

# Least-demanding colleges produce 'limited learning'

*45% of students in survey show skills have only marginally improved after first 2 years*

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You are told that to make it in life, you must go to college. You work hard to get there. You or your parents drain savings or take out huge loans to pay for it all.

And you end up learning ... not much.

A study of more than 2,300 undergraduates found 45 percent of students show no significant improvement in the key measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing by the end of their sophomore years.

Not much is asked of students, either. Half did not take a single course requiring 20 pages of writing during their prior semester, and one-third did not take a single course requiring even 40 pages of reading per week.

The findings are in a new book, "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses," by sociologists Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia. An accompanying report argues against federal mandates holding schools accountable, a prospect long feared in American higher education.

"The great thing — if you can call it that — is that it's going to spark a dialogue and focus on the actual learning issue," said David Paris, president of the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, which is pressing the cause in higher education. "What kind of intellectual growth are we seeing in college?"

The study, an unusually large-scale effort to track student learning over time, comes as the federal government, reformers and others argue that the United States must produce more college graduates to remain competitive globally. But if students aren't learning much, that calls into question whether boosting graduation rates will provide that edge.

"It's not the case that giving out more credentials is going to make the U.S. more economically competitive," Arum said in an interview. "It requires academic rigor. ... You can't just get it through osmosis at these institutions."

The findings also will likely spark a debate over what helps and hurts students learn. To sum up, it's good to lead a monk's existence: Students who study alone and have heavier reading and writing loads do well.

The book is based on information from 24 schools, meant to be a representative sample, that provided Collegiate Learning Assessment data on students who took the standardized test in their first semester in fall 2005 and at the end of their sophomore years in spring 2007. The schools took part on the condition that their institutions not be identified.