

## Improving the value of a college degree

COLUMN

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In January of 2011, the University of Chicago Press published a startling account of the state of higher education. The book, “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,” by Richard Arum and Josipa Rosksa, concludes that “American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students.” Through research that draws from student survey responses, transcript data and the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the pair of sociologists show that the model underlying higher education needs to be rethought.

In a period of economic woes, a bachelor’s degree seems a must in the barren job market. Soaring tuition costs, however, have brought into question the value and necessity of a college degree. Through [analysis](#) of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, Arum and Rosksa found that 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.

In an environment that supposedly nurtures innovation and creative genius, how is it that college students are just drifting through?

The answer to that question seems to be a lack of rigor in classrooms across the nation. Arum and Rosksa make a direct connection between rigor and gains in learning. This finding is not surprising given the current atmosphere in higher education.

The advent of tools such as MyEdu have sparked a student rush to find courses that provide “easy A’s.” Current restrictions in curricula also contribute to student stagnation. Course catalogues have become an assembly line in which students follow a predetermined path.

This trend may be a result of universities’ scrambling to improve enrollment. Decreased funding often means that classroom sizes increase. Professors are spread too thin, forcing professors to cut down on assignments to keep up with grading.

Universities have incentives that reward departments for enrollment and retention rather than improvements in education standards, drifting toward a student-as-client model in which

institutions chase after students for their potential financial contributions. The university culture must place more value on learning.

Except in the liberal arts, college majors are not helping students develop critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills. This is not to say that technical fields are inherently bland. Rather, majors in engineering and natural sciences lack the creative flair of their liberal arts counterparts. Students in technical fields are required to learn multitudes of theories and equations, limiting the amount of time they are able to explore other aspects of education.

The course model must be transformed to become more interactive.

The current system of students looking at PowerPoint lectures, following lab manuals and looking up homework solutions on Cramster is clearly not effective and will certainly not produce the next [Steve Jobs](#). Students should have more freedom to explore projects and research opportunities that are directly related to their studies. The engineering school's senior design project requirement is an excellent example of how this can be accomplished. The senior design project allows a group of engineering students to pool their collective creative talents to design and implement a piece of technology that solves a real world problem. This process allows these students to join professors and companies and take part in cutting-edge developments.

Additionally, UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship program allows undergraduate students to pursue their creative interests. IE connects undergraduates with graduate student mentors and faculty supervisors to explore unique aspects of graduate studies. This program grants students the freedom to conduct research, participate in seminars and publish professional articles. These activities greatly enhance the learning experience.

When students reach the "magic number" of credits they need to graduate, they are assumed to know everything that is necessary. But in far too many cases, this is simply not true. Universities must reexamine their purpose to educate and commit to adding real value to a college degree.

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