

“Academically Adrift” in a Sea of Sports and Mediocrity

CLIPS Guest Commentary

By Frank G. Splitt, 03-04-12

Our guest author expands on his previous observations based on the provocative 2011 book Academically Adrift.

The annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities this past January occasioned the release of a follow-up report on the published research of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa—calling renewed attention to their 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*.^[1]

The Arum-Roska Observation – In *Academically Adrift*, the authors provided data to back the observation that "Growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly higher costs, but for a large proportion of them the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communications are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent."

"College leaders have long excused decades of relentlessly rising prices, exploding student-loan debt, and alarmingly high dropout rates with the assumption that students are learning. The prices are reasonable and the loans repayable, they say, because of the skills and knowledge that students acquire in exchange. And while dropouts are regrettable, we are told, that's an unavoidable—nay, admirable—consequence of maintaining high academic standards. *Academically Adrift* exposed the bankruptcy of those assertions," said Kevin Carey, the policy director at the Education Sector, an independent Washington think tank.^[2]

The Consequences of Limited Learning –The object of the follow-up research was to discern the consequences of limited learning on outcomes via student progress since graduation: whether these graduates were employed, were enrolled in graduate school, what their living arrangements were, and how civically engaged they were. This was done by extending the study into early adulthood for 900 of the 2300 students studied in *Academically Adrift*. The results were published in a Social Science Research Council Report.^[3]

The 'Adrift' follow-up story has been summarized as follows: "College graduates who showed paltry gains in critical thinking (as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment test) and little academic engagement while in college have a harder time than their more accomplished peers as they start their careers."^[4]

The Negative Impact of Big-Time Athletics – In a related essay, Anthony Grafton noted the negative impact of collegiate athletics: “Practically every university (has) its festering sores....At many state universities and more than a few private ones, head football and basketball coaches earn millions and their assistants hundreds of thousands for running semiprofessional teams. Few of these teams earn much money for the universities that sponsor them, and some brutally exploit their players.”^[5]

Academically Adrift didn't reveal anything that college leaders didn't know, in quiet rooms behind closed doors, all along. Academe was so slow to produce this research because it told the world things that those in academe would rather the world didn't know. —Kevin Carey

Grafton's observation also relates to earlier remarks by this author:[6]

There should be no doubts about the author's (Arum's and Roska's) basic conclusion—it's the reason why schools have resisted learning-outcome assessments and why the NCAA cartel is quick to seek refuge in FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, when asked to answer questions relating to the education of college athletes who are generally academically adrift. Who wants to reveal the fact that they are not doing a very good job at what they are supposed to be doing? Just imagine the blowback from tuition-paying parents, government funding agencies, and our nation's taxpayers—not to mention the Internal Revenue Service.

Murray Sperber has argued that colleges are substituting a party-like, "beer and circus" social environment for a meaningful education—an environment that serves to keep students happy, to marginalize faculty, and to maintain an ongoing flow of evermore tuition dollars.[7] The Arum-Roska observation certainly supports Sperber's earlier condemnation of higher education.[8] Nonetheless, the American public continues to enjoy their sports-entertainment.

It is hard to read Sperber's book without having a sinking feeling about the future of American culture. He has managed to document one facet of our national decline in painstaking detail, and the result is an admirable, timely and profoundly disturbing work.— The New York Times Book Review

Stifled critical thinking – Most likely the public is unaware of its sports-entertainment induced coma that effectively inhibit critical thinking and discussion of issues. There will be no complaint from government officials. From a political point of view it is much better to have the public discuss football and basketball games than it is to have it troubling these officials about the nation's unresolved problems.

After all, critical thinking could lead to uncomfortable questions as to why millions have lost their jobs, businesses and savings, why the price of gas is rising above \$4/gallon, why the housing market is taking so long to recover, why our national debt has grown so significantly, why we continue to depend on assistance from foreign countries to finance unaffordable government programs, why the ongoing political gridlock and partisanship in Washington and why contraception, rather than academically-adrift institutions of higher education, is such a hot political issue.

Distorted Value Judgments – Perhaps the value judgments of a portion of the public are somehow influenced by the enthusiasm for sports displayed by President Obama. For example, the *Associated Press* reported, "President Barack Obama gives his seal of approval to a college football playoff game, plans to welcome his hometown Chicago Bulls to the White House as NBA champions sometime in the next "five years" and he says he's been on the Jeremy Lin Bandwagon for a while." [9]

It is of interest to note that the Chicago Bulls are led by Derrick Rose, the 23-year-old NBA MVP, who became the toast of Chicago, thanks in large part to a sports-media culture that essentially overlooks the Rose-related cheating scandal at the University of Memphis. But there has been an exception.

They can do better – "Chicago is a great town with a lot of talented people. Among them is a president of the United States who is a huge basketball fan and knows the challenges faced by kids who grow up in poor homes. It would be great if he went to these disadvantaged neighborhoods and told kids to aspire to be professors at the University of Chicago, lawyers or community organizers. But President Barack Obama — and anyone else who cares about children — should not be telling them to be like Derrick Rose. They can do better," said Mark Yost, a Chicago area writer and author of the 2010 book *Varsity Green: A Behind the Scenes Look at Culture and Corruption in College Athletics*. [10]

“They” can do better—so can America’s academically-adrift institutions of higher education as well as students whose graduation diplomas should represent significantly more than an attendance record and a passport to the world of alumni sports fans and donors.

The Bottom Line – We all need to wake up and face reality, our nation’s institutions of higher education are academically adrift in a sea of sports and mediocrity. America cannot compete in the 21st-century global marketplace by being the least-educated industrial nation in the world ... a nation in which its colleges and universities serve as prostitutes for the sports entertainment industry—with many focusing resources on athletics at the expense of academics so its best and most important future products could eventually be limited to athletic sports entertainment venues and world-class athletic entertainers.

Also, although college-completion and graduation-rate goals stressed by President Obama and Secretary Duncan are certainly important, the quality of the educational process is absolutely critical. It makes no sense to increase graduation rates if the graduates have not responded to a challenge to engage in the serious process of personal and intellectual formation while learning how to work hard— learning what they need to learn and how to learn it as they aspire to be contributors and possibly leaders in their chosen professions.

Frank G. Splitt is the former McCormick Faculty Fellow of Telecommunications, McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science, Northwestern University, and Vice President Emeritus of Educational and Environmental Initiatives, Nortel Networks. He is a member of The Drake Group and the College Sport Research Institute’s Advisory Committee, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and recipient of The Drake Group’s *2006 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award*. A complete listing of links to his essays and commentaries on college sports reform can be found at <http://thedrakegroup.org/splittessays.html>

NOTES

1. Arum, Richard, Roksa, Josipa, *Academically Adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.
2. Carey, Kevin, "Academically Adrift: The News Gets Worse and Worse," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 12, 2012.
3. Arum, Richard, Cho, Esther, Kim, Jeannie and Roksa, Josipa, "Documenting Uncertain Times: Postgraduate Transitions of the Academically Adrift Cohort," New York: Social Science Research Council, 2012, <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/FCFB0E86-B346-E111-B2A8-001CC477EC84/>
4. Barrett, Dan, "'Adrift' in Adulthood: Students Who Struggled in College Find Life Harsher After Graduation" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 3, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Adrift-in-Adulthood-/130444/>
5. Grafton, Anthony "Our Universities: Why Are They Failing?" *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2011.
6. Splitt, Frank, "Collegiate Athletics Reform: Kicking the Hornet’s Nest," page 13, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Signs.pdf. For more, see the section, "What Others Have Said and Are Saying," on page 14.
7. Sperber, Murray, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*, Henry Holt and Company, 2000.
8. Splitt, Frank G., "'Academically Adrift' in a Sea of Sports," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 8, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/126643>
9. *Associated Press*, "Sports fan Obama confident in Bull's NBA chances," *The Daily Herald*, March 1, 2012.
10. Yost, Mark, "Derrick Rose is no role model," *The Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 2011.