

University

PSU grapples with 'academically adrift' students

by Lucy Bryan Green

Looking back on seven semesters at Penn State, Toma Zikatanov described the college experience as a time of “growing into yourself, figuring out who you are.”

The son of two Penn State math professors, Zikatanov said his parents' emphasis on academic achievement has been an “anti-influence.”

“For whatever reason, I've always had this intrinsic desire to pursue what I want to do and not what I'm told to do,” he said.

Zikatanov said that finding a major has been “a pretty arduous process.” He entered college in 2008 as a double major horticulture and wildlife and fisheries science because of his love for plants and animals.

But when he found both specializations too businesslike and not enjoyable enough, he switched to outdoor recreation. There, he said he felt like he wasn't learning anything he couldn't learn outside of college, so he switched to mechanical engineering.

“I enjoyed that for a while,” Zikatanov said. “And then I got into the more in-depth classes and I figured out that engineering in general stands for everything I'm against... It's just that constant process of science where they just put stuff out in the world, not knowing whether it's safe or not, and it ends up destroying everything.”

Ultimately, he ended up returning to the outdoor recreation major.

“I figured out that college was more just to develop yourself as a person, a human being who can communicate,” he explained, “and I thought outdoor rec is a good place to do that, because it does teach you how to take hold of situations.”

Currently registered for 13 credits, Zikatanov said he rarely spends more than five hours a week studying and writing papers and that he skips class



Photo by Adam Scheletsky
Toma Zikatanov, a Penn State senior, said he sometimes chooses spending time in the outdoors over attending class. Here, he is pictured on the west coast bicycling trip he took in the summer of 2011.

more than he should.

“I feel like my physical health is more important than going to class sometimes,” he said. “Perhaps it's a waste of money, but I'm sure happier because of it.”

Since starting college, Zikatanov has worked between 10 and 30 hours a week to financially support himself. He currently works 20 hours a week in a greenhouse. Outside of work and class, he fills time with socializing, bicycling and taking walks, reading fiction and learning applicable skills like sustainable gardening and carpentry.

“I'm blowing off class to make my own class,” he explained.

A new kind of student

Zikatanov exemplifies several distinguishing characteristics of contemporary college students that social scientists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa point out in their book “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College

Campuses,” which has made waves in higher educational institutions since its publication in January 2011.

Drawing from longitudinal data on 2,322 students at 24 institutions of higher education, the authors assert that 36 percent of college students graduate without any significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication.

This “pattern of limited learning,” the authors say, results from numerous trends among college students and the institutions they inhabit.

Today's average college student spends roughly 27 hours a week on academic endeavors, including class and studying, as opposed to the 40 hours a week the average student spent on such activities in the 1960s.

While many modern students hold jobs in order to offset the financial burden of college, the authors explain that they frequently lack a vision “of where they want to go, what they want to

accomplish in life, and why,” based on psychologist William Damon's research. They also cite sociologist Mary Grigsby, who said today's students are likely to “widely [embrace] cultural scripts of college life depicted in college movies” that portray “a hedonistic collegiate culture.”

In recent decades, an increasing number of students have shown an interest in becoming well-off financially, and a decreasing number have expressed interest in developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Arum and Roksa say this leads to a consumer mentality in which students want “as effortlessly and comfortably as possible to attain valuable educational credentials that can be exchanged for later labor market success.”

Accordingly, the authors suggest that students are more likely to choose classes and fields of study with instructors who grade leniently.

Andrew Kreider, a junior mechanical engineering major at Penn State, said that this is not the case for him. Pursuing what he calls “an unofficial minor in ‘human betterment,’” he has taken more general education classes than are required, selecting landscape architecture, cinema and first aid classes on the basis of interest.

He admitted, however, that many of his friends gravitate to a well-known set of easy classes.

“A lot of people just want to get As,” he said, adding that he and his peers use ratemyprofessor.com every semester to check out other students' opinions of their instructors.

Kreider said he felt that many of his personal experiences, however, contradict the book's findings. He dedicates at least 35 hours a week to academic pursuits and said most of his friends study as much or even more. After five semes-

A week in photos: scandal rocks Penn State



Photo by Sean Flynn
Nov. 9, John Surma, vice chair and spokesman for the Pennsylvania State University Board of Trustees, announces the firings of Coach Joe Paterno and President Graham Spanier.



Photo by Sean Flynn
After the Board of Directors' announcement, an angry mob gathers at the intersection of McAlister and Beaver, chanting and singing.



Photo by Katherine Rodriguez
A police officer talks to students during the Nov. 9 riot.



Photo by Sean Flynn
This sign is one of many expressing support for Joe Paterno after the announcement of his termination on Nov. 9.



Photo by Katherine Rodriguez
A police officer deploys an irritant to disperse students who were throwing objects and tearing down signs.



Photo by Sean Flynn
A student holds a sign expressing his outrage about the firing of Joe Paterno.



Photo by Sean Flynn
A masked rioter records the events on College Avenue with his cell phone.



Photo by Sean Flynn
Police officers march towards College Avenue to reinforce the line holding rioters on campus.



Photo by Katherine Rodriguez
Students overturned this news van on College Avenue during the Nov. 9 riot.

A week in photos: scandal rocks Penn State



Photo by Sean Flynn
A candlelight memorial burns in front of Old Main after the Nov. 11 candlelight vigil held in recognition of the alleged victims of Jerry Sandusky.

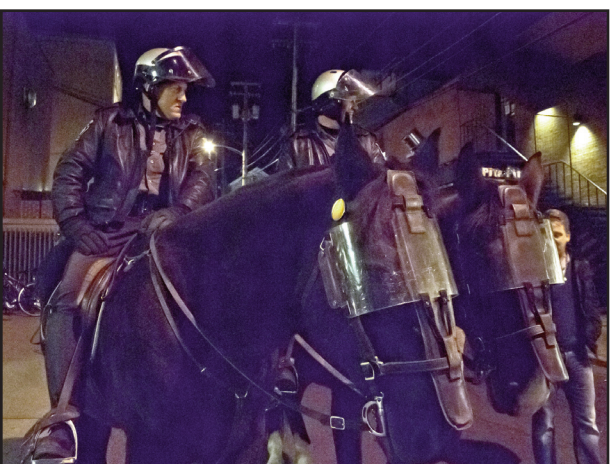


Photo by Sean Flynn
Mounted troopers from the Pennsylvania State Police keep a watchful eye on Calder Way in State College.



Photo by Katherine Rodriguez
Crowds wearing blue fill Beaver Stadium during the Penn State Nebraska game on Nov. 12. The game was declared a blue out to raise awareness for sexual assault.



Photos by Chris Lee
Members of the Westboro Baptist Church (top) stand on the corner of Park Avenue and Bigler road during the Nov. 12 football game. State College community members (bottom) protest the presence of the picketers, widely decried as a "hate group" and known for its extreme stance against homosexuality.

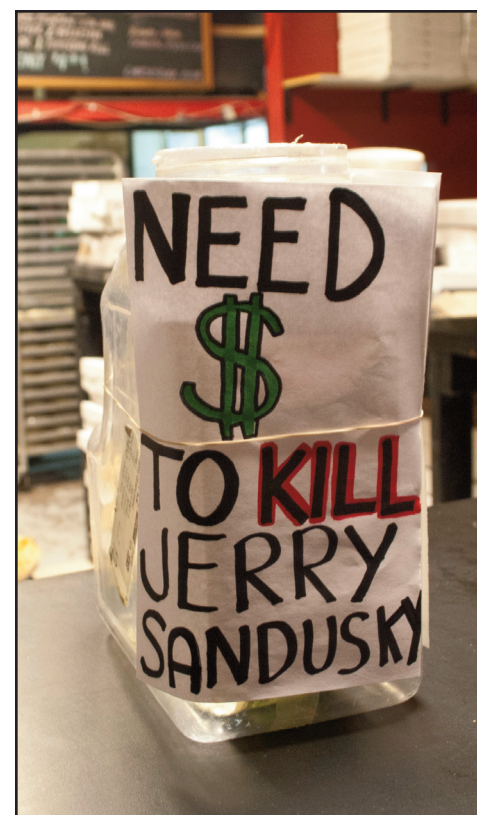


Photo by Sean Flynn
Canyon Pizza displays this sign on its tip jar, expressing workers' sentiments about the scandal.

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ters in college, he sees himself as a better thinker, reader and writer.

“I think a lot of my critical thinking skills have come from just a general curiosity and outside-of-classroom learning, whether it be clubs [like Engineers Without Borders], or discussions, or books, or articles,” he explained. “I would say those probably had a bigger impact on my development than classes.”

But Arum and Roksa express doubt as to whether such extracurricular, self-guided “learning” actually improves the skills they tested.

“Spending time surfing the internet in a dorm room ‘geeking out’ on ‘interest-driven’ pursuits, sitting on a quad and philosophically pondering one’s place in the universe, or simply hanging out at a neighborhood bar enjoying the camaraderie of friends are all activities likely to lead to social learning, creative insights, and potentially individual growth,” the authors wrote. “We are skeptical, however, that many of these activities are also likely to be closely associated with academic learning...”

Research vs. Teaching

Arum and Roksa explain that students are only a piece of a complex puzzle that has led to the “significant social problem” of limited learning. Instructors (and the pressures they face) also have a large influence on student learning, they report.

The authors cite Alexander Astin, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who claims in his book “What Matters in College” that a faculty member’s research orientation (publication rate, time spent on research, personal commitment to scholarship) is negatively correlated with his or her student orientation (focus on student development).

Still, according to Arum and Roksa, for more than two decades, faculty at four-year colleges have overwhelmingly reported that “scholarship was more

important than teaching for tenure decisions in their departments.”

“Being productive in publishing is what you’re here to do—teaching is nice,” said Leland Glenna, associate professor of rural sociology and science, technology, and society at Penn State. But he also asserted that he and many of his colleagues do take teaching very seriously.

Glenna, who noted that he has a 65 research / 35 teaching appointment, also added that he rejects the dichotomy of research and teaching.

“I think they can be mutually supportive of each other,” he said. “Because I’m expected to be doing research and presenting papers at conferences and publishing, I am up on the latest stuff. My syllabus should be as up-to-date as it can be.”

The pressure of student evaluations

Not only are faculty members distracted by research demands, student course evaluations—the prevailing norm for instructional assessment—also put problematic pressure on instructors, Arum and Roksa say.

They cite research from biostatistician Valen Johnson that demonstrates “higher grades do lead to better course evaluations” even though “student course evaluations are not very good indicators of how much students have learned.”

Penn State junior Andrew Kreider said that students who are accustomed to getting As, if they feel like they’ve studied hard enough for a class, retaliate against professors who give them lower grades. He said they give such professors lower marks on their Student Rating of Teaching Effectiveness forms (SRTEs) with the mindset “I want to slap you back, because you slapped my GPA.”

Since a majority of faculty members report that student assessments are critical for getting tenure, Arum and Roksa say this “encourages individual faculty to game the system by replacing rigorous and demanding classroom instruction with entertaining classroom activities, lower academic standards, and a generous distribution of high course marks.”

Penn State administrators seek to avoid this problem by subjecting tenure-seeking faculty to peer reviews of their teaching, which include classroom observation and reviews of teaching portfolios, said Jeremy Cohen, associate vice president and senior associate dean of the Office of Undergraduate Education, in an email. He added that Penn State also conducts post-tenure reviews for senior faculty.

Still, many of Penn State’s approximately 1,500 non tenure line fixed term faculty members, who renew their contracts on a yearly basis, do not receive any teaching evaluation beyond student evaluations.

“I’ve been in the Penn State system for almost 10 years,” said Wil Fine, a fixed term lecturer in the English Department. “I’ve never once been evaluated by a colleague... They assess your performance based on whether students are

happy.”

“We have a real problem in that we give hundreds of times more As and Bs than we do Ds and Fs,” said Bob Burkholder, associate head of the English Department.

But he added that he personally investigates instructors whom he suspects of grade inflation, and that he directs all instructors to use “the full range of the grading scale.”

Mark Morrison, head of the English department, said that the issue of grade inflation is more complex than the authors of *Academically Adrift* suggest. He pointed out that some of the English Department faculty who have won multiple teaching awards have not been easy graders, adding that he has seen research that suggests high student evaluations

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Three holiday resolutions you can keep

by Jamie Campbell

Many of you, like me, go into the Christmas/holiday season with the very best of intentions for the upcoming year. Resolutions like lose weight, save more, spend more time with the family and so on begin to sprout up like gym membership profits at this time of year.

Since it is that time of year when giving is better than receiving, I thought I would give you a few resolutions or self-help plans that you could keep, at least until March (well, I am hoping you can get past January).

Be kind to yourself.

Sounds easy? Think about the last time you truly did something great for you. In this day and age in which we are all



over-involved, how often do you step back and say “this is a me day or this is a me moment”?

Thirty seconds or 30 minutes in your own space can seem like heaven. Use of this time can help you to center yourself. It also can stop you from doing something foolish.

A simple 30 seconds before you hit “send” or “post” can make all of the difference. Thirty minutes before you return that angry call may mean the dif-

ference between defusing a situation and exacerbating one.

Find that exhale moment. Your family and co-workers will thank you for it. I know the “rule of 30” doesn’t seem like a long time, but sometimes 30 minutes is all we can force ourselves to take.

Be true to you.

“To thine own self be true” was one of the first quotes I ever paid any attention to in high school. It meant a lot to me, because like most students in high school, I was challenged with many obstacles. The only way that I managed to survive was by remaining true to myself.

As adults, we often forget about what’s important to us. We change our thoughts and ideas just to fit someone else’s way of thinking or not to hurt someone’s feelings, even if they are doing wrong.

You know what is right and what’s wrong. Say something. More important, do something to prevent an error (as opposed to waiting for things to go

wrong just to have the pleasure of saying “I told you so”). Be right now, and don’t wait for the error to occur.



Be involved.

By the time you get this, you will be focused on the approaching holidays, but I implore you to not take Jan. 15 as a day off from work or school.

I get depressed every holiday that we have for our veterans and important figures. The reason is these holidays are almost always associated with a mattress sale of some sort. I am pretty sure our veterans did not go and risk life and limb so I could sleep on Sealy mattress. MLK didn’t give his life so I could purchase a suit or some tires. And I am certain Clinton didn’t become President for me to purchase jewelry at discount prices.

On these days that commemorate people who have given their all for you, give to or help someone less fortunate.

Hopefully these resolutions will give you one less thing to worry about in the coming holiday season. I hope your Christmas is merry and your New Year starts off great!

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don't always correlate with high grades.

Morrison said there's not an easy solution to the problem of grade inflation, whatever the causes may be. He said bell curves, for example can result in students getting higher, or lower, grades than they deserve.

"I actually think that having a set of grading norms is the most useful way of trying to avoid that problem," he said. "Lots of students feel like their papers [deserve better grades]... But I think if any instructor [lays] out a pretty clear set of expectations for the work, then the students are less devastated... What drives them batty the most quickly is not having a clear sense of what you're expecting in an assignment or even how it will be graded."

A change in faculty composition

Arum and Roksa also highlight the shifts in instructor makeup that have occurred over the last decade.

"Traditional forms of faculty direct instruction have themselves been undermined by the replacement of full-time tenure track faculty with adjunct, graduate student, and other alternative forms of instruction," they write.

Penn State's English department typifies this shift. This fall, faculty members taught 73 courses, non-tenure-line lecturers taught 188 courses and graduate students taught 63 courses.

While the book suggests that non-tenure line faculty offer inferior instruction, Bob Burkholder said the English department has worked hard to ensure that fixed term faculty members offer as much to students as tenure line faculty.

"We really have tried to professionalize the fixed term faculty," he said. "We now have ranks within the FT faculty. We review them every year. We're also concerned with contributions to the community... There's also an interest in encouraging FTs to publish, to be engaged in research."

Department head Mark Morrison acknowledged that FTs may have less to



Photo by Jessica Paholsky
Mark Jones, left, and Andrew Kreider work together on Engineering Mechanics 315 homework in the Penn State Learning area in Sparks building.

offer students—not because they are lower quality teachers, but because they have higher teaching loads, sometimes up to five courses per semester.

"A lot of our adjuncts are terrific teachers, but the higher and higher the teaching load, the less time one really has to devote to individual students," Morrison said. "There's just so many hours in a week."

Still, fixed term lecturer Wil Fine said he thinks the university has found a "sweet spot" with full-time, non-tenured faculty.

"They've provided me an opportunity to do what I love, which is to teach higher education, work with the sort of students I want to work with at the level I want to work," Fine said. "At the same token, it helps the institution. It helps tenured faculty, who are doing good work in their fields, do what they want to do. I think it's good for the students as well. They have committed faculty who are more than capable of teaching."

The role of institutional culture

Academically *Adrift* also underscores the role that university administrators

play in defining academic culture at their institutions.

The authors note that in recent years, colleges and universities have increasingly diverted resources toward nonacademic functions—from administrative operations like accounting to student services like career placement and counseling.

"The percentage of professional employees in higher education comprised of faculty has decreased from approximately two-thirds in 1970 to 53 percent by 2000," they wrote.

The Penn State Fact Book shows that, in the Penn State system, staff more than double faculty, with 5,635 faculty members and 12,058 staff members.

Jeremy Cohen of the Office of Undergraduate Education defended this breakdown as the university's attempt to "balance multiple paths of learning."

Arum and Roksa also expressed concern about the unprecedented high pay of non-teaching university administrators.

"While there is nothing inherently wrong with well-paid higher education administrative personnel... Arguably,

shifts in the character of administrative leadership are associated with the phenomenon of colleges and universities today becoming much more interested in the fulfillment of nonacademic services and functions, while focusing less on traditional academic instruction," they stated.

Earlier this year, former Penn State President Graham Spanier ranked fifth on the Chronicle of Higher Education's survey of public college presidents' pay at \$800,500 total compensation.

The mean salary of administrative staff at Penn State is \$84,132, higher than the average salaries of all ranks of faculty except full professors.

Seeking solutions

So what is the solution? How can universities help students develop into critical thinkers, strong writers, engaged and capable citizens?

Arum and Roksa's research suggests that coursework in the classic liberal arts, including the humanities, social sciences, physical and biological sciences and psychology, have strong reading and writing components that will help students to develop those skills.

The authors said that students in the humanities are the most likely to report taking classes that require more than 20 pages of writing and more than 40 pages of reading during the semester. They're also more likely to report meeting with faculty outside of class, and they spend on average more time studying than those in occupationally related majors such as business, education, social work and communications.

Though English department head Mark Morrison said this discovery came as no surprise to him and that he hopes it will attract more students to liberal arts, it doesn't necessarily present an easy solution to the problems posed in *Academically Adrift*.

"To think of fixing this problem by adding more liberal arts requirements... that might overburden some majors so

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much that it would be impossible to graduate in four years," Morrison said. "Intuitively I think it makes sense, but logistically it might be more of a problem."

Arum and Roksa also report that peer interaction is strongly associated with the academic decisions that students make in schools. Students who are part of peer groups that value academic involvement and achievement are more likely to develop critical thinking skills.

Leland Glenna of the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Department said that the Community, Environment and Development (CED) major, for which he is program coordinator, serves as one such peer community at Penn State.

"There's a very strong CED club, so I

think a lot of the social activities are very much wrapped up in some of their educational activities," Glenna said.

He also pointed out that the CED major was "basically designed to do what [the authors *Academically Adrift*] say is lacking—to teach reading, writing and critical thinking skills."

Another small step universities can take is to provide a clear indication of which classes will fulfill general education requirements, as Arum and Roksa note that students with stringently outlined requirements fare better than those whose institutions accept more varied coursework.

Jeremy Cohen pointed out that there is currently an initiative at Penn State to re-evaluate the current General Education program by looking at the best practices of other universities, examining classroom and program data and evaluating Penn State practices.

Arum and Roksa note that many students enter college unprepared—especially racial minorities, students from lower class families and those whose parents do not have college degrees. Currently the achievement gap only widens for such students over the course of college, and the authors argue that, "Colleges... need to do more to compensate for the unequal starting points of students from different family backgrounds."

Glenna recalled that, when he was a professor at another university, his colleagues were concerned that many students come to college unprepared and that secondary school testing requirements, particularly No Child Left Behind requirements, could put students at a disadvantage before they even enter college.

"High schools aren't emphasizing writing and reading anymore—they're

teaching test preparation," Glenna said.

The authors also propose that the current "assumed right" of college (more than 70 percent of recent high school graduates enroll in two- or four-year colleges) may be counterproductive for the learning environment. They pointed out that in recent decades, 30 percent of students with C grades in high school and 15 percent with GPAs of C minus or lower have been admitted to four-year colleges.

"Evidence of limited learning and persistent inequality should give pause to the recent emphasis on 'college for all' policies," they write.

The solutions to the problem of limited learning on college campuses may be just as complex as the problem itself, but the authors argue that it "should be the subject of concern of policy makers, practitioners, parents, and citizens alike."

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