



Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates

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Book Review

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Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates, by Richard Arum, professor in the Department of Sociology at NYU and senior fellow at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Josipa Roska, associate professor of sociology and education and associate director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at the University of Virginia, is the much-anticipated sequel to the authors' celebrated, often cited, and hotly debated *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011), which documented in great detail the academic gains - and stagnation - of some 2,300 students of traditional college age enrolled at a range of 4-year college and universities. In the 2011 report, students were measured on gains in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and other "higher level" skills taught at college, and the results were not encouraging. The most often-cited findings included: 45 percent of students "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" during the first two years of college; and 36 percent of students "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" over four years of college. The main culprit for students' lack of academic progress, the authors claimed, is lack of rigor, particularly with respect to critical reading and analytical writing.

Aspiring Adults Adrift tracks the same cohort of undergraduates out into the working world into (what should be) adulthood, and documents their struggles to make the transition to traditional adult roles. The results of this follow-up study are no more inspiring: 24 percent of graduates living at home with their parents; 74 percent of graduates receiving financial support (in some cases quite substantial) from their families; and 23 percent of graduates in the labor market who are unemployed or underemployed. Despite these discouraging findings, however, the authors report that these graduates are quite optimistic about their futures, 95

percent of them reporting that they expect their lives to be better than their parents. The authors set out to determine what accounts for this optimism.

One compelling argument put forward by Arum and Roksa is a theory given recent prominence by social psychologist Jeffrey Arnett in his notion of “emerging adulthood,” a new demographic identified as the period between eighteen and twenty-five years of age, a period of “self discovery” and “self exploration” during which adolescence is extended; a period in which these aspiring college-educated young adults struggle with identity exploration, instability, and self-focus, often do not live independently, are un- or underemployed, and do not have the income to be financially self-sufficient.

Arum and Roksa put the blame, fairly or unfairly, largely on institutions of higher education, and their commitment to “promoting a personnel perspective that celebrate(s) self-exploration and social well-being” (11) – put more bluntly, that caters to the ethos of consumer society, and a broader “cultural adoption of a therapeutic ethic” (9): “both the students and institutions have put such a high focus on social engagement as a key component of higher education that the students have come to believe that it’s those skills and networks that are going to be critically important for their lifelong success.” The evidence, however, suggests otherwise; that the emphasis on social “engagement” at the expense of academic rigor is not achieving these results. “Widespread cultural commitment to consumer choice and individual rights, self-fulfillment and sociability, and well-being and a broader therapeutic ethic leave little room for students or schools to embrace programs that promote academic rigor” (136). It is, the authors contend, ultimately a mutually-reinforcing race to the bottom: “This may reflect the self-centered nature of emerging adulthood,” they write, “or the education system’s decreasing emphasis on preparing individuals for participating in a democratic society. Whatever the underlying causes of this tendency, colleges could adopt a more productive role in the development of values and dispositions for greater engagement with the world at large” (113). In essence, the responsibility is ours, as educators, to reject consumer satisfaction as “a worthy aim for colleges and universities” and “do more to help students develop the attitudes and dispositions they need to reach their aspirations” (134). Wherever the solutions lie to the oft-cited “crisis in higher education,” the authors of *Aspiring Adults Adrift* have once again contributed significantly to the centrality of educator-led reform.

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