

# Critical thinking called into question

February 4 2011, By Lauren Nisbet

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A post-secondary education won't necessarily guarantee students the critical thinking skills employers have come to expect from university grads, says a recent study.

Richard Arum of New York University conducted a study of more than 2,300 [students](#) between fall 2005 and spring 2009 examining test data and student surveys at 24 U.S. colleges and universities. Results, published in the book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, revealed 45 per cent of students made no significant improvement in [critical thinking](#), reasoning or writing skills during the first two years, and 36 per cent showed no improvement after four years of schooling.

With such negative results, academic professionals are left to consider whether student apathy is to blame or if the study reflects a fundamental failing in the post-secondary education system.

“For most things in life, you get out of something what you put into it,” says John Doerksen, Western’s vice provost for academic programs and students. “It’s possible for students to find the easiest route to a diploma at the end of the day, but on the whole universities are serving populations well.”

Doerksen emphasizes the importance of motivation among students, pointing out that “opportunities are there for students who are willing to learn and develop academically. The environment is very rich on university campuses.”

According to Mark Blagrove, Huron College dean of arts and social science, students have the right level of motivation, but the story doesn't end there. Blagrove places more responsibility on educators to encourage comprehensive learning in the university community. "Students are as intellectually curious as they ever were," he says. "It's up to us to make sure we spark that intellectual curiosity and are able to meet today's students on today's terms."

Blagrove sees an opportunity for improvement in the way professors communicate the intention behind the work they assign. "We've gone a long while knowing that (critical thinking) is part of what we teach, but we're not necessarily articulating or reminding students that it's happening."

In terms of the academic atmosphere at Western, the university offers challenging and stimulating programs. "University is a place for students who are keen in committing themselves to expanding their knowledge and skills," Doerksen says.

At the same time, Blagrove highlights the need for an academic approach involving going back to basics. "We need to look at what we're trying to achieve, define critical and creative skills and look at the tools that we have to encourage them, as well as the constraints we face."

Arum's study also found students spent an average of 85 hours a week socializing or involved in extracurricular activities, but devoted less than a fifth of their time to academics. "This surprises me," Doerksen says. "From my own experience I would say that students are spending very significant amounts of time on their academic pursuits."

When asked how the balance of social activity and academics should work, he emphasizes the importance of both aspects of the university experience. "There's no question that to be successful and to move

forward it is necessary to learn critical, analytical and creative skills, and that takes time,” he says, “but this is also an important time for most students’ emotional and personal development ... much of that occurs outside the classroom.”

When asked if he thought Arum’s study would have similar results if conducted in Canada, Doerksen says he would be extremely surprised. “If a student wants to learn, there is an appropriate environment for that here.”

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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