Academically Adrift:
Limited Learning on College Campuses

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Research Questions

- Are students improving their critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during college?

- Are students’ ascriptive characteristics associated with inequality in college learning?

- What specific experiences and college contexts are associated with student learning? To what extent does inequality in learning occur across campuses?

- How are recent graduates faring after completing college?
Determinants of College Learning Dataset

- **Longitudinal Design**

- **Large Scale**
  - 2005–2007: 24 diverse four-year institutions; 2,341 students
  - 2005–2009: 29 diverse four-year institutions, 1,666 students

- **Breadth of Information**
  - Family background and high school information, college experiences and contexts, college transcripts
  - Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)
Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)

- Dimensions of learning assessed
  - critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication

- Distinguishing characteristics
  - Direct measures (as opposed to student reports)
  - NOT multiple choice
  - Holistic assessment based on open-ended prompts representing “real-world” scenarios

- Used in other contexts
  - One of the measures of learning used by VSA
  - Will be utilized in 2016 by OECD–AHELO project
Performance Task (example)

Jamie Eager is a candidate who is opposing Pat Stone for reelection. Eager critiques the mayor’s solution to reducing crime by increasing the number of police officers. Eager proposes the city support a drug education program for addicts because, according to Eager, addicts are the major source of the city’s crime problem.
Performance Task (example, cont.)

Students are provided with a set of materials (e.g. newspaper articles, crime and drug statistics, research briefs, internal administrative memos, etc.) and asked to prepare a memo that addresses several issues, including a) evaluate the validity of Eager’s proposal and b) assess the validity of Eager’s criticism of the mayor’s plan to increase the number of officers.

http://www.collegiatelearningassessment.org/
# Institutional Characteristics 2005–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CLA Analysis Sample</th>
<th>IPEDS – CLA Schools</th>
<th>IPEDS – All Schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Test Scores</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT, 25th percentile</td>
<td>1052.83</td>
<td>995.15</td>
<td>993.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT, 75th percentile</td>
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<td>ACT, 25th percentile</td>
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<td>20.86</td>
<td>20.33</td>
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<td>ACT, 75th percentile</td>
<td>26.29</td>
<td>25.77</td>
<td>25.31</td>
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</table>
Course Requirements

- Course with more than 20 pages of writing
- Course with more than 40 pages of reading per week
- Both course requirements
- Neither course requirement

Note: Based on Spring 2007 survey.
Students’ Time Use

- Attending class/lab: 9%
- Studying: 7%
- Working, volunteering, fraternities/sororities, and student clubs: 9%
- Sleeping (estimated): 24%
- Socializing, recreating, and other: 51%

Note: Based on Spring 2007 survey.
Academic Commitment Over Time
(source: Phillip Babcock and Mindy Marks, forthcoming 2010)

Academic time from 1925-1965 in time diaries relatively constant (39.2 to 34.1)
CLA Gains 2005–2007 (performance task)

- 0.18 standard deviations – 7 percentile point gain (0.47 sd, 18 percentile points, 2005–2009)

- No statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills for 45 percent of the students in the sample (36 percent, 2005–2009)
Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores, student characteristics, and institutions attended.
CLLA Performance: Studying and Fraternities/Sororities

Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores, student characteristics, and institutions attended.
Note: Predicting 2007 CLA scores while controlling for 2005 CLA scores.
Educational Measures Associated with Learning

- Faculty expectations
- Course (reading and writing) requirements
- Hours studying alone
- College majors (traditional arts and science core)
Inequality in CLA Performance: Parental Education

Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Inequality in CLA Performance: African American vs. White

Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Institutional Variation

23 percent of CLA growth between 2005 and 2009 occurs across institutions
College Selectivity and CLA Performance

Note: Based on a 3-level HLM model, controlling for a range of demographic/family characteristics.
Graduate Transitions

- College Graduates, Spring 2010 follow-up survey – *preliminary* findings
  - 60 percent reported loans (averaging $26,800)
  - 9 percent are currently unemployed
  - Only 35% earn more than $30,000
    - 48% if working FT
  - Only 17% earn more than $40,000
    - 23% if working FT
  - 31 percent living with parents and relatives
College Graduates – News Awareness (2010 Survey)

Read print or on-line news

- Daily: 36%
- Weekly: 34%
- Monthly/Never: 30%
College Graduates – Civic Engagement (2010 Survey)

Discuss politics/public affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monthly/Never</td>
<td>39%</td>
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Summary of Findings

- Gains in student performance are disturbingly low in U.S. higher education.

- Learning in U.S. higher education is characterized by persisting and/or growing inequality with respect to individual characteristics.

- There is notable inequality in experiences and outcomes across U.S. institutions associated with college selectivity.

- U.S. recent college cohorts have high debt loads and are facing difficult transitions.
Policy Recommendations

- Federal imposed accountability would be counterproductive (existing measurements are imperfect; unintended consequences likely)

- Federal resources could provide incentives for institutional improvement, innovation and assessment

- Federal resources needed to develop research infrastructure to advance scientific knowledge of learning in higher education

- Accountability should operate at lower levels in the system
Recommendations for Institutional Improvement

- Institutional leadership to emphasize learning, develop plans for improvement and support ongoing assessment of both program quality and student learning outcomes.

- Faculty collective responsibility for ensuring academic rigor across programs and classes (i.e., course requirements and appropriate grading standards).

- Promote organizational cultures emphasizing student academic engagement, not just social engagement and student retention.
http://highered.ssrc.org/

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