



*An open door is only the announcement of an intention.*

# The Promise and the Drift.

*On the conditions of success, and the learning we have yet to secure*

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WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 08

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## In This Issue

Two books, a decade apart, ask the same uncomfortable question from opposite ends of the student journey. What happens to opportunity once a student has been admitted, and what is actually being learned during the time the institution holds them?

Dr. Christopher Washington considers Paul LeBlanc's *Students First*, a sustained argument that universities do not merely offer opportunity but design the conditions under which opportunity becomes real, or fails to. Prof. Bassem Khafagy turns to Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift*, a longitudinal study whose findings on undergraduate learning have lost none of their weight in the years since publication.

Read together, the two books form a single thought. When the structure of opportunity is poorly designed, learning drifts. When learning drifts, the credential becomes a partial promise. The students who can least afford that gap are the ones our institutions have most loudly claimed to serve.

*This issue of Wisdom Forgotten is dedicated, as always, to those who dare to reimagine.*



### ARTICLE ONE

## The Conditions of Success

*Why Student-Centered Design Still Eludes Universities · Christopher Washington, Ph.D.*

There is a promise universities have made so confidently that it now feels self-evident: if students can gain access, opportunity will follow. It is a compelling idea that has expanded enrollment and opened doors to higher education for millions. But it rests on an assumption that has gone largely unexamined.

That access, once granted, is sufficient. In *Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education*, Paul LeBlanc invites us to reconsider that assumption, not by rejecting access, but by asking what actually happens after students arrive at the door of the university. His answer exposes a consequential gap between institutional promise and student experience.

### The Gap We Do Not See Clearly

LeBlanc asks us to examine the student journey as it is lived, not as it is described.

A first-generation student arrives with admission secured. Financial aid is partial and uncertain. Advising exists but must be found and interpreted. Course pathways are technically defined, but difficult to navigate in practice. Work obligations compete with academic schedules designed for another era.

None of these conditions are intentionally exclusionary. But together, they shape outcomes. This is the point at which LeBlanc's insight sharpens.

*Universities do not simply provide opportunity, they structure the conditions under which opportunity can be realized.*

When those conditions are fragmented, students do not simply struggle. They spend time and money navigating complexity that the institution itself has produced.

And for adults re-entering the university for lifelong learning, or for those students with limited margin for error, that cost is either prohibitive or substantial.

## Support Is Not a Service

Universities often speak of support as something available to students in the form of advising centers, tutoring services, financial aid offices. LeBlanc reframes support more fundamentally. Support is not something students access. It is something institutions design.

The clarity of academic pathways, the sequencing of courses, the predictability of costs, and the integration of advising are not peripheral services. They are structural features that determine whether students move forward efficiently, or stall, stop out, or drop out of school altogether.

*A student-centered institution does not merely offer help. It reduces the need for it.*

A student-centered university does not lower expectations. It does, however, ensure that student effort is directed toward learning rather than navigation.

## Opportunity, Reconsidered

Perhaps the most consequential shift in LeBlanc's argument is his treatment of opportunity. He notes that we often speak of opportunity as something students seize. LeBlanc suggests it is something institutions produce.

This distinction changes how we evaluate student support and success. It is no longer sufficient to ask who we admit or even who graduates. The more demanding question is what students are able to do next.

Do they enter stable and meaningful work? Can they adapt as industries evolve? Are they prepared to exercise judgment in complex civic and professional contexts? A degree that does not prepare students for change is not a promise fulfilled. It is a partial one.

## The Drift Away from Students

Universities have long spoken of serving students. Yet over time, many of the systems that shape the student experience have been organized around other priorities. Curricula may reflect disciplinary histories more than coherent student pathways. Course scheduling may reflect institutional convenience more than student realities. Incentive systems may reward forms of productivity that are often distant from student progression.

These are not failures of intent. They are examples of inherited structures that continue to operate even as the conditions they were designed for have changed. The result is a quiet contradiction: institutions declare students first, while asking students to navigate systems not designed with them in mind.

*Caring is not the same as designing.*

## Why This Still Matters

It is easy to assume that “students first” is an idea whose time has passed, although represented in mission statements and institutional rhetoric. LeBlanc’s work reminds us that the work of placing students first remains unfinished. Not because university employees do not care, but because caring is not the same as designing.

To take student success seriously requires more than expanding access. It requires aligning the institution around the conditions that make success possible, conditions that respect students’ time, reduce unnecessary cost, and prepare them for a world defined by continual change.

The question for those interested in the future of higher education, then, is not whether universities value students. It is whether we are willing to examine the systems we have built, and redesign them so that access becomes the beginning of opportunity, not its proxy.

*Christopher Washington*

CHRISTOPHER WASHINGTON, PH.D.

29 April 2026

### ABOUT THE BOOK

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TITLE        | Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| AUTHOR       | Paul J. LeBlanc                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| PUBLISHER    | Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| YEAR         | 2021                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| PAGES        | 224                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| ISBN         | 978-1-68253-675-9                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| RECOGNITION  | 2022 Phillip E. Frandson Award for Literature, University Professional and Continuing Education Association                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| CORE INSIGHT | Universities do not merely provide opportunity. They design the conditions under which opportunity becomes real. The credit hour, conceived as a measure of administrative time, has become the architecture of an entire system, and that architecture now constrains who can succeed and how. Replacing seat time with verified competencies, and redesigning support as a structural property of the institution rather than a service to be sought, is the unfinished work of placing students first. |

#WisdomForgotten #StudentsFirst #PaulLeBlanc #HigherEducation #Equity #AccessAndOpportunity #StudentSuccess #UniversityDesign  
#CompetencyBasedEducation #LifelongLearning #FutureOfLearning #InstitutionalDesign #UniversityReform #UniversityOfTheFuture



## ARTICLE TWO

## The Drift Within

*What an Older Study Still Demands of Higher Education · Prof. Bassem Khafagy*

A claim, well examined, can change the way an institution sees itself. In 2011, two sociologists offered such a claim about American higher education. It has not yet been answered.

Richard Arum, then professor of sociology and education at New York University and director of the Education Research Program of the Social Science Research Council, and Josipa Roksa, then assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, set out to ask a question that universities had largely stopped asking themselves with rigor. How much are undergraduates actually learning during their time in college?

The book that emerged, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, published by the University of Chicago Press, drew on transcript data, student surveys, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a longitudinal instrument administered to more than 2,300 students at twenty-four institutions in their first semester and again at the end of their second year.

The finding has lost none of its weight. For nearly half of the students studied, two years of college produced no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, or writing.

*“How much are students actually learning in contemporary higher education? The answer for many undergraduates, we have concluded, is not much” (p. 34).*

The authors framed the conclusion plainly. That was not a polemic. It was a measurement.

### A System Receiving What It Is Designed to Produce

Arum and Roksa did not present limited learning as an accident. They presented it as the predictable outcome of a system whose actors are receiving the institutional rewards they are organized to receive. Faculty are evaluated on research and publication. Administrators are measured by enrollment, retention, reputation, and fundraising. Students navigate a culture in which social engagement is honored more readily than academic effort, and grades have become largely insulated from the rigor of what was demanded.

In such a system, the authors observed, no actor is in crisis. Each is succeeding by the metrics that govern their work. The institutions are receiving the organizational outcomes they seek, and so the system, taken as a whole, is not threatened. This is the most disquieting argument in the book. The drift is not a failure. The drift is the equilibrium.

## The Conditions of Rigor

What makes *Academically Adrift* so durable is that it does not stop at diagnosis. The authors identify the conditions under which learning does occur. Students who took courses requiring more than forty pages of reading per week, and who wrote more than twenty pages over the term, demonstrated significantly stronger gains. Students who studied alone, rather than in unstructured groups, gained more. Students whose faculty held high expectations, demanded substantive work, and graded that work seriously outperformed their peers across institutional boundaries.

*“With a large sample of more than 2,300 students, we observe no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students in our study” (p. 36).*

These findings are not romantic. They are operational. Rigor is a structural property, not a personal virtue. Where institutions arrange their courses, their staffing, and their evaluative norms around demanding intellectual work, learning follows. Where they do not, learning drifts.

## A Conversation Already Begun

It is worth noting that *Academically Adrift* arrived in conversation with a generation of earlier work. Derek Bok had warned in *Higher Learning* (1986) that universities had failed to invest seriously in the effectiveness of their own teaching. Ernest Boyer, whose *Scholarship Reconsidered* we have visited in this newsletter, had documented in *College* (1987) the disconnection between curriculum, campus life, and the undergraduate experience. Vincent Tinto, whom we encountered last month, had shown how academic and social integration shape persistence.

Arum and Roksa stood on this lineage and, with the empirical force of a longitudinal instrument, made it impossible to look away. Yet the wider university, as the authors themselves acknowledged, did not reorder itself in response. The book sold widely. It was assigned in graduate courses. It earned the praise of public figures and the dismissal of others. And the institutional architecture it described continued, largely undisturbed, to produce the outcomes it had always produced.

Their work did not include the deeper architectural critique that would later arrive in Paul LeBlanc’s *Students First*. Arum and Roksa documented what was missing. LeBlanc, a decade later, asked why the architecture of credit hours and time-bound enrollment makes the missing so probable.

*The two books form a single thought, separated by a decade.*

## What the Drift Tells Us About the Future

Reading *Academically Adrift* in 2026 is a different experience than reading it in 2011. The intervening years have brought a pandemic that displaced students from classrooms, an artificial intelligence that can now produce text indistinguishable from undergraduate essays, and a labor market that increasingly questions the credential itself.

Each of these pressures interrogates the same wound the book identified. If a college can pass through two years without producing measurable gains in reasoning and writing, what protects it now from technologies that can simulate those very competencies, or from employers who decide they no longer need the signal?

*“Drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose is readily apparent”  
(Arum and Roksa, on the experience of many undergraduates in the study).*

The answer cannot be defensiveness. It can only be design. Universities must be willing to measure what they say they teach, to align their incentives with what they say they value, and to make rigor the visible architecture of the undergraduate experience rather than its hopeful by-product.

The drift Arum and Roksa documented is not a closed chapter. It is the unfinished work of an institution still defining itself. Every university that takes this finding seriously is asked the same question, fifteen years later. What conditions must we now design so that the time students give us returns to them as something they can carry forward, into work, into citizenship, into a life shaped by the capacity to think well?

That is the question this book continues to ask. It awaits an institutional answer.

*To those who dare to reimagine.*

*Bassem Khafagy*

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#### ABOUT THE BOOK

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TITLE        | Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| AUTHORS      | Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| PUBLISHER    | University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| YEAR         | 2011                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| PAGES        | 272                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| ISBN         | 978-0-226-02855-2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| CITATIONS    | 4,500 to 5,500 plus (Google Scholar)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| CORE INSIGHT | Universities are receiving the organizational outcomes they are structured to produce, and undergraduate learning is rarely among the prioritized outcomes. The institutional drift Arum and Roksa documented through longitudinal evidence is not a failure of any single actor but the predictable equilibrium of a system whose incentives, staffing patterns, and evaluative norms have moved away from rigorous instruction. Reversing the drift requires designing rigor as an institutional architecture rather than asking it of individual conscience. |

#WisdomForgotten #AcademicallyAdrift #RichardArum #JosipaRoksa #HigherEducation #StudentLearning #CriticalThinking  
#UndergraduateEducation #UniversityReform #InstitutionalAmnesia #LearningOutcomes #AcademicCulture #FutureOfTheUniversity  
#CollegeRigor



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If you like *Wisdom ... Forgotten*, and want to support it, there are a few ways.

- Forward the newsletter to a colleague with an invitation to join us.
- Share your comments, and let us all learn from you.
- If there is a book that you believe deserves a place in this conversation, tell us. Recommend it. Make the case for it.

**About this newsletter** • *Wisdom ... Forgotten* is a weekly newsletter by Prof. Bassem Khafagy and Dr. Christopher Washington. Together, they bring six decades of combined experience spanning global higher education strategy, institutional leadership, governance, workforce innovation, and organizational transformation across multiple continents. Each week, this newsletter surfaces ideas from two classic academic works that were often written for moments very much like the one higher education is navigating today, and asks what becomes possible when those insights are brought back into active practice. This newsletter is not a book review. It is a conversation between two thought leaders and a growing community of academics, university leaders, and practitioners who believe the future of the university is strengthened when we reconnect with the intellectual foundations that shaped the field and reinterpret them for today's realities. Many scholars and leaders have carried these ideas forward. Our goal is to help reconnect them to everyday leadership, policy, and institutional design decisions.

**Dr. Christopher Washington** • Provost Emeritus of Franklin University, is the Founder and CEO of ResiliencePlus Advisors LLC, an executive coaching and advisory firm focused on equipping leaders to navigate complexity, disruption, and rapid organizational change. He also serves as President of the ILI Think Tank at the Innovative Leadership Institute, leading a global network of scholars and senior practitioners advancing the theory and practice of innovative leadership. A contributing author to Forbes Nonprofit Council, Dr. Washington publishes on leadership innovation, organizational culture and performance, and learning ecosystem design.

**Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy** • An academic leader, best-selling author, award winning researcher, and strategic thinker whose work spans the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. He is currently dedicating his time to rethinking the “University” as a transformative force in society. Prof. Khafagy is the founding force behind several global academic initiatives, most notably the World Universities Foundation, WUF, the World Summit on Universities, WSU, and the Re-Imagine University Newsletter & book series.

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**The visual compositions** • throughout this newsletter and the series are original works by Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy. They are crafted using advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, guided entirely by the author's artistic vision and design sensibility. In a series about reimagining the university, it felt only right that the art itself reflect that spirit of creative possibility.

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