the aims of undergraduate education with which Arum and Roksa end their book: “A renewed commitment to improving undergraduate education is unlikely to occur without changes to the organizational cultures of colleges and universities that reestablish the primacy of these functions — instilling in the next generation of young adults a lifelong love of learning, an ability to think critically and communicate effectively, and a willingness to embrace and assume adult responsibilities” (2010: 144).

Are these values widely held? We think they should be. What needs to happen in your classroom, at your institution, in your corner of the profession to again value undergraduate teaching? We hope to hear from you.

Works Cited

- Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nathan, Rebekah. 2005. *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. New York: Penguin Books.