



Navigating a Perfect Storm

June 2011

W. Robert Connor

There's good reason to think that higher education is about to confront a perfect storm, a convergence of troubles that are more than the usual bluster. The economy is not just slow to recover; it may be 'hollowing out' in ways that undermine the old claim that going to college guarantees a good job upon graduation. Confidence in higher education may also be waning, if not among the general public then among policy makers troubled by stagnant graduation rates and slippage in the rank order of percentage of adults with baccalaureate degrees compared to some other highly developed countries. On top of all this are the worrisome inexorable annual tuition and fee increases.

Most troubling, however, are reports of shortfalls in the quality of education. In recent months several studies have appeared that raise lend to such doubts. One is *Academically Adrift* by Arum and Roksa (2011) which reported that many students make disappointing progress in critical thinking skills during their undergraduate years. More wide-ranging, but no less distressing, findings come from the Wabash College's Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts. Their study uses a dozen well-regarded instruments to look at such things as academic motivation, moral reasoning, and personal well-being. The study is ongoing but preliminary results, reported by the director of the Center, Charles Blaich, are broadly consistent with the findings in *Academically Adrift*.

The Wabash researchers found that students make modest gains in some areas, but appear to regress in others. For example:

- Measures of moral reasoning, critical thinking, socially responsible leadership and psychological well-being all showed gains over four years between 0.32 – 0.58 standard deviations (SD). How much of these gains is attributable to college attendance and how much is due to maturation is not clear.
- Slight gains or small declines were found in diversity awareness, political and social involvement, and openness to diversity.
- Scores on positive attitude toward literacy, contribution to the arts, and contribution to the sciences all declined along with academic motivation which showed the largest drop -- .37 SD.

Taken together, these disappointing findings coupled with the other factors mentioned earlier suggest a perfect storm may be on the horizon for higher education.

I believe the most promising way to navigate through such a storm is to make better use of evidence from assessment. Such data make it possible to focus on what really works, not on ideas that sound nice but often turn out to be vacuous.

Viewpoint

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

The patterns of results from *Academically Adrift*, the Wabash National Study, and other research point to what must be done to improve undergraduate education. Arum and Roksa, for example, note that students spend an average of only twelve hours a week studying (p. 69), consistent with a decade of findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement. Given that students devote so little effort to their studies, we should not be surprised that they gain so little in critical thinking and related abilities.

I believe the most promising way to navigate through such a storm is to make better use of evidence from assessment.

The Wabash Study goes a step further, identifying classroom practices that are tied to impressive gains among students who experience them. These are not just the usual suspect—small classes, or a generally supportive and caring environment. Instead, the big gains come from these four clusters of practices:

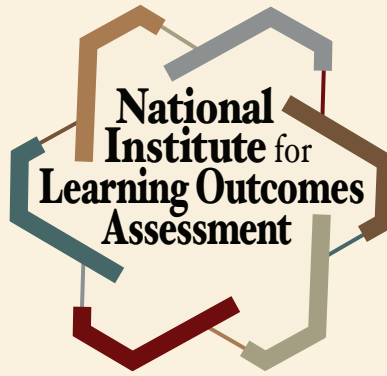
1. Good Teaching and High-Quality Interactions with Faculty
2. Academic Challenge and High Expectations
3. Diversity Experiences
4. Higher-Order, Integrative, and Reflective Learning

These practices point to practical ways of improving the quality of undergraduate education. Even more important, perhaps, they hold out the promise that advances in the assessment of student learning will identify even better ways of making such improvements in the future. None of this guarantees a successful passage through the perfect storm that now seems imminent. But it does say full speed ahead in putting the knowledge gained from assessment to work in the classroom.

References

- Arum, R. & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Blaich, C.F. & Wise, K.S. (2011, January). *From gathering to using assessment results: Lessons from the Wabash national study* (NILOA Occasional Paper No.8). Urbana, IL: University for Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Pascarella, E.T., Blaich, C., Martin, G.L., & Hanson, J.M. (2011). How robust are the findings of academically adrift?. *Change*, 43, 20-24.

Note: This piece was adapted from a fuller discussion of the perfect storm, given as a lecture at Boston College and available on Robert Connor's personal website: wrobertconnor.com.



Please Cite As:

Connor, W. R. (2011, June). *Navigating a perfect storm*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.



Viewpoint

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org