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A CRITIC AT LARGE

LIVE AND LEARN

Why we have college.

by Louis Menand

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My first job as a professor was at an Ivy League university. The students were happy to be taught, and we, their teachers, were happy to be teaching them. Whatever portion of their time and energy was being eaten up by social commitments—which may have been huge, but about which I was ignorant—they seemed earnestly and unproblematically engaged with the academic experience. If I was naïve about this, they were gracious enough not to disabuse me. None of us ever questioned the importance of what we were doing.

At a certain appointed hour, the university decided to make its way in the world without me, and we parted company. I was assured that there were no hard feelings. I was fortunate to get a position in a public university system, at a college with an overworked faculty, an army of part-time instructors, and sixteen thousand students. Many of these students were the first in their families to attend college, and any distractions they had were not social. Many of them worked, and some had complicated family responsibilities.

I didn't regard this as my business any more than I had the social lives of my Ivy League students. I assigned my new students the same readings I had assigned the old ones. I understood that the new students would not be as well prepared, but, out of faith or ego, I thought that I could tell them what they needed to know, and open up the texts for them. Soon



More and more Americans are going to college, but how many of them are actually learning anything?

after I started teaching there, someone raised his hand and asked, about a text I had assigned, “Why did we have to buy this book?”

I got the question in that form only once, but I heard it a number of times in the unmonetized form of “Why did we have to read this book?” I could see that this was not only a perfectly legitimate question; it was a very interesting question. The students were asking me to justify the return on investment in a college education. I just had never been called upon to think about this before. It wasn’t part of my training. We took the value of the business we were in for granted.

I could have said, “You are reading these books because you’re in college, and these are the kinds of books that people in college read.” If you hold a certain theory of education, that answer is not as circular as it sounds. The theory goes like this: In any group of people, it’s easy to determine who is the fastest or the strongest or even the best-looking. But picking out the most intelligent person is difficult, because intelligence involves many attributes that can’t be captured in a one-time assessment, like an I.Q. test. There is no intellectual equivalent of the hundred-yard dash. An intelligent person is open-minded, an outside-the-box thinker, an effective communicator, is prudent, self-critical, consistent, and so on. These are not qualities readily subject to measurement.

Society needs a mechanism for sorting out its more intelligent members from its less intelligent ones, just as a track team needs a mechanism (such as a stopwatch) for sorting out the faster athletes from the slower ones. Society wants to identify intelligent people early on so that it can funnel them into careers that maximize their talents. It wants to get the most out of its human resources. College is a process that is sufficiently multifaceted and fine-grained to do this.

College is, essentially, a four-year intelligence test. Students have to demonstrate intellectual ability over time and across a range of subjects. If they’re sloppy or inflexible or obnoxious—no matter how smart they might be in the I.Q. sense—those negatives will get picked up in their grades. As an added service, college also sorts people according to aptitude. It separates the math types from the poetry types. At the end of the process, graduates get a score, the G.P.A., that professional schools and employers can trust as a measure of intellectual capacity and productive potential. It’s important, therefore, that everyone is taking more or less the same test.

I could have answered the question in a different way. I could have said, “You’re reading these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else.” This reflects a different theory of college, a theory that runs like this: In a society that encourages its members to pursue the career paths that promise the greatest personal or financial rewards, people will, given a choice,

learn only what they need to know for success. They will have no incentive to acquire the knowledge and skills important for life as an informed citizen, or as a reflective and culturally literate human being. College exposes future citizens to material that enlightens and empowers them, whatever careers they end up choosing.

In performing this function, college also socializes. It takes people with disparate backgrounds and beliefs and brings them into line with mainstream norms of reason and taste. Independence of mind is tolerated in college, and even honored, but students have to master the accepted ways of doing things before they are permitted to deviate. Ideally, we want everyone to go to college, because college gets everyone on the same page. It's a way of producing a society of like-minded grownups.

If you like the first theory, then it doesn't matter which courses students take, or even what is taught in them, as long as they're rigorous enough for the sorting mechanism to do its work. All that matters is the grades. If you prefer the second theory, then you might consider grades a useful instrument of positive or negative reinforcement, but the only thing that matters is what students actually learn. There is stuff that every adult ought to know, and college is the best delivery system for getting that stuff into people's heads.

A lot of confusion is caused by the fact that since 1945 American higher education has been committed to both theories. The system is designed to be both meritocratic (Theory 1) and democratic (Theory 2). Professional schools and employers depend on colleges to sort out each cohort as it passes into the workforce, and elected officials talk about the importance of college for everyone. We want higher education to be available to all Americans, but we also want people to deserve the grades they receive.

It wasn't always like this. Before 1945, elite private colleges like Harvard and Yale were largely in the business of reproducing a privileged social class. Between 1906 and 1932, four hundred and five boys from Groton applied to Harvard. Four hundred and two were accepted. In 1932, Yale received thirteen hundred and thirty applications, and it admitted nine hundred and fifty-nine—an acceptance rate of seventy-two per cent. Almost a third of those who enrolled were sons of Yale graduates.

In 1948, through the exertions of people like James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard, the Educational Testing Service went into business, and standardized testing (the S.A.T. and the A.C.T.) soon became the virtually universal method for picking out the most intelligent students in the high-school population, regardless of their family background, and getting them into the higher-education system. Conant regarded higher education as a limited social resource, and he wanted to make more strait the gate. Testing insured that only people

who deserved to go to college did. The fact that Daddy went no longer sufficed. In 1940, the acceptance rate at Harvard was eighty-five per cent. By 1970, it was twenty per cent. Last year, thirty-five thousand students applied to Harvard, and the acceptance rate was six per cent.

Almost all the élite colleges saw a jump in applications this year, partly because they now recruit much more aggressively internationally, and acceptance rates were correspondingly lower. Columbia, Yale, and Stanford admitted less than eight per cent of their applicants. This degree of selectivity is radical. To put it in some perspective: the acceptance rate at Cambridge is twenty-one per cent, and at Oxford eighteen per cent.

But, as private colleges became more selective, public colleges became more accommodating. Proportionally, the growth in higher education since 1945 has been overwhelmingly in the public sector. In 1950, there were about 1.14 million students in public colleges and universities and about the same number in private ones. Today, public colleges enroll almost fifteen million students, private colleges fewer than six million.

There is now a seat for virtually anyone with a high-school diploma who wants to attend college. The City University of New York (my old employer) has two hundred and twenty-eight thousand undergraduates—more than four times as many as the entire Ivy League. The big enchilada of public higher education, the State of California, has ten university campuses, twenty-three state-college campuses, a hundred and twelve community-college campuses, and more than 3.3 million students. Six per cent of the American population is currently enrolled in college or graduate school. In Great Britain and France, the figure is about three per cent.

If you are a Theory 1 person, you worry that, with so many Americans going to college, the bachelor's degree is losing its meaning, and soon it will no longer operate as a reliable marker of productive potential. Increasing public investment in higher education with the goal of college for everyone—in effect, taxpayer-subsidized social promotion—is thwarting the operation of the sorting mechanism. Education is about selection, not inclusion.

If you are friendly toward Theory 2, on the other hand, you worry that the competition for slots in top-tier colleges is warping educational priorities. You see academic tulip mania: students and their parents are overvaluing a commodity for which there are cheap and plentiful substitutes. The sticker price at Princeton or Stanford, including room and board, is upward of fifty thousand dollars a year. Public colleges are much less expensive—the average tuition is \$7,605—and there are also many less selective private colleges where you can get a good education, and a lot more faculty face time, without having to spend every minute of high school sucking up to your teachers and reformatting your résumé. Education is about personal and intellectual growth, not about winning some race to the top.

It would be nice to conclude that, despite these anxieties, and given the somewhat

contradictory goals that have been set for it, the American higher-education system is doing what Americans want it to do. College is broadly accessible: sixty-eight per cent of high-school graduates now go on to college (in 1980, only forty-nine per cent did), and employers continue to reward the credential, which means that there is still some selection going on. In 2008, the average income for someone with an advanced degree (master's, professional, or doctoral) was \$83,144; for someone with a bachelor's degree, it was \$58,613; for someone with only a high-school education, it was \$31,283.

There is also increasing global demand for American-style higher education. Students all over the world want to come here, and some American universities, including N.Y.U. and Yale, are building campuses overseas. Higher education is widely regarded as the route to a better life. It is sometimes pointed out that Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg were college dropouts. It is unnecessary to point out that most of us are not Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg.

It's possible, though, that the higher education system only *looks* as if it's working. The process may be sorting, students may be getting access, and employers may be rewarding, but are people actually learning anything? Two recent books suggest that they are not. They suggest it pretty emphatically.

"Academically Adrift" (Chicago; \$25) was written by two sociologists, Richard Arum (N.Y.U.) and Josipa Roksa (University of Virginia). Almost a third of it, sixty-eight pages, is a methodological appendix, which should give the general reader a clue to what to expect. "Academically Adrift" is not a diatribe based on anecdote and personal history and supported by some convenient data, which is what books critical of American higher education often are. It's a social-scientific attempt to determine whether students are learning what colleges claim to be teaching them—specifically, "to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems, and communicate clearly."

Arum and Roksa consider Theory 1 to be "overly cynical." They believe that the job of the system is to teach people, not just to get them up the right educational ladders and down the right career chutes. They think that some people just aren't capable of learning much at the college level. But they think that people who do go to college ought to be able to show something for the time and expense.

The authors decided that, despite a lot of rhetoric about accountability in higher education, no one seemed eager to carry out an assessment, so they did their own. They used a test known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or C.L.A. The test has three parts, though they use data from just one part, the "performance task." Students are, for example, assigned to advise "an employer about the desirability of purchasing a type of airplane that has recently crashed," and

are shown documents, such as news articles, an F.A.A. accident report, charts, and so on, and asked to write memos. The memos are graded for “critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing.”

The test was given to a group of more than two thousand freshmen in the fall of 2005, and again, to the same group, in the spring of 2007. Arum and Roksa say that forty-five per cent of the students showed no significant improvement, and they conclude that “American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students.”

The study design raises a lot of questions, from the reasonableness of assessing learning growth after only three full semesters of college to the reliability of the C.L.A. itself. The obvious initial inference to make about a test that does not pick up a difference where you expect one is that it is not a very good test. And, even if the test does measure some skills accurately, the results say nothing about whether students have acquired any knowledge, or socially desirable attitudes, that they didn’t have before they entered college.

There are other reasons for skepticism. It’s generally thought (by their professors, anyway) that students make a developmental leap after sophomore year—although Arum and Roksa, in a follow-up study completed after their book was finished, determined that, after four years, thirty-six per cent of students still did not show significant improvement on the C.L.A. But what counts as significant in a statistical analysis is a function of where you set the bar. Alexander Astin, the dean of modern higher-education research, who is now an emeritus professor at U.C.L.A., published a sharp attack on Arum and Roksa’s methodology in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and, in particular, on the statistical basis for the claim that forty-five per cent of college students do not improve.

Even leaving the C.L.A. results aside, though, “Academically Adrift” makes a case for concern. Arum and Roksa argue that many students today perceive college as fundamentally a social experience. Students spend less time studying than they used to, for example. In 1961, students reported studying for an average of twenty-five hours a week; the average is now twelve to thirteen hours. More than a third of the students in Arum and Roksa’s study reported that they spent less than five hours a week studying. In a University of California survey, students reported spending thirteen hours a week on schoolwork and forty-three hours socializing and pursuing various forms of entertainment.

Few people are fully reliable reporters of time use. But if students are studying less it may be because the demands on them are fewer. Half the students in the study said that they had not taken a single course in the previous semester requiring more than twenty pages of writing. A third said that they had not taken a course requiring more than forty pages of reading a week.

Arum and Roksa point out that professors have little incentive to make their courses more rigorous. Professors say that the only aspect of their teaching that matters professionally is student course evaluations, since these can figure in tenure and promotion decisions. It's in professors' interest, therefore, for their classes to be entertaining and their assignments not too onerous. They are not deluded: a study carried out back in the nineteen-nineties (by Alexander Astin, as it happens) found that faculty commitment to teaching is negatively correlated with compensation.

Still, Arum and Roksa believe that some things do make a difference. First of all, students who are better prepared academically for college not only do better when they get to college; they improve more markedly while they're there. And students who take courses requiring them to write more than twenty pages a semester and to read more than forty pages a week show greater improvement.

The most interesting finding is that students majoring in liberal-arts fields—sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities—do better on the C.L.A., and show greater improvement, than students majoring in non-liberal-arts fields such as business, education and social work, communications, engineering and computer science, and health. There are a number of explanations. Liberal-arts students are more likely to take courses with substantial amounts of reading and writing; they are more likely to attend selective colleges, and institutional selectivity correlates positively with learning; and they are better prepared academically for college, which makes them more likely to improve. The students who score the lowest and improve the least are the business majors.

Sixty per cent of American college students are not liberal-arts majors, though. The No. 1 major in America is, in fact, business. Twenty-two per cent of bachelor's degrees are awarded in that field. Ten per cent are awarded in education, seven per cent in the health professions. More than twice as many degrees are given out every year in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies as in philosophy and religion. Since 1970, the more higher education has expanded, the more the liberal-arts sector has shrunk in proportion to the whole.

Neither Theory 1 nor Theory 2 really explains how the educational system works for these non-liberal-arts students. For them, college is basically a supplier of vocational preparation and a credentialing service. The theory that fits their situation—Theory 3—is that advanced economies demand specialized knowledge and skills, and, since high school is aimed at the general learner, college is where people can be taught what they need in order to enter a vocation. A college degree in a non-liberal field signifies competence in a specific line of work.

Theory 3 explains the growth of the non-liberal education sector. As work becomes more

high-tech, employers demand more people with specialized training. It also explains the explosion in professional master's programs. There are now well over a hundred master's degrees available, in fields from Avian Medicine to Web Design and Homeland Security. Close to fourteen times as many master's degrees are given out every year as doctorates. When Barack Obama and Arne Duncan talk about how higher education is the key to the future of the American economy, this is the sector they have in mind. They are not talking about the liberal arts.

Still, students pursuing vocational degrees are almost always required to take some liberal-arts courses. Let's say that you want a bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts Management, with a Beverage Management major, from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. (Hmm. I might have taken a wrong turn in my education somewhere.) To get this degree, U.N.L.V. requires you to take two courses in English (Composition and World Literature), one course in philosophy, one course in either history or political science, courses in chemistry, mathematics, and economics, and two electives in the arts and humanities. If your professional goal is, let's say, running the beverage service at the Bellagio, how much effort are you going to put into that class on World Literature?

This is where Professor X enters the picture. Professor X is the nom de guerre of a man who has spent more than ten years working evenings (his day job is with the government) as an adjunct instructor at "Pembroke," a private four-year institution, and "Huron State," a community college that is evidently public. The academic motivation of the students at these schools is utilitarian. Most of them are trying to get jobs—as registered nurses or state troopers, for example—that require a college degree, and they want one thing and one thing only from Professor X: a passing grade.

Professor X published an article in *The Atlantic* a few years ago about his experiences. David Brooks mentioned the piece in his *Times* column, and it provoked a small digital storm. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" (Viking; \$25.95) is the book version. The author holds an M.F.A. in creative writing (he teaches composition and literature), and he writes in the style of mordant self-deprecation that is the approved M.F.A. mode for the memoir genre. He can be gratuitously snarky about his colleagues (though not about his students), but he's smart and he's generally good company. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" has the same kind of worm's-eye charm as Stephen Akey's "College" (1996), a story of undergraduate misadventures at Glassboro State College, though "College" is funnier.

Professor X has entwined his take on teaching with episodes in his personal life involving the purchase of a house he could not afford and subsequent marital tension. These parts of the

book are too vague to be engaging. If you are going to go down the confessional path, you have to come across with the lurid details. We never find out where Professor X lives, what his wife does, what his kids are like, or much else about him. This is a writer who obviously enjoys the protection of a pseudonym. “*In the Basement of the Ivory Tower*” is one of those books about higher education that are based on anecdote and personal history and supported by some convenient data (sort of like this review, actually), but the story is worth hearing.

Professor X thinks that most of the students he teaches are not qualified to attend college. He also thinks that, as far as writing and literature are concerned, they are unteachable. But the system keeps pushing them through the human-capital processor. They attend either because the degree is a job requirement or because they’ve been seduced by the siren song “college for everyone.” X considers the situation analogous to the real-estate bubble: Americans are being urged to invest in something they can’t afford and don’t need. Why should you have to pass a college-level literature class if you want to be a state trooper? To show that you can tough it out with Henry James? As Professor X sees it, this is a case of over-selection.

It’s also socially inefficient. The X-Man notes that half of all Americans who enter college never finish, that almost sixty per cent of students who enroll in two-year colleges need developmental (that is, remedial) courses, and that less than thirty per cent of faculty in American colleges are tenure-track. That last figure was supplied by the American Federation of Teachers, and it may be a little low, but it is undeniable that more than half the teaching in American colleges is done by contingent faculty (that is, adjuncts) like Professor X.

This does not mean, of course, that students would learn more if they were taught by tenured professors. Professor X is an adjunct, but he is also a dedicated teacher, and anyone reading his book will feel that his students respect this. He reprints a couple of course evaluations that sum up his situation in two nutshells:

Course was better than I thought. Before this I would of *never voluntarily read* a book. But now I almost have a *desire* to pick one up and read. I really like [Professor X], this is why I took the course because I saw he was teaching it. He’s kind of enthusiastic about things that probably aren’t that exciting to most people, which helps make the three hours go by quicker.

Professor X blames this state of affairs on what he calls “postmodern modes of thought,” and on the fact that there are more women teaching in college, which has had “a feminizing effect on the collective unconscious of faculty thought.” He also takes some shots at the academic field of composition and rhetoric, which he regards as low on rigor and high on consciousness-raising. This all seems beside the point. Professor X’s own pedagogy is old-fashioned and his grading is strict (he once failed nine students in a class of fifteen)—and he

hasn't had much luck with his students, either.

When he is not taking on trends in modern thought, Professor X is shrewd about the reasons it's hard to teach underprepared students how to write. "I have come to think," he says, "that the two most crucial ingredients in the mysterious mix that makes a good writer may be (1) having read enough throughout a lifetime to have internalized the rhythms of the written word, and (2) refining the ability to mimic those rhythms." This makes sense. If you read a lot of sentences, then you start to think in sentences, and if you think in sentences, then you can write sentences, because you know what a sentence sounds like. Someone who has reached the age of eighteen or twenty and has never been a reader is not going to become a writer in fifteen weeks. On the other hand, it's not a bad thing for such a person to see what caring about "things that probably aren't that exciting to most people" looks like. A lot of teaching is modelling.

Professor X has published a follow-up essay, in *The Atlantic*, to promote the book. He's on a mini-crusade to stem the flood of high-school graduates into colleges that require them to master a liberal-arts curriculum. He believes that students who aren't ready for that kind of education should have the option of flat-out vocational training instead. They're never going to know how to read Henry James; they're never going to know how to write like Henry James. But why would they ever need to?

This is the tracking approach. You don't wait twenty years for the system to sort people out, and you don't waste resources on students who won't benefit from an academically advanced curriculum. You make a judgment much earlier, as early as middle school, and designate certain students to follow an academic track, which gives them a liberal education, and the rest to follow a professional or vocational track. This is the way it was done for most of the history of higher education in the West. It is still the way it's done in Britain, France, and Germany.

Until the twentieth century, that was the way it worked here, too. In the nineteenth century, a college degree was generally not required for admission to law school or medical school, and most law students and medical students did not bother to get one. Making college a prerequisite for professional school was possibly the most important reform ever made in American higher education. It raised the status of the professions, by making them harder to enter, and it saved the liberal-arts college from withering away. This is why liberal education is the elite type of college education: it's the gateway to the high-status professions. And this is what people in other parts of the world mean when they say they want American-style higher education. They want the liberal arts and sciences.

Assuming that these new books are right (not a fully warranted assumption), and that many students are increasingly disengaged from the academic part of the college experience, it

may be because the system has become too big and too heterogeneous to work equally well for all who are in it. The system appears to be drawing in large numbers of people who have no firm career goals but failing to help them acquire focus. This is what Arum and Roksa believe, anyway. Students at very selective colleges are still super-motivated—their motivation is one of the reasons they are selected—and most professors, since we are the sort of people who want a little gold star for everything we do, still want to make a difference to their students. But when motivation is missing, when people come into the system without believing that what goes on in it really matters, it's hard to transform minds.

If there is a decline in motivation, it may mean that an exceptional phase in the history of American higher education is coming to an end. That phase began after the Second World War and lasted for fifty years. Large new populations kept entering the system. First, there were the veterans who attended on the G.I. Bill—2.2 million of them between 1944 and 1956. Then came the great expansion of the nineteen-sixties, when the baby boomers entered and enrollments doubled. Then came co-education, when virtually every all-male college, apart from the military academies, began accepting women. Finally, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, there was a period of remarkable racial and ethnic diversification.

These students did not regard college as a finishing school or a ticket punch. There was much more at stake for them than there had been for the Groton grads of an earlier day. (How many hours do you think *they* put in doing homework?) College was a gate through which, once, only the favored could pass. Suddenly, the door was open: to vets; to children of Depression-era parents who could not afford college; to women, who had been excluded from many of the top schools; to nonwhites, who had been segregated or under-represented; to the children of people who came to the United States precisely so that their children could go to college. For these groups, college was central to the experience of making it—not only financially but socially and personally. They were finally getting a bite at the apple. College was *supposed* to be hard. Its difficulty was a token of its transformational powers.

This is why “Why did we have to buy this book?” was such a great question. The student who asked it was not complaining. He was trying to understand how the magic worked. I (a Theory 2 person) wonder whether students at that college are still asking it. ♦

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