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**A Response to the SSRC's Report "Improving Undergraduate Learning:
Findings and Policy Recommendations from the
SSRC-CLA Longitudinal Project and
*Academically Adrift; Limited Learning on College Campuses***

A firestorm seems to have been ignited with the recent release of the Social Science Research Council researchers Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho report and book regarding the degree to which college students are performing academically. Whether their report, *Improving Undergraduate Learning* (the report) and subsequent book, *Academically Adrift* (both supported by the findings of the Collegiate Learning Assessment- the CLA) will excite a broad and sustained conversation to the extent that higher education in the United States will see an appreciable change in its tradition-rich paradigm is yet uncertain. We certainly hope it will excite such a response, but we'll only know that after the passage of time.

The Center for Learning Outcomes Assessment (CLOA) at Indiana State University is particularly interested in the report as it helps us not only better understand how and to what degree students are growing, learning, and developing (GLD) as a result of their collegiate experience, but as it might support or refute the findings of the CLOA's ongoing study of GLD based on data generated by the University Learning Outcomes Assessment (UniLOA).

It is of critical importance that educators understand the difference between what the CLA and the UniLOA measure. Richard H. Hersh writes that the CLA "provides colleges and universities with information about their students' performance on tasks that require them to think critically, reason analytically, solve realistic problems, and write clearly....We define critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving skills as a student's demonstrated ability to evaluate and analyze source information, and subsequently to draw conclusions and present an argument based upon that analysis." Hersh further states that "The holistic integration of these skills on the CLA mirrors the requirements of serious thinking and writing tasks we face in life outside the classroom."

But a successful life outside the classroom demands far more than only serious thinking and writing tasks alone.

The CLOA makes no assertion that the phenomena measured by the CLA are not important constructs to be considered in appreciating the quality of an undergraduate education. To the contrary, we fully support and endorse the CLA's measured constructs as critical to success in college. But we argue that, while the CLA constructs are critical, they do not represent a very wide slice of what is important in the collegiate experience. To echo Carl Rogers' imperatives for counseling, the constructs measured by the CLA are absolutely necessary, but in of themselves, are insufficient to support a holistic education. It is important to note that Arum, Roksa, and Cho have not argued that the CLO constructs are "necessary and sufficient" in of themselves to account for a successful collegiate experience, but we fear that many lay readers of their work might infer just that.

The UniLOA measures distinctly different phenomena than does the CLA. The UniLOA measures student GLD along seven domains considered critical by various constituencies both within and outside the collegiate environment, especially employers. To be sure, according to the National Association of Colleges and Universities (NACE), the majority of employers are clear in stating that they aren't necessarily concerned with college graduates' specific academic major field of study, but rather, that they are able to bring a set of advanced skills, qualities, and attributes that will complement success in the workplace. Those skills, qualities, and attributes are defined by the seven domains the UniLOA measures, specifically, 1) critical thinking, 2) self-awareness, 3) communication, 4) diversity, 5) citizenship, 6) membership & leadership, and 7) relationships.

The CLOA argues that both the constructs measured by the CLA as well as the UniLOA are critically important to holistic success on the part of college students. The broad construct of student success in college is such that no single instrument now existing or might exist in the future will serve to fully measure student success in college. That feat will only be accomplished by assessing student learning outcomes with an extensive battery of assessment instruments, each designed to measure multiple factors that are essentially oblique to one another rather than orthogonal. Any argument for orthogonal relationships between factors regarding student success in college would be at their very best, weak. Because of the inherent oblique relationships between factors that contribute to student success in college, there is bound to be overlap between factors explored by any instrument designed to measure student success in college. As such, there should be some degree of concurrent validity between instruments. Such is the case with the CLA and the UniLOA. There is great similarity in the CLA's findings with those of the UniLOA, including (but not necessarily limited to);

- Students having higher degrees of accomplishment in high school generally experience higher levels of accomplishment in college,
- Ethnicity is correlated with varying levels of CS,
- Number of hours spent studying is positively correlated with CS,

While there are consistent findings between the CLA and UniLOA, there are also significant differences. While those differences are grounded in the fact that each instrument measures different (but loosely correlated) phenomena, the CLOA fears that lay readers will draw inappropriate assumptions based on the reported findings of both longitudinal studies.

The CLOA asserts the following.

- The CLA Longitudinal Study reports a sample size of just over 2,300 students which might bring some question as to whether or not the Report's findings can or should be generalized to the entire population of the over 16 million students now enrolled in postsecondary education settings. But the face validity of the study seems to be supported by the identification of general themes and patterns that emerge with consistency. Attention has to be given to exactly what the College Learning Assessment (the instrument used to collect the data on which this report's findings are based) measures. The focus of the College Learning Assessment (CLA) and UniLOA are distinctly different. The CLA measures qualities, skills, and attributes that are typically tied to the classroom-based learning environment (specifically to this report, critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing). Academic content learning is, of course, critical to the eventual success (or lack thereof) on the part of college students, but so is the type of learning measured by the UniLOA; typically those areas of growth, learning, and development considered to occur "outside" the classroom. While there is some overlap in the phenomena measured by both instruments, they do indeed measure different "things" and both broad areas are critical to providing a holistic educational experience that can be regarded as "successful."
- Given the results of both the CLA report and the ongoing UniLOA findings, the CLOA believes it is seeing the emergence of a "1-2 punch" at higher education. The CLA report concludes that 1) not much academic content learning is taking place during the college years and the CLOA argues that 2) not much out of classroom learning is occurring either!
- The CLOA is particularly concerned with the CLA Report as it refers to construct of "Socializing, recreating, other." Considerable attention must be given to exactly how the CLA defines the construct as the report itself is unclear regarding the issue. "Socializing, recreating, other," when considering only those behaviors associated with what today's college student might refer to as "hanging out, partying, chilling, etc." is decidedly different than "socializing, recreating, other" that have specific purpose and intentionality such as participating in intramural sports, building a float for the student parade, participating in a rush function, attending a sporting event with friends, being part of a dunking booth at a campus carnival for purposes of raising funds or awareness to a social issue, and a host of other examples of behaviors in which college students often engage. "Connecting" with others is crucial to holistic human development and any social scientist that would argue the point should probably return to school for some refresher courses. The CLOA asserts that purposeful "socializing, recreating, other" serves a very real and necessary function in overall growth, learning, and development. THE CLA Report asserts that membership in a fraternity or sorority or studying with others is negatively correlated with learning (to the point that the report seems to infer a causal relationship rather than mere correlation). The CLOA believes that a considerable amount of time is given by members of the Greek community, clubs and organizations, intercollegiate and intramural sport activities, among others, in purposeful and meaningful "socializing, recreating, other." Those types of "socializing, recreating, other" experiences have consistently been show to be positively correlated with GLD as measured by the UniLOA. The CLOA also asserts a flaw in the CLA study in that the researchers'/authors' fail to appropriately define the construct of "socializing, recreating, other" in a more appropriate and narrower range of definition that would differentiate purposeful socializing as opposed to "hanging, partying, and chilling."

- The issue of socializing, recreating, etc. also needs to be addressed in terms of “how much is too much.” The CLA Report finds that students on average spending 51% of their time as such and presents the finding inferring that 51% is far too much time. While a casual reader would probably agree with that inference, a more contemplative reader might wonder what would be considered an appropriate amount of time.....35%, 22%, 12%, 3%.....? An irrefutable reality of life is that all people will (and probably should) spend some time in less purposeful and intentional “socializing, recreating, other.” But it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the issue beyond what has already been stated.
- A review of the many articles, commentaries, and general responses to the CLA Report finds comments such as “...it’s good to lead a monk’s existence,” “students who study alone and have heavier reading and writing loads do well” is an argument based far more on correlation than causal factors. To read the report/book and conclude that something such as “studying with other students causes lower levels of learning” suggests the reader’s lack of understanding just what social science research (and its reported findings) is all about as simple correlation is often assumed to be a causal relationship, which it is no. A multitude of confounding variables that exist and must be considered before drawing hasty conclusions to the CLA Report and reading it with understanding requires a deeper understanding of the impact of confounding variables.
- It has long been acknowledged by both higher education and the Greek community that grades tend to be a bit lower for fraternity and sorority members. The CLA Report seems to support that conclusion. When considering the CLA measures academic-based growth, learning, and development, the finding of lower levels of growth occurring in Greek students shouldn’t come as a surprise. The entire Greek community still hasn’t arrived at a successful counter to this unfortunate reality and will continue to find vocal detractors as long as the challenge of supporting higher levels of academic growth on the part of its members is left unchecked.
- The CLOA can find nothing in the CLA Report that counters the many findings (and the resulting inferences and assumptions derived from those findings) of its UniLOA results. To be sure, the findings of both appear to be highly complementary to one another, when considering that each measures different but loosely correlated phenomena. The CLOA stands firm with its empirically validated conclusion that higher levels of growth, learning, and development are indeed positively tied to Greek membership, and ideal levels of membership in clubs and organizations, volunteer service, and working for pay, and number of hours spent in studying. And over four years of consistent findings continue to bolster and support that assertion.