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'Adrift' in Adulthood: Students Who Struggled in College Find Life Harsher After Graduation

By Dan Berrett

College graduates who showed paltry gains in critical thinking and little academic engagement while in college have a harder time than their more accomplished peers as they start their careers, according to a report released today.

The [report](#), "Documenting Uncertain Times: Postgraduate Transitions of the Academically Adrift Cohort," follows up on the highly influential and controversial book *Academically Adrift*, which was published one year ago. The report is being released at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and it expands upon many of the themes that the book explored by following a subset of students from the book into early adulthood.

Like the book, the new study was written by Richard Arum, professor of sociology and education at New York University, and Josipa Roksa, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. They were joined by Esther Cho, program coordinator at the Social Science Research Council, and Jeannie Kim, a doctoral candidate in sociology at NYU.

In the spring of 2011, the authors surveyed more than 900 of the students that they studied in *Academically Adrift* to learn about their progress since graduation: whether they were employed, enrolled in graduate school, what their living arrangements were, and how civically engaged they were.

It has proven to be difficult for researchers to link data on students' academic performance to what happens to them when they enter the labor market, said Mr. Arum. The results that he and his colleagues found were so arresting, he said, that they chose to release them earlier than the follow-up book that they are planning to publish in the next year or two.

Sharp Differences

Here is what they found: Graduates who scored in the bottom 20 percent on a test of critical thinking fared far more poorly on measures of employment and lifestyle when compared with those who scored in the top 20 percent. The test was the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA, which was developed by the Council for Aid to Education.

The students scoring in the bottom quintile were three times more likely than those in the top quintile to be unemployed (9.6 percent compared with 3.1 percent), twice as likely to be living at home with parents (35 percent compared with 18 percent), and significantly more likely to have amassed credit-card debt (51 percent compared with 37 percent).

"That's a dramatic, stunning finding," said Mr. Arum, referring to the sharp difference in unemployment so early in the students' lives after college. "What it suggests is that the general higher-order skills that the Council for Aid to Education assessment is tracking is something of significance, something real and meaningful."

The size of the group studied in the new report represented a smaller sample than was studied in the book. For *Academically Adrift*, Mr. Arum and Ms. Roksa studied more than 2,300 students who entered 24 four-year colleges in the fall of 2005. They found the unsettling results that about one-third of students **failed to show significant progress** on the CLA during their college careers. Most students did not take academically demanding courses, defined as 20 or more

pages of writing across the semester, or 40 or more pages of reading per week.

The book's findings sparked both controversy and hand-wringing. Critics argued that the CLA, which gives students a set of materials with contradictory information and asks them to marshal a written argument, was a flawed measure of learning because it is divorced from content. Others questioned the book's [statistical methodology](#).

Since the book's publication, some of the results have been [replicated](#) by a team of education researchers, including Ernest T. Pascarella of the University of Iowa, which studied other samples of students who were tested with other standardized measures of critical thinking.

The overwhelming majority of students, 86 percent, who were studied in Academically Adrift graduated in four years, in 2009. Their CLA scores were not alone in predicting stark differences in how they fared after college; so did the selectivity of their college and what the authors described as a measure of academic engagement and growth, which encompassed reading and writing requirements of classes taken, hours spent studying, and growth on the CLA.

Other Findings

Business majors, who received some of the [harshest criticism](#) in Academically Adrift for showing meager gains in critical thinking, nonetheless found full-time jobs more often than students in any other major. More than 71 percent of business majors were employed, followed by communications majors at nearly 68 percent. Only about one-third of science and math majors were employed, but nearly half of the graduates in these fields were enrolled full time in graduate school, the highest such percentage of any major.

Mr. Arum said the high rate of employment for business majors was not surprising, based on past research. The bigger question, he said, is how business majors fare over time, and whether their meager gains in critical thinking in college predict less of an ability to adapt

as their careers unfold.

"Some of these early gains come at the cost of different career trajectories," he said. "Perhaps it's going to catch up to them down the road."

The authors also surveyed graduates on their level of civic engagement.

Those who showed high levels of academic growth in college or who scored in the highest quintile on the CLA also were more likely (between 11 and 19 percentage points) to read the news and discuss politics compared with students who fared poorly on these measures.

"Our findings indicate that educational experiences have significant consequences for individuals and the larger society," the authors wrote.

The findings on civic engagement follow other efforts by the Association of American Colleges and Universities to raise public awareness of the value of higher education to the civic health of the country. Last week, the association issued a report calling on colleges to make civic learning a [central goal](#) of higher education.

Correction (3:36 p.m.): This article originally reported incorrectly on how much more likely were students with the highest academic growth in college or the highest scores on the CLA to read the news and discuss politics compared with students who fared poorly on those measures. The increased likelihood for those top students was 11 to 19 percentage points, not 10 to 15 percentage points. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.