

The State of the Academy: A Review Essay

Professor X, *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic*. New York: Viking, 2011. 258 pages. \$25.95.
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Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 259 pages.
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When I enrolled as a freshman at Oberlin in 1973, the college had just instituted a remedial writing course. Prior to that year, it had been assumed that students admitted to Oberlin (and many other elite colleges and universities) already knew how to write at the college level. There was no perceived need to teach writing as part of the curriculum. Seventeen years later, temporarily unable to find a college teaching job in musicology, I taught for two years at a small, undistinguished private high school in California. While there, I struggled to make contact with the most skill-deficient, poorly motivated students I have ever taught. Not only were they unprepared to write at their grade level, they were unable to construct sentences, spell correctly, distinguish parts of speech, or grasp the themes in required reading assignments. Producing an extended essay showing evidence of critical thinking was utterly beyond them. Furthermore, they had absolutely no idea of why they should want to do these things.

From my own experiences with English instruction at the college and pre-college level, it would be easy to conclude that standards in English instruction declined dramatically over a very short time and that the decline was already well underway by the time I began college. The two books under review both indict American higher education and, at least implicitly, compare its situation today with that of an idealized past when college students were better and professors had it easy. Apart from that, they are as different as can be. *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower* (henceforth *IBIT*) originated as an

essay in the June 2008 issue of *The Atlantic*. Its author, who identified himself only as “Professor X,” wrote colorfully and provocatively about the time he had spent as an adjunct instructor of English teaching evening classes at two local schools. The article was widely read and provoked much discussion, including a lengthy exchange on the AMS listserv. *Academically Adrift* is written by two sociologists with the assistance of several graduate students, and it received very wide press coverage when it appeared in 2011 because of its claim that despite the vast amounts of money being spent by American students to get a college education, most of them aren’t learning very much. Unlike Professor X, whose evidence is almost entirely anecdotal, the authors of *Academically Adrift* provide copious documentation, presented in a sixty-eight-page Methodological Appendix, for their claim that critical thinking skills in particular are not being effectively taught. Both books are important for music history teachers because, like everyone in the humanities, we spend a great deal of time teaching our students to write and think critically. It is worth spending some time, therefore, examining the authors’ claims and their relevance to our field. The books also raise broader issues about the integrity of higher education as a whole, and thus pose challenges with which anyone in the academy should be concerned.

IBIT, unlike *Academically Adrift*, which frequently lapses into mind-numbing jargon, makes for entertaining reading. Professor X writes like a frustrated novelist. In Chapter 5, titled “The Four Stages of a Plot,” he reviews the life circumstances that have led him, as a middle-aged husband and father with too much house on his hands, to moonlight as an academic. His refusal to share his actual identity is understandable. (“I have . . . changed the names of the colleges where I teach, freely added bell towers, parking lots, and quadrangles, and moved lecture halls and gymnasiums around like an architecture student running amok with his models,” he writes in the “Author’s Note,” p. ix). Nevertheless, the combination of anonymity with the fiercely personal nature of much of the writing in this book can be jarring, and one suspects that the real reason for the author’s anonymity—apart from his desire to keep his jobs—is a certain degree of shame he feels because of the way he has worked a system whose goals he often finds indefensible.

His argument, in short, is that colleges are opening their classes to countless students who really have no business being there, and that it makes little difference whether their instructors pass them on the basis of inadequate performance or fail them as they deserve. Either way the colleges make money, and people like Professor X continue to be able to make their mortgage payments. Professor X describes writing so poor it invites disbelief, and standards of intellectual rigor so low that the resulting instruction is neither intellectual nor rigorous. He describes students utterly unable to understand the inadequacy of their work. Readers of the *Atlantic* article will recall his struggles

with himself over a research paper that clearly deserved to fail, but that he briefly considered awarding a C because the student had worked hard and obviously expected to pass—and they will recall the student’s devastation upon receiving a failing grade after all. Despite such moments of compunction, Professor X shows little regret over his participation in a system that lets such students—most of whom do not fit the traditional profile—enroll in college in the first place, pushing them to acquire meaningless degrees for reasons remote from their lives and experience. (In both books, incidentally, President Barack Obama is presented as a major figure in this drive to get more and more students into college without considering the consequences.)

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift* focuses on the performance of a very different group of students, tracking the performance of traditional college-age students at two dozen four-year colleges and universities from Fall 2005 to Spring 2007. The authors use what they view as a sophisticated measurement tool, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA, to compare student performance at the beginning and end of this period. Unlike more familiar standardized tests, the CLA “consists of three open-ended, as opposed to multiple-choice, assessment components,” and is intended to measure student skills in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing (p. 21). The results showed that “from their freshman entrance to the end of their sophomore year, students in our sample on average have improved these skills, as measured by the CLA, by only 0.18 standard deviation,” or a seven percentile point gain (p. 35). “With a large sample of more than 2,300 students, we observe no statistically significant gain in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students in our study” (p. 36). A secondary finding, which also received a lot of press coverage, was that many classes taken by the students in the study group did not require forty or more pages of reading a week and/or twenty pages of writing over the course of a term. Higher education, the authors found, does little to even out inequalities in academic performance that stem from students’ racial or economic backgrounds; those who enter college with greater advantages generally leave that way as well.

Subsequent chapters deal in turn with differences in student backgrounds and educational contexts (“Origins and Trajectories”), variations in the college experience itself (“Pathways through Colleges Adrift”), and the extent to which college can shape student outcomes (“Channeling Students’ Energies toward Learning”). One conclusion that was to some extent lost in the media coverage of Arum and Roksa’s more sensational claims is that the quality of the college experience makes almost as much difference in student outcomes as does academic preparation. Students who are consistently challenged to think critically and to do what the authors consider significant amounts of reading and writing, who study alone rather than in groups, and who regard

college more as a learning experience than as a social one, do emerge with better cognitive skills and sharper intellects: things that are not just advantages in today's more competitive job market but are often essential to success.

This finding forms the pretext for the final chapter, titled "A Mandate for Reform," in which the authors write, "Over the past two decades, while the U.S. higher education system has grown only marginally, the rest of the world has not been standing still" (p. 123). The United States, long accustomed to regarding its system of higher education as the best in the world, is being overtaken and surpassed. What is needed is multi-tiered change both in higher education and in primary and secondary schooling. Given the emphasis that these authors place on CLA assessment, it is worth noting that they endorse William Damon's finding that students are entering college at a disadvantage because "our obsessive reliance on standardized test scores deters both teachers and students from concentrating on the real mission of schooling: developing a love of learning for learning's sake" (pp. 126–7). Those of us who teach music and other humanistic disciplines should be cheered by their argument that the actual value of a college education can be measured not just by students' acquisition of concrete job skills, but also by the development of their minds. While Arum and Roksa suggest that a shock comparable to that of the Sputnik launch in 1957 may be necessary, it is clear that if and when such a change does come, the humanities will play a central role.

What does this mean for our field? We might begin by playing devil's advocate, pointing out that music majors, in contrast to many other college students, tend to be a highly self-selective group seeking to master a clearly-defined skill set. Theoretically, at least, this makes them the opposite of the goalless, "adrift" students who are the focus of Arum and Roksa's study. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, we often find ourselves, like Professor X, playing the role of writing instructor. Here our goals can be confusing. We want our students, faced with competing demands from studio teachers and ensemble directors, to devote sufficient time to coursework. Of the time that they do devote to our classes, we usually expect them to do some writing, although in most cases it probably falls short of the twenty pages a semester that Arum and Roksa believe to be essential. The same can be true for reading. Students in my semester-long course, which covers music from Beethoven through World War I, read about twenty pages a week from a very familiar textbook; this is at least 60% more than they would have been required to read from the first edition of that book, published in 1960, but still only half of what Arum and Roksa recommend. Crucially, though, they also spend a great deal of time listening critically to the music examples that accompany the reading, and that experience is also reflected in the writing assignments that they complete. At its best, the music history curriculum is ideally suited to

encouraging critical thought and intellectual engagement, as many of us continue to discover in novel and inventive ways.

Meanwhile, I suspect that the experiences of Professor X described in *IBIT* will resonate most clearly with those who teach music appreciation: a course that is offered at nearly every college and university in the country, that enrolls students indiscriminately regardless of background or experience, and that is often taught by adjuncts. A quick perusal of the standard textbooks also suggests that the music appreciation experience has changed demonstrably during the last generation or two, as has its constituency among students. In this respect, it differs from music history, which has always been required primarily of music majors, who are assumed to have prior musical training. When Joseph Machlis first published *The Enjoyment of Music* over fifty years ago, the average college student also had some limited experience listening to classical music. Machlis took advantage of that fact by beginning with the music of the Romantic period, which is what his students were most likely to recognize and like. This gave his book an immediate advantage over those that were arranged entirely in chronological order. Since students may no longer be familiar with Romantic music, or with any particular type of music, the chronological format has once again become common. Most current textbook authors, though, at least attempt to deal with music in popular styles and non-Western traditions. The typical student now emerges from the music appreciation class with a superficial knowledge of a wide variety of music.

But while the music appreciation course may look different on paper, its pedagogy has changed little. Now as then, it is open to students with no musical training: students are unprepared to listen to music at what might be called a college level, with no idea of why they should want to do so. Now as then, it can easily fail to challenge those students seriously to do what might be called “critical listening.” In the 1939 essay, “Why Composers Write How,” Virgil Thomson described such courses as participating in the “Appreciation Racket,” arguing that their goal is not to introduce students to music at any deep level, but to promote an elitist view of what it means to be musically literate.¹ One might further argue today that despite significant shifts in course content, the profile of elitism has simply changed; as Shamus Khan recently suggested in *The New York Times* (Op-Ed, July 7, 2012), it is now considered chic to have expansive musical tastes encompassing many different styles and genres. In contrast to these “cultural omnivores,” Khan writes, those with a strong preference for any one type of music ally themselves with the poorer classes.

1. Virgil Thomson, “Why Composers Write How, or the Economic Determinism of Musical Style,” in *Virgil Thomson, A Reader: Selected Writings, 1924–1984*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2002), 138–44.

Thus, faculty who teach music appreciation can neither look back to an idyllic past nor claim significant progress. Professor X's experiences in *IBIT* might lead us to ask whether such progress is possible in the diverse and baffling environment of current college teaching. Arum and Roksa's study might challenge us to wonder what that progress would look like. Meanwhile, those who teach music history should take encouragement from Arum and Roksa's endorsement of the importance of the humanities and of critical thinking skills, while perhaps also applying their conclusions to the way we teach students to listen, and not just read, critically.