

## **Undergraduate Student Orientations in the United States: Academically Adrift?**

**By Steven Brint**

### **Abstract**

Many observers of U.S. undergraduate education consider it to be under-performing. In this paper I discuss the evidence underlying these assessments. I emphasize institutional and disciplinary differences in the academic experiences of students. I develop a new typology of student orientations based on combinations of students' attitudes about the college as an institution and their view of the purpose of higher education.

Few influential observers of undergraduate education now consider American colleges and universities to be working very effectively as undergraduate educational institutions. Former Harvard president Derek Bok (2006) entitled a recent book *Our Under-achieving Colleges* in which he criticized faculty members for their indifference to undergraduate learning. Perhaps the most widely read book on American higher education of the last year, *Academically Adrift*, went further, proclaiming the emergence of an implicit pact among U.S. college students, faculty, and administrators to reduce expectations for student learning. According to the authors, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011), none of the major groups in the university – students, faculty, or administrators – has a strong interest in maintaining high standards for student learning. Students are chiefly interested in the social life of the campus – friends, sports, clubs, drinking, and sex -- and obtaining credentials with as little effort as possible. Professors are interested in their research and their professional activities, and most want to spend the least possible time preparing for class or grading student work. Administrators, for their part, are primarily interested in expanding enrollments – or reproducing highly selective classes -- and demanding hard work in the classroom will not help them to achieve these goals. The goals of all groups conspire to create an environment in which education is not valued in spite of being the primary stated purpose of colleges and universities.

Certainly, some of the evidence on student learning is disquieting. Arum and Roksa studied 2300 students across 24 U.S. colleges and universities. Nearly half made no significant gain between their first year in college and the middle of their second year on a test of analytical and critical thinking, the Collegiate Learning Assessment. (A follow-up study found that 36 percent made no significant gain between their first and fourth years in college. Arum and Roksa lay considerable blame on lax requirements. Nearly two out of five sophomores (39 percent) reported that none of their courses during the current term required as much as 40 pages of reading a week or 20 pages of writing over the course of the semester (p. 115). The few schools in which most students showed significant gains tended to have much stiffer requirements. Babcock and Marks (2011) found that the average amount of time students reported attending class or studying out of class fell by nearly half between the early 1960s and 2008, from more than 40 hours a week to about 27. Again, institutional and disciplinary variation was notable: students at selective colleges and universities said they studied more, as did engineering and natural science students. But they found similar rates of decline across time regardless of institution or discipline. In the University of California, one of the leading public research universities in the country, only one-third of students say they do even 80 percent of the assigned reading for their classes. On average, they report that socializing occupies a full 40 hour work week, but class attendance and studying much less time (Brint, Douglass, Thomson, and Chatman 2011).

As a principal investigator of the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey and consortium, I have been studying teaching and learning in American research universities over the last decade. In this paper, I will evaluate the Arum and Roksa diagnosis of what ails undergraduate education, and I will propose an alternative view that emphasizes

institutional and disciplinary variation and the power of professors to engage students in learning. I also develop a new typology of student orientations.

## STUDENT SUBCULTURES AND ORIENTATIONS

From colonial times through the period of post-World War II expansion, college was mainly a place where middle- and upper-middle class students went to meet others of their own class, study as little as possible and still obtain a degree, become involved in engaging extra-curricular activities, and practice displays of status and develop social skills. Horowitz (1987) distinguishes between these “insiders” and upwardly-mobile “outsiders.” The outsiders were sons and daughters of immigrants, new to college, often on scholarship. They valued classroom success as preparation for occupational success, and they were the natural allies and supporters of professors. While the insiders could depend on family and college social connections as means to secure careers, the outsiders were often socially awkward (from the perspective of the insiders) and more reliant on conscientiousness in study to get ahead. Relations between insiders and outsiders were often highly charged and tainted by religious and ethnic bias.

The expansion of higher education after World War II created new more impersonal organizational conditions in academe and to an expansion of the number of student subcultures. Based on study of UC Berkeley students in the 1950s and 1960s, Burton R. Clark and Martin Trow developed a typology of student subcultures, which emphasized two dimensions of student identity: identification with ideas and identification with the college. These two dimensions generated four student “subcultures” (see Figure 1). The “collegiate” subculture was the descendant of Horowitz’s social world of “insiders.” These were students interested in campus social life, extra-curricular activities, sports, and dating. According to Clark and Trow, students

identifying with the collegiate subculture generally came from the middle-classes because it was only in these classes that the material resources and leisure time exists to support the collegiate lifestyle. The “vocational” subculture was the descendant of Horowitz’s social world of “outsiders.” These were students who used college to prepare for occupational success. They tended to be upwardly-mobile students from working-class families. They had neither the resources nor the time to participate in collegiate subculture. They had little identification with the college; college was a means to an end. Students who identified with the academic subculture found work in the library, laboratory and seminar rewarding, and they saw professors, not as authority figures to be outwitted but as role models worthy of respect. Like the collegiates, they came from the middle-classes. Their parents went to college and they had the inherited and accumulated “cultural capital” to succeed in academic competition. A sprinkling of academically oriented students of course had always existed on campus, but as a sizable subculture the academics were new to colleges. Their appearance was the result of the expanded demand for post-secondary faculty and other experts in the new middle class. Like the academics, the “non-conformists” identified with the world of ideas, but they did not identify with the college. Their interests gravitated toward the arts, radical politics, and movements for social change. They found the college environment stultifying and narrow, and they adopted unconventional dress and manners as a symbol of their rejection of the college environment.

Figure 1

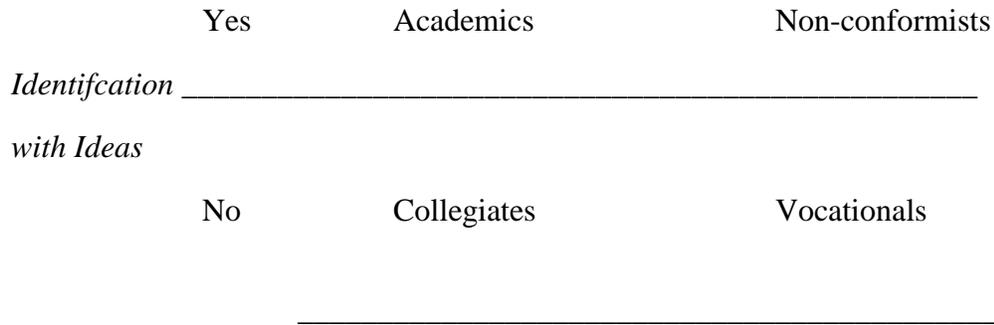
Clark and Trow (1966) Typology of Student Cultures

---

*Identification with the Institution*

Yes

No



The growth of large, impersonal universities, Clark and Trow thought, would encourage the vocational spirit. “Comprehensive public universities are typically people-processing institutions whose administrative staffs must deal with and organize the scattered activities of great numbers of students enrolled in a variety of programs. Relations between teachers and students under these conditions are...fluid and impersonal. Additionally, teachers’ involvement with students is lessened by commitments to research, professions, and off-campus service. “(I)mpersonal relations...(fit) vocational education, which aims to transmit technical information efficiently” (p. 53).

Yet it did not quite turn out that way. Clark and Trow failed to estimate the force of leisure interests and consumerism as a complement and alternative to preparation for work. The entertainment industries (including, notably, music and sports) provided fodder for student conversations that books cannot match. As the anthropologist Michael Moffatt (1989) wrote about students in a large public university in the Northeastern United States: “(C)onceivable reforms (of undergraduate education) would require types of social and cultural change that do not seem within the realm of likelihood...for instance, a reversal of the growing hegemony of an aural and visual popular culture over literate culture” (p. 310). Clark and Trow also failed to foresee the possibility of the re-emergence of an anti-intellectual culture among college students – this time rooted in the working class, rather than the upper classes. The sociologist Howard

London (1978) was one who saw this development and, not surprisingly, he saw it by observing working-class students in a two-year community college. London emphasized the ambivalence that many young working-class men, in particular, experienced in the community college setting. Unsuccessful in previous school work, but desiring credentials to move up in their jobs, these men were easily antagonized by the demands placed on them by their professors. London described them as would-be conformists with doubts about their abilities to succeed and an underlying hostility to those who controlled their academic fates. He wrote: “Stress and anomie and deviant behavior were evident in the students’ resistance to their schoolwork, in their absenteeism, in their (verbal) ‘assaults’ on teachers, and in their self-criticisms” (p. 153). For these men, in-group solidarity in opposition to the school was an alternative to deep investment in upward mobility aspirations which were destined to be unrewarding for most.

Virtually every ethnography and empirically based typology of college students since the early 1970s has emphasized the importance of social life over academics (see also Astin 1993; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Katchadourian and Boli 1985; Kuh, Hu, and Vesper 2000. London 1978; Moffatt 1989; Nathan 2005). This has been no simple re-emergence of the “collegiate” subculture, however. Instead, in the large public universities social life is focused, not on extra-curricular activities, but rather on small-scale ego-centered networks whose members bond over shared interests in popular culture and the details of their personal lives. Perhaps the best balanced of the ethnographies is that by Mary Grigsby (2009) who studied the lives of 60 students at a large, Midwestern university. Grigsby describes a generalized culture of college students involving learning to take care of oneself independently from parents, developing and maintaining close personal relationships, developing unique personality characteristics, and learning how to balance social and academic life. Seventy percent of her subjects said social

learning was more important than academic learning and most of the others said the two were of roughly equal importance. “Hanging out” with friends, listening to and swapping music, and pursuing romantic involvements are major aspects of the dominant culture of college. Within this dominant culture, students express distinctive priorities which they share with like-minded peers. Grigsby describes these as the “careerist,” “credentialist,” “collegiate,” and “alternative,” and “academic” subcultures. Echoes of the Clark and Trow typology are clear, and yet these categories of student orientations reflect the different circumstances of later generations of college students, and especially those located outside major cosmopolitan urban centers. Grigsby distinguishes between “careerists” who are interested in developing specific vocationally-relevant skills and “credentialists” who are interested simply in obtaining diplomas. The former take courses related to their careers seriously (and other courses not very seriously), while the latter are usually indifferent students and enroll in the “softer” majors, such as education and humanities. These two accounted for nearly two-thirds of her sample. Instead of Clark and Trow’s non-conformists, the more conservative Midwest gave rise to Grigsby’s “alternatives,” people who were alienated from the generalized college “fun” culture due to conservative religious or political beliefs or because family responsibilities drew them in other directions.

The term “orientation” is preferable to “subculture”; the latter indicates an actual group of persons who are in regular interaction with one another, who transmit norms and values to newcomers and who exercise social control over one another to encourage conformity.

Orientations are linked to subcultures, but do not necessarily require the regular interactions of group life (Kuh 1990). Many students shift among orientations during their college careers, or have a foot in more than one orientation. Primary and secondary orientations are also common

among college students. For example, a students’ primary orientation may be social, but her secondary orientation may be careerist (see Grigsby 2009: chap. 4). With these considerations in mind, it is possible to offer a revision of the Clark and Trow typology consistent with contemporary American campus life.

Figure 2

Revised Typology of Student Orientations

*Attitude toward the College as Institution*

Ambivalent/

Hostile                      Neutral                      Positive

	Intellectual	Activist	Auto-Didact	Academic
	Development	Counter-cultural	Explorer	
<i>Purpose Of College</i>	Skill	---	Vocational	High-
	Development			Achieving Pre- Professional
	Fun	“Drifting” (often w/Outside Friends)	Social (Network-Centered)	Collegiate
	Diploma	Anti-Intellectual	Diploma Seeker	---

The column “ambivalent/hostile attitudes” represents the most significant change from the Clark and Trow’s (1966) typology. The existence of such attitudes is nothing new in

elementary and secondary schools, but during the immediate post-World War II era the great majority of students only went to college if they had some interest in exchanging their attention and effort for something of value bestowed by the college – typically a qualification or the opportunity for personal and intellectual development. When the educational exchange breaks down, a counter-school culture invariably develops. With the shift toward mass higher education, opportunities increase but so too do counter-school cultures develop. Most students with ambivalent and hostile attitudes toward the college come from the ranks of the diploma seekers, though some have higher aspirations, at least initially. Students can be ambivalent or hostile to college because they are not succeeding, have doubts that they are “college material,” or find their classes “boring” or “irrelevant.” The ambivalence comes from students’ oscillating views about whether it is the college at fault for requiring “boring” and “irrelevant” courses or whether it is themselves who are at fault for not being interested in or able to perform at an acceptable level in the classroom. These students are located primarily in the two-year community colleges, but they are far from unknown in the less selective public four-year colleges. Many drop in and out of college and do not complete their degrees. They are institutionally problematic because they can contribute greatly to a climate of low expectations in the student body. Moreover, they have real power, because many colleges need them to stay in business. In addition, professors are inclined to adapt to their complaints that courses are “too hard” by requiring less work so as not to be penalized on teaching evaluations (see Babcock 2010.) The number of these students is likely to grow in the future, both as a function of the continuing poor preparation of many students prior to college, and as a result of resource constraints in the public universities (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2009). Resource constraints will lead to longer periods of time in college, fewer course options, more difficulty

obtaining degrees in high-demand courses of study, and consequently higher levels of frustration for many students.

We can assume that it is easier to move up and down the rows and across the columns in Figure 2 than diagonally across the rows and columns. Those in the same rows and columns share some uniting characteristic, though they also differ from one another on the other dominant dimension. Some affinity exists between activists and academics, for example, because both are connected to the world of ideas. Some academics become activists, if they become alienated for some reason from the institution or become more closely connected to outside groups. Similarly, an affinity can exist between activists and anti-intellectuals because of their common distance from institutional values.

Student orientations are unevenly distributed across institutions and disciplines. At the most selective research universities, academic subcultures are not as rare as they are at less selective institutions, and most students have the capacity to talk with genuine interest about ideas and class materials. Nevertheless, residence hall and activity based social life are fundamental to the college experience – perhaps to an even greater degree in elite institutions than in most because so many classmates are destined for prominent positions in later life (Karabel 2005). Selective liberal arts colleges are smaller and have more constrained social and extra-curricular offerings. They select for and encourage academics, autodidacts, and explorers. Many of these colleges include a fair mix of activists and counter-cultural students as well. The common thread is engagement with ideas.

Technical institutes select for and encourage high-achieving vocationals – students interested in developing (mostly quantitative) skills that will allow them to obtain high-paying

jobs. Metropolitan colleges like Temple University in Philadelphia, Northeastern University in Boston, and San Francisco State University, are dominated by upwardly-mobile working-class students whose interests in the college are almost entirely vocational, but whose achievement levels are typically lower than students in technical institutes or science and engineering majors at research universities. State colleges also attract and foster students with vocational orientations; these institutions grew out of teacher training schools and have tended to expand outward into business, technology, and health related occupational fields (Brint, Proctor, Mulligan, Rotondi, and Hanneman forthcoming; Clark 1987).

Large flagship public research universities, whose football and basketball teams receive national television exposure, attract a very diverse mix of students but in most cases, particularly in conservative sections of the country, the dominant student culture emphasizes parties, sports, and fun – and fraternities and sororities continue to play an important role as the hub of social life (Clotfelter 2011; Grigsby 2009). At a large, mildly selective East Coast public university with limited sports success, one finds a more even balance between social and academic life and the expressed desire among the majority of students to succeed in both arenas. But, again, social life is the center of student interest. At an unselective “party” school in the American southwest one finds almost no evidence of the life of the mind and ego-centered social networks are dominant (Nathan 2005; see also Holland and Eisenhart 1990).

Every discipline has some high achievers. But the center of gravity – and the range of acceptable orientations -- varies from discipline to discipline. Engineering is a tightly organized area of study and most students are required to work hard to succeed. In the University of California, average study time between engineers and humanities students, for example, varies by more than eight hours per week. Students in other natural sciences curricula also study

longer hours than students in humanities, arts, and social sciences, and in most science disciplines they also express higher levels of conscientiousness (Brint, Cantwell, and Saxena forthcoming). Occupational curricula outside of engineering and health sciences are among the least demanding of majors (Arum and Roksa 2011), and business, in particular, has developed a reputation for being more interested in providing networking opportunities that may lead to jobs than for providing academically challenging curricula (Glenn 2011). One out of seven American college students majors in business, and it is in this very large major that a mild vocational orientation frequently combines with the social fun culture as a natural support for the proliferation of college-sanctioned networking events. The interpretive social sciences and humanities, as well as the soft applied fields of education, social work, marketing, and legal studies, are a home to many students whose primary orientations are toward diploma seeking and social fun. Communications has become widely known as an attractive major for students who are interested in watching film and television in class to complement, with minimal expenditure of energy, their leisure time interests in the same activities. As Clark and Trow (1966) noted, “‘Softer’ majors become important curricular props to collegiate culture, providing special sanctuaries for those primarily interested in (social) life as well as those oriented to ‘diploma’ rather than ‘skill’ vocationalism” (p. 34).

## CONCLUSION

The social side of college life has always been prominent in the United States, and in many ways the student culture of today resembles the student culture of previous eras. The difference is that access to college has greatly increased, and with it the number of ill-prepared and weakly motivated students on campus. Nevertheless, some of the anecdotes and statistics used to generate a grim picture of the role of academics in college life are overstated, and we

must be careful not to take an overly negative view based on flawed materials. Arum and Roksa (2011) based their assessment of the state of student learning on a single test of critical thinking given in the first, second, and fourth year of college. Half of the students in their sample made significant gains on this test between their first and fourth years, but half did not. Studies of learning students' major fields of study may reveal a brighter picture.

Arum and Roksa's own data suggests that academic and high achieving vocational orientations are relatively common in selective colleges and universities, and they are found among some students in virtually every college. Most students seeking to matriculate in graduate and professional schools – now at least 20 percent of U.S. four-year college students -- have strong incentives to study, because their grades will matter in graduate school admissions. Demanding learning environments are typical of the “hard science” fields. Students in these fields can hardly avoid the need to spend long hours on study.

The most eminent researchers do sometimes minimize their undergraduate teaching as much as possible; it is a mark of status among some never to teach undergraduates (Clark 1987: 73-89). Nevertheless, *Academically Adrift* and similar works foster a myth that faculty members care only about research and conference going. Instead, most American faculty members say they are oriented to teaching rather than research, and spend much more time on teaching than on research (see Schuster and Finkelstein 2008: 127-36). Over the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, professorial interest in undergraduate education steadily rose, and the proportion of faculty members who strongly agreed about the importance of undergraduate education doubled (ibid., p. 127). Even in research universities, where interest in teaching has always been lower, many faculty members embrace the idea that effective teaching is part of their job and take craft pride in the good work they do in the classroom.

Arum and Roksa misdiagnose the problem, but American professors do face significant obstacles to providing high-quality instruction. These problems include their realistic fears that increasing rigor will lead to low marks on student evaluations (Babcock 2010); their declining capacity for accurate assessment due to larger class sizes and decreasing teaching support services (Bound, Lovenheim and Turner 2009); as well as the common curse of career disappointments and burnout, found with some frequency in access-oriented institutions (Clark 1987: 217-32; Hermanowicz 2009). As rates of college going increase, larger numbers of students in the United States will be unprepared for college level study (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2009). But in every course teachers also have the power to foster academic engagement by increasing the rigor of their classes (up to a realistically challenging level), by maintaining high standards in grading (Johnson 2003), by building in frequent opportunities for classroom participation (Brint, Cantwell, and Saxena forthcoming), and by the clarity of their instruction and the joy with which they bring course materials to life.

## References

- Arum, Richard and Josipa Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Astin, Alexander W. 1993. "An Empirical Typology of College Students." *Journal of College Student Development* 34: 36-46.
- Babcock, Philip S. 2010. "Real Costs of Nominal Grade Inflation? New Evidence from Student Course Evaluations." *Economic Inquiry* 48, 4.
- Babcock, Philip S. and Mindy Marks. 2011. "The Falling Time Cost of College" Evidence from a Half Century of Time Use Data." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 93: 468-78.

Bok, Derek. 2006. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bound, John, Michael Lovenheim, and Sarah E. Turner. 2009. "Why Have College Completion Rates Declined? An Analysis of Changing Student Preparation and Collegiate Resources." *NBER Working Paper No. 15556*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Brint, Steven and Allison M. Cantwell. 2010. "Undergraduate Time Use and Academic Outcomes." *Teachers College Record* 112: 2441-70.

Brint, Steven, Allison M. Cantwell, and Preeta Saxena. Forthcoming. "Disciplinary Categories, Majors, and Undergraduate Academic Experiences: Rethinking Bok's 'Underachieving Colleges' Thesis." *Research in Higher Education*.

Brint, Steven, John Aubrey Douglass, Gregg Thomson, and Steve Chatman. 2011. *Engaged Learning in the Research University: General Report of UCUES 2008*. Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California at Berkeley.

Brint, Steven, Kristopher Proctor, Kerry Mulligan, Matthew B. Rotondi, and Robert A. Hanneman. Forthcoming. "Declining Fields in U.S. Four-Year Colleges and Universities." *The Journal of Higher Education*.

Clark, Burton R. 1970. *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore*. Chicago: Aldine.

---. 1987. *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Clark, Burton R. and Martin Trow. 1966. "The Organizational Context." Pp. 17-70 in Theodore Newcomb and Everett K. Wilson (eds.) *College Peer Groups: Problems and Prospects for Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Clotfelter, Charles T. 2011. *Big-Time Sports in American Universities*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Glenn, David. 2011. "The Default Major: Skating through Business School." *The New York Times* (April 14). <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/education/edlife/edl-17business-t.html?pagewanted=all>. Retrieved September 10, 2011.

Grigsby, Mary. 2009. *College Life through the Eyes of Students*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hackman, J.D. and T.D. Tabor. 1976. *Typologies of Student Success and Nonsuccess*. New Haven: Yale University Office of Institutional Research.

Hermanowicz, Joseph C. 2009. *Lives in Science: How Institutions Affect Academic Careers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hermanowicz, Joseph C. and Harriet P. Morgan. 1999. "Ritualizing the Routine: Collective Identity Affirmation." *Sociological Forum* 14: 197-214.

Higher Education Information Systems. 2008. *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe*. Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag. Dominic Orr, ed.

Holland, Dorothy C. and Maragaret A. Eisenhart. 1990. *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. 1987. *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, Valens E. 2003. *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education*. New York: Springer-Verlang.

Karabel, Jerome. 2005. *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admissions and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Katchadourian, Herant A. and John Boli. 1985. *Careerism and Intellectualism among College Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, George D. 1990. "Assessing Student Culture." *New Directions for Institutional Research* 68: 47-60.

Kuh, George D., Shouping Hu, and Nick Vesper. 2000. "They Shall Be Known by What They Do: An Activities Based Typology of College Students." *Journal of Student Development* 41: 228-44.

London, Howard. 1978. *The Culture of a Community College*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Moffatt, Michael. 1989. *Coming of Age in New Jersey*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

Nathan, Rebekah. 2005. *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Schuster, Jack H. and Martin J. Finkelstein. 2008. *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

---

Steven Brint is Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education and Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Riverside. He is also director of the *Colleges & Universities 2000 Project* and co-Principal Investigator of the SERU Survey and Consortium.