



Notes from the Dismal Science:

WHEN AMERICA'S COLLEGES
DON'T TEACH AND
STUDENTS DON'T LEARN:

Two Recent Books Reviewed

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Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. 272 pp.

Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It, by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, New York: Time Books, 2010. 304 pp.

Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, America has been said to be in a “crisis of education”; however, during the subsequent years grades K through 12 education and higher education have faced very little scrutiny. The grace period is apparently over. Hacker and Dreifus in *Higher Education?* claim that American colleges and universities don’t teach. Arum and Roska in *Academically Adrift* report the shocking news that half of our college students don’t learn. Anything. Both books, as well as my own teaching experience, make these claims seem plausible, not meant merely to make headlines. Bereft of good news, let’s take the shocking news first.

Arum and Roska, sociologists from NYU and the University of Virginia respectively, surveyed and tested a representative sample of U.S. college students at the beginning of their freshman year and again near the end of their sophomore year. They tracked these students, or in other words, estimated the value added of their first two years of college. They conclude:

With a large sample of more than 2,300 students, we observe no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students in our study. (36)

This strong claim suggests the need for a close look at the authors' testing instrument and their sample. The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) serves as the proficiency test. It has three components, each requiring open-ended written responses, no multiple choice. The specific performance component that the study focuses on, illustrates the nature of the CLA.

Students are given ninety minutes to develop a memo to the president of their company on the advisability of purchasing a small plane, the SwiftAir 235. The president had been ready to make the purchase when news came of a crash of a SwiftAir 235. Students are supplied with newspaper stories of the crash, technical data on the plane, magazine background stories, and other research materials. They are asked specific questions: e.g., what items of information were relevant to the decision? The scores were determined by the criteria outlined by the Council for Aid to Education (CLA); these criteria addressed critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving. The SwiftAir 235 memo is only one of several performance tests by the CLA.

Is the CLA test the appropriate test? While some counter that what we teach in the university cannot be measured, Arum and Roska cite many who laud the test, such as the Commission for the Future of Higher Education. A few people are nevertheless very negative, such as David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities: "We will get a meaningless outcome at great cost" (23).

However, the CLA gets respectable statistics for reliability and construct validity.

What about the sample? Is the total sample size large enough? But perhaps the proper question would be whether it was representative of the U.S. student population. It looks good in this regard. The students were comparable to national averages in ethnicity, kind of high school, SAT and ACT scores, and gender distribution. The 24 universities were well distributed across regions, public/private, and high standards/low standards. The detailed data and discussion establish the CLA's test as an accurate measurement of teaching and learning. For example, some of my greatest concerns were supported in their ample Appendix: 1) students who study alone get better CLA gains than those who study in groups; 2) students did better on the CLA if their teachers "held high standards"; and 3) students got better scores when their typical classes required more reading and writing.

My experience in student performance testing of a few years ago primed me to find this CLA study credible. I applied a nationally standardized and validated test called the Test of Understanding College Economics (TUCE) to students at the beginning of their microeconomic principles course and again near the end of their intermediate microeconomics (Managerial Economics) course. These are the two micro courses in the Business School "core" requirements. Economics is largely a service department at Oakland University, and this seemed like a good way to see how well we were serving the School.

Three to four hundred students were tested, both at the pre- and the post-test stages. Average student gains were between two and three questions (points) on the thirty-point test. This disappointing result echoed the results of other economics departments across the nation. My experience of teaching three of the sixteen post-test classes allowed me to identify the high gainers. Not surprisingly, they were simply the best and the brightest learners. But what about the large clump of students who learned little or nothing? Ethically, we can't continue to ignore them.

The CLA study reviewed here suggests that the departments in other disciplines are having the same frustrating experience or perhaps don't know it yet. While it's easy to teach bright and willing students, it is much more difficult to raise the mean—to reach that large clump of indifferent students. To be successful, professors have to have the energy and desire to reach these students. However, goals of becoming a “Harvard of the Midwest” don't necessarily refer to the faculty's teaching, but more probably, to their scholarship. The second book for review, *Higher Education?*, by Hacker and Dreifus, is a poke in the eye on this issue; it posits that most American professors show no sign of being willing to teach.

Higher Education? is a very different book, if only because it is not a data collection study and makes no claim to scientific methods. Nevertheless, its authors have impressive credentials: Andrew Hacker is a sociologist at Queens University and a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, while Claudia Dreifus teaches at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs and writes for the *Science* section of the *New York Times*. Their “data,” beyond their scholarly study, was obtained from the experience of visiting a large and varied group of universities and talking with many professors around the country. The result is lauded by Diane Ravich, one of the nation's leading experts on education. Their work appealed to Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel prize winner and former head of economics at the World Bank, and won the approval of Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York; as well as other education magnates. Readers should keep these credentials in mind when perusing these authors' jaw-dropping claims.

COMMITTEES

The professoriate, they say, has developed a culture where tasks of little real value are considered essential:

Committees are not only busywork, they are a surrogate for faculty members who have long since given up on scholarship . . . Committees also proliferate because academics, to an unusual degree, want to feel they are being consulted, not just on major policies but about everything else that happens on their campus. (21)

ADMINISTRATION OVERLOAD

In 1976 the national average was 32 non-faculty adults for every 1,000 students; by 2007 the rate had nearly doubled to 63 non-faculty adults per every 1,000 students. There has also been a proliferation of very narrowly defined administrative careers. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently posted ads for Diabetic Internship Director, Credentials Specialist, and Vice President for Student Success. Salaries go up commensurately, especially for presidents, who now are paid like CEOs of major corporations and may earn more than a million dollars annually. The authors' case is that administrative overload is the main reason that college costs have become so inflated.

To cover these pressing costs, colleges have turned to a new kind of leadership. Instead of recruiting persons of high intellect who wish the university to seek truth, colleges seek a good fundraiser. Hacker and Dreifus add

We . . . would like to see courage, inspiration, and imagination at the helm. All too many of our colleges have become rudderless leviathans, taking on any chore that will bring them attention. Equally disquieting is that too few are guided by enunciated principles or a sense of purpose. (43)

THE HOLLOW HALLS OF IVY

Most of us did not get an Ivy League undergraduate degree, but we nevertheless think of it as the epitome of the best college education that America has to offer. Of the tens of thou-

sands of high school graduates with high college board scores and proven talent, fewer than 10 percent will be admitted to the Ivies. But those who have the luck to get in, will be automatically connected, chosen for top jobs and high positions for the rest of their lives, at least that is what many think.

Hacker and Dreifus tested this view by following 934 Princeton graduates from the Class of 1973:

We started with Princeton's avowal that its mission is to "educate national Leaders." By this criterion we must report that none of the 934 has served in a cabinet or sub-cabinet position in either congressional chamber, as a federal judge, or financial official, or as a chief executive officer in a national corporation . . . [M]any of the members gravitated to the professions. But most have had modest careers. While there are quite a few academics, relatively few made it to leading universities. More were at places like University of Akron or Western Missouri State. (73)

This paragraph suggests that students who don't go to the Ivies have saved their parents \$200,000 dollars without skipping a beat.

OUR TEACHING PROBLEM

Truth is often at risk of becoming a cliché and then being ignored; e.g., the fact that there is no free lunch. To spend four hours on a task is to not spend those four hours on some other task. Yet we academics persistently tell ourselves that the rule doesn't apply to teaching and research because the two have synergy. One provost is quoted as saying, "You can't possibly be a good teacher unless you're interested in sharing what you've learned, both through research and publication" (83). Hacker and Dreifus disagree:

There's only one problem. Or rather two. First factually it is wrong.

And second, its consequences are pernicious. In our observation, even committed undergraduates aren't asking for what's in the latest journals. (83)

Nevertheless, the colleges and universities want ever greater prestige and in today's academic culture this means more publications, increasing the pressure not just at the elite schools but also at community colleges. A side effect of this pressure is the proliferation of journals on every topic, no matter how narrow; a few journals will publish almost anything that is sent to them. As a consequence, there are published articles that are rarely ever cited and read, as well as some conferences that appear little more than vacation sites.

The observations of these two authors often loom too close to home. Recently, they report, the National Survey of Student Engagement examined average student ratings of professors' "helpfulness" and "availability" across many schools. Smaller, lesser-known colleges, scored at the top, while large state research universities hit the bottom. These survey facts, unfortunately, are an apt match for the most frequent comment Hacker and Dreifus heard at the many academic cocktail parties they attended on their visits. The exact words varied but the theme was always the same: professors expressed contempt for the intellect of their students.

Are we short-changing our students? I think so. Furthermore, this is happening at a time when American youth don't compare well academically with European and Asian youth. It is a time when many business schools hear blue ribbon panels of CEOs say that business school graduates "can't write." It is a time when technical jobs are filled with foreign-trained people because American-trained students can't do the math. Recently a German foreign exchange student told me that in her two years at Oakland University, the longest term paper she was assigned was 14 pages double-spaced. She said that back at Oldenberg, the typical term paper was 20 pages and single-spaced.

TENURE

Their argument against tenure was new to me, and I find it interesting if not entirely convincing. They analyze the Ward Churchill case—you may recall that he claimed that the victims in the Twin Towers on 9/11 were nothing but “little Eichmans.” The authors found that Churchill’s case quickly went to the courts. Tenured or not, the courts served as a venue that can and often will protect a professor. The authors conclude that tenure is neither necessary nor sufficient to preserve academic freedom.

Some people feel that tenure is not necessary for high school teachers because they don’t publish research findings or make public statements, but that the university tenure system’s requirements for publication ensure a high level of research. Yet of the tens of hundreds of articles I have read, I don’t recall any that would cause a college administrator to overheat. Perhaps the authors have a point.

FINAL WORDS

Readers who want to know more about how experts are evaluating American education will want to read the two books together; readers may also find themselves provoked to work for the (revolutionary) reform of college teaching. Harvard tried it, first declaring a crisis and then forming a blue ribbon panel to advise the University. The panel’s recommendations: faculty visits to one another’s classes to review and comment on pedagogy; the establishment of “rewards” for faculty who agree to take time from their research and devote it to the classroom; and adjuration to junior faculty to video-tape their teaching sessions (93). Harvard had difficulty getting full attendance at the teaching reform meetings. But their leadership on this subject is encouraging. Could faculty at Oakland University succeed at reform? Oakland University has made an organizational investment, building the Writing Center, establishing

the University Assessment Committee, and creating a brand-new Center for Teaching and Learning. These are clear signs of commitment—but of course—it is the faculty who must carry out the change recommended in these two important books.