From the Director

As I imagine most of you are aware, the Reform Movement has launched a Campaign for Youth Engagement. The Campaign seeks to reverse the trend of so many teenagers and young adults distancing themselves from Jewish life during the high school and college years. HUC-JIR is already playing an important role in the Campaign by doing what we do best: preparing professionals.

Even before the Campaign began, HUC-JIR launched a Certificate Program in Jewish Education for Adolescents and Emerging Adults as part of the Jim Joseph Foundation Education Initiative. The goal of this program is to help professionalize the field of youth work through the creation of a cadre of well-trained Jewish educational leaders prepared to engage increasing numbers of Jewish youth, teens and young adults in compelling educational experiences. As alumni you can support this effort by identifying people who work with this population who would benefit from the professionalization the program offers. (If you know of people who may be interested in the program, please have them send an email to Melissa Zalkin Stollman, coordinator of the certificate program at EdCert@huc.edu.)

The course of study aims to enhance the skills, knowledge, and personal capacities of Jewish educators who already serve those populations in either part-time or full-time positions (or as part of their larger institutional responsibilities). Students in the program learn how the adolescent mind works and how adolescents continuously reformulate their identities. They also develop knowledge, skills and understandings about how to work with families and what to do when young people or their families face a crisis. They develop a deep understanding of experiential learning and how to plan learning experiences in non-formal settings, be they camp, Hillel, youth group, or settings yet to be imagined. They also learn how to navigate change from within their institutions and how to be entrepreneurial outside their settings so that they can better serve populations who expect fast-paced services and innovation. Students in the program can also choose to study technology, media, the arts, or service learning, all of which have practical applications to their work.

Like the new Executive Masters Program in Jewish Education (EMA), the Certificate Program is delivered through a combination of online learning, 3-day intensives and a 10-day institute. In addition, students are mentored by experienced professionals. They also create a final project designed to help them integrate what they have learned into the work they are doing.

The first cohort is approaching completion of the 9-month program. Most of the participants will be continuing to work in their youth settings, bringing with them a much more sophisticated understanding of adolescents and emerging adults, experiential learning and institutional change. One of them will be entering a full-time program at HUC-JIR (in the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management) — and we hope more graduates of this program will likewise choose to pursue a degree at the College-Institute, inspired by the taste they get of HUC-JIR learning.

As both the Certificate Program and the EMA prepare to welcome their second cohorts, the final two elements of the Jim Joseph Foundation Education Initiative are preparing to launch later this spring. The Induction and Retention Initiative, designed to ease the transition of graduates of the MAJE and MARE programs as they move from school to work, will launch with a New Educators Transition Boot Camp just before graduation, and the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute (JECELI), a program co-sponsored by HUC-JIR and JTS with support from Bank Street College of Education, will welcome its first cohort this spring.

More about these programs in future issues of Tikshoret. Best wishes for a summer of relaxation and rejuvenation.

B’shalom, Michael
Message from the Chair: 2012 Leadership Team Meeting

Ellen Lefkowitz (’99)

Once a year, the leadership of the RHSOE Alumni Association has an opportunity to come together face-to-face to reflect on our work of the past year and also look ahead towards the future.

In February, just before the Alumni Kallah we gathered together at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute just outside of Los Angeles. We focused on the five pillars of our mission statement: Kehillah — building community among our alumni, Limud — providing opportunities for study and professional learning, T’micha — providing financial support to the College, Lidor va’dor — welcoming the next generation of our alumni and Kavod — honoring our alumni.

We celebrated our accomplishments including the launch of our professional learning groups. We have over 75 members of our alumni association participating in these learning groups, spearheaded by Brad Cohen. We examined the way we communicate with each other across time and space through our Facebook group, Tikshoret, e-Tikshoret and a new blog that is coming soon which will spotlight the work of our alumni in their own words. Our membership outreach working group led us in a thoughtful discussion about how to best connect with students while they are in school and when they graduate.

The alumni population of the College-Institute continues to grow in both the traditional residential programs and also through the development of new education programs such as the Executive M.A. program and the Certificate in the Education of Adolescents and Emerging Adults. The DeLeT program has its own alumni group and continues to prepare teachers to be leaders in the day school community. Many of the graduates of RHSOE are also studying in the rabbinic program. All of these exciting and innovative programs charge us to look deeply at our identity as an alumni association and what the future holds as we welcome new cohorts of colleagues.

Finally, we thought about how we can best support the College-Institute not only in recruitment, but also with our resources. We are critical to the success of the College’s efforts in development and advancement.

Our leadership meeting flowed directly into the Alumni Kallah. It was a wonderful weekend of intense study, schmoozing and reconnecting with colleagues. I was honored to be officially installed as the Chair of the Alumni Association. I want to honor and thank Cindy Reich in her tenure as the Chair. I am grateful to serve in this position and to be working with a wonderful group of leaders in the field of Jewish education. Each and every member of the leadership team dedicates precious time to ensure that our alumni association is able to serve its members the best way possible. Thank you for all of your hard work and commitment!

Save the Date Now!
5773 RHSOE Alumni Day of Learning
November 13, 2012 on the NYC Campus
With Scholars Sara Lee and Dr. Lisa Grant
Telling Our Story, Highlighting Our History

Deborah Niederman ('93), Coordinator of Alumni Engagement

As Ellen shared, our Alumni Association continues to grow and we continue to work hard to make sure we are keeping people connected. One of the important topics we discussed at our Leadership Team meeting was continuing to tell our story. Our story begins in 1994 not so very long ago, given all that we have accomplished! That’s right, our Alumni Association is only 18 years old; a wonderful milestone to celebrate by sharing a brief bit of our history:

In 1994 the position of Alumni Affairs Coordinator was created and filled by Joy Wasserman ('81) and our first NATE breakfast meeting was held in December of that year (that was a 7:00 am gathering!). The first major undertaking of the Association was a Salary and Benefits survey that was undertaken in 1995. In take same year we also published the newsletter, not yet called Tikshoret, we collected dues for the first time and formed our Leadership Team with Roberta Goodman ('81) as the first chair. Quite impressive for just one year, but wait ‘til you hear about all that we accomplished in our first decade. Watch for more historical details in our upcoming e-Tikshoret!

IN THE RHSOE CLASSROOM TODAY
Bringing it Home: Professional Learning as Local & Embedded

Dr. Tali Zelkowicz ('00)

Leading thinkers in their field, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, argue that

[1] The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.

And the rest is commentary. The seminar now called “Professional Learning” that we offer at the RHSOE aims to provide that commentary. If you are an alumna/us of the program who graduated before 2010, you would remember this course under a different guise: “Staff Development.” It will surely come as no surprise to you that the name change was an intentional and reflective decision on the part of the RHSOE faculty.

Specifically, when I first began co-teaching the course with Michael four years ago in 2008, I learned from him and current scholarship that there was a real and significant paradigm shift taking place in the field of “Staff Development,” and it had been under way at least since the mid-1990s. Indeed, we might even say “Staff Development z’1,” because if you take seriously the paradigm shift, the focus is no longer on “staff” or “development.” Rather than an expert who seeks to develop those deemed to be less expert, the focus has shifted to building cultures. This is very different from being “developed.” In short, the focus has shifted from the “restructuring” of the 1980s which left leaders hoping their culture would change, to a “reculturing,” from which leaders can then plan for any restructuring that they realize is necessary in order to be aligned with the core values and vision of their conscious culture. As such, this has been a true backward design shift. “Reculturing” that can lead to restructuring, rather than the reverse, lies at the heart of the work of Professional Learning Communities, or “PLCs,” and did not feature prominently in the old paradigm of Staff Development.

More specifically, I suggest to students that PLCs seek to address and redress what have for decades been perhaps the two greatest kushiot to plague educators’ efforts at what was called staff development. These two are what I call the problems of “the Great Mechitzah” (the gap between how teachers are expected to teach versus how they are encouraged to learn), and of “Targum” (translating learning from external environments, outside both the local cultures of our educational institutions, but also knowledge from outside the field of education altogether).

So the course aims to help students to be able to create communities of colleagues who come together regularly and meaningfully, in a variety of ways, to invent and reinvent what constitutes excellent

continued on page 4


1 The authors first mentioned in this article, DuFour and Eaker, helped develop a website called “All things PLC,” which can be found at: http://allthingsplc.info/. It is interesting to imagine what dialogues could take place on a Jewish Educational version of such a website!

3 For a rich anthology of the new paradigm of “professional learning,” which covers a panoply of all of these themes, we turn to: Easton, Lois Brown (2008) Powerful Designs for Professional Learning. Oxford, OH: NSDC.
teaching and learning, all in the specific context of their local settings and institutional realities.

This emphasis on the “local” is a radical, challenging but promising shift. It means, for example, that any one-shot staff development workshops that take place off-site become suspect in the new paradigm, since they are not embedded in the teachers’ own institutional culture.

Put another way, “Professional Learning” makes educational supervision less about being a corporate manager whose main job is to ensure productivity and efficiency, and makes it more akin to the work of an anthropologist, whose tasks revolve around observation and the interpretation of culture. Indeed, the core tasks of clinical supervision (the model we use and teach in RH SOE) — observation, supervision, and evaluation — all become the core ingredients of this larger end, a PLC.

As such, during the semester long course each spring, I engage students in three core assessments. They need to:

1. propose their own approach to classroom observation designed in response to seven diverse models presented in class
2. guide a teacher at their internship site through a pre-ob, observation and post-ob, the three stages of clinical supervision cycle and then reflect personally and professionally on the process at each step
3. develop and propose, in small teams, a vision for a professional Learning Community for any educational institution — Jewish school, camp, or other educational agency. Their presentation is given as a portfolio of carefully selected artifacts which should each tell a different part of the “story” (culture) about their imagined PLC. Peer and outside judges will decide whether each proposal is to receive the hypothetical grant towards realizing their vision.

Through these tasks, along with core activities such as our collective study of samples of their students’ work using the various new protocols that have been developed around the country or practicing classroom observation using a range of qualitative and quantitative instruments, I invite students to investigate the core and overlapping components of professional learning which are aimed at creating PLCs: observation, supervision, and evaluation.

Although it is not easy, I know that the shift in this course has also begun to take place, with your help, in Jewish educational settings across the country. Cultural change is slow, but deep. I would love to hear how it is going and welcome ideas from you for how we might best prepare graduates for this amazing and complex work we do.

Tali is happy to share the full text of the Professional Learning syllabus with you. Just email her at <tzelkowicz@huc.edu>.

5 I highly recommend you explore the short but comprehensive work on this topic by, Blythe, Tina and David Allen and Barbara Schieffelin Powell (1999) Looking Together at Student Work. New York, New York: Teachers College Press. Ron Berger refers to these protocols and offers inspiring illustrations of their application in his chapter called “A School Culture of Excellence,” which we also read, and explore what an “ethic of Jewish excellence” might entail.
6 We learn to be descriptive and not judgmental in our classroom observations, learning how to decide when to draw on qualitative and quantitative instruments for collecting classroom data, using two chapters from the following class works: Cooper, James M. (1984) Ch. 4 “Observation Skills,” in Developing Skills for Instructional Supervision. United Kingdom: Longman Group, and; Good, Thomas L. and Jere E. Brophy (1978) Ch.3 “Seeing in Classrooms,” in Looking in Classrooms. New York: Harper and Row.

Lori and Joel Abramson (’91) celebrated their son Benjamin’s Bar Mitzvah in July. Lori has been promoted to Head of Educational Tourism and Marketing for the Dept. for Jewish Peoplehood at Oranim College. Joel’s business, Abramson Israel Connection, is now open, arranging simchas in Israel, co-officiating at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and tour consulting for individual families.

Lauren (’97) and Todd Chizner (NY ’99) on the Bar Mitzvah of their son Jacob Myles Chizner, first in Israel at Robinson’s Arch on Monday, December 26, 2011. He also read Torah and led the congregation in prayer on January 14th, 2012, with family and friends.

Jennifer Clayman (’01) and her husband John Fishman celebrated the birth of their son Isaac on January 12.

Margit Crane (’87) on the publication of her book, How To Train Your Parents in 6 1/2 Days: a teen’s guide to raising people you can live with. which came out in November and has just earned a Mom’s Choice Award. In addition, her first grandson, Ava Josephine, was born on December 22.

Jordanna Flores (’01) and Karen Strok (’00) were both honored with Melton Director Certification at the Annual Directors’ Conference.

Josh Mason-Barkin (’07) and Sara Mason-Barkin (’08) are thrilled to announce the birth of their son, Charlie Edward, on March 28th. Among the proud family members are uncle/aunt Mike (SJNM ’05) and Erin Mason (’08), grandparents Steven (NY ’78) and Patty Mason (NYSOE ’77), and grandparents Steve and Caryn Barkin. (Caryn is the administrative assistant to the DeLeT program at HUC/L.A.)

Renee Tornberg, mother of Bob Tornberg (79). Renee was the grandmother of Shoshanah King-Tornberg (’04).
BOOK REVIEW

Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith

By Rabbi Niles Goldstein (Hardcover: St Martin’s Press, 2006; Paperback: Trumpeter, 2010)

Reviewed by Stacey Delcau (’01)

If you need a reminder on a bigger scale of why you went into this work, then read this book. It’s not about educational theory, or a new method for staff development — it reminds us of the spark that led each of us to become professional Jewish educators.

Rabbi Goldstein’s spark is encapsulated in the word “gonzo.” Gonzo is a journalistic term that was coined in the 1960s. Gonzo journalism has now become a recognized style of writing that concerns itself with “telling it like it is.” Rabbi Goldstein applies this term to Judaism in the following manner:

Gonzo Judaism is

“about trying to recover and reaffirm that revolutionary impulse and using it to reshape the Judaism we’ve inherited from the previous generation... it’s about taking risks and thinking freely... yet it’s also about looking back into the riches our past in order to move forward into our future.” (pg. 149)

His points are threefold:

Point 1: Get Out (of your routine)

“What we need for this next generation and century — and what we need desperately — are new faces and new voices. The message must be different as well, in content and in spirit. Not the familiar messages rooted in insecurity and fear, but fresh ones grounded in confidence and celebration.” (pg. xii)

Put on a fresh face, find your inner creative voice, and realize that you have the power to create real change in Judaism. People are looking for connections between intellect and emotion. When we try too hard to intellectualize Judaism, we lose the connection to the soul and our emotions. Step out of your routine for a moment and re-evaluate. My favorite is the way he titles his chapters: Chapter #1: Get Out of Your Damn Head and into Your Gut.

Point 2: Get Back (to tradition)

If we are secure in our own knowledge, we feel more confident to experiment and leave our comfort zones. This is why Rabbi Goldstein is adamant about making sure that we look to our tradition for grounding. He suggests that if we look back to historical rituals, we can possibly find new outlets for connections to innovative programming. It is our obligation to recover Judaism’s lost power through ritual. It’s great that we ask our b’nai mitzvah students to engage in a yearlong service project, but if we expect our future generations to grow up committed to Jewish practice, why aren’t we asking them to experiment with a ritual tradition during this year?

Imagine having a conversation with your confirmation class about informed choice where each of your students ACTUALLY engaged in keeping a level of kashrut for a year, praying the shema before they went to bed every night, or putting on a tallit every time they walked into services? They would actually have something to contribute to a conversation about the relevance of these rituals from a meaningful perspective. Innovation grounded in tradition.

Point 3: Get Moving (and find the excitement)

So many times I’ve read articles about radical transformational that discount the synagogue. Rabbi Goldstein doesn’t do anything of the sort. He firmly believes that every place and time that someone can engage in Jewish practice or action is a place and space to take on the gonzo approach. But he does suggest that the synagogue take its programming outside the walls to meet people where they are. We should experiment with outdoor experiences, artistic expression, or technological advances.

We have to take risks and we have to be willing to fail. Get out of your guts and find a way to take a gonzo approach to Judaism.

Have you moved?

We want to make sure you are still receiving our publications; if you have moved, please send Debbie <dniederman@huc.edu> or Joy <jwasserman@huc.edu> your updated information and we will make sure you don’t miss a thing!
Focus on Excellence: Alumni in the Field

As we read in RHSOE Director Michael Zeldin’s article in the Spring ’08 issue, Pursuing an Ethic of Excellence, “We at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education have always made excellence our goal.”

We continue to focus on excellence in Jewish education as reflected in the work of our fellow alumni, looking at those whose work is uniquely different from that of most alumni.

My Work in Holocaust Education

By Beth Dotan (’89)

I returned to my hometown, Omaha, with my family in 2000 through a two-year grant agreement with the Plains States Region of the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Federation of Omaha. I had been working at the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum in the Western Galilee in Israel as a Senior Educator when we settled an agreement with Partnership 2000 for me to use my skills as an educator and administrator to address the growing interest and inquiries for Holocaust education in the Omaha area. This opportunity also allowed me to continue work on a project with the Ghetto Fighters’ called “The Book Sharing Project,” a student internet exchange between American and Israeli classrooms. Holocaust education was a growing topic across the U.S. and I had a wonderful opportunity to make a difference with my background.

Over the last 12 years, we have developed a center called the Institute for Holocaust Education (IHE) www.ihene.org. Administered under the 501(c)3 of the Jewish Federation of Omaha and in conjunction with Holocaust-related programming of the ADL, the IHE provides educational resources, workshops, survivor testimony and integrated arts programming to students, educators and the public. We provide support to Holocaust survivors in the community. Our goal is to ensure that the tragedy and history of the Holocaust are remembered, that appropriate instruction and materials are available to all students, educators and the public to learn from these lessons. We strive to inspire our community to create a more just and equitable society.

The IHE tag line suggests that our work should “inspire, honor and educate.” I believe that the Institute’s accomplishments are a reflection of my years at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Striving for a sense of excellence in each targeted area and searching to provide a holistic experience is part of the gestalt that Bill Cutter so deeply ingrained in those of my generation. Working in the field of Holocaust education crosses many disciplines and educational structures, allowing us to work with Jewish Day Schools, Public and Private schools and Universities.

Partnership is our best ally as we work closely with the larger community to present unusual experiences. At IUC-JIR, I had the opportunity to intern at the Skirball museum where my work with Adele Burke provided the entre to museum and exhibit work. The IHE brings traveling exhibits from large museums around the country, but we also curate exhibitions. Most recently, an exhibit titled Searching for Humanity: Victims, Veterans and Survivors of World War II opened at the Nebraska Strategic Air and Space Museum and will remain there through 2014 providing growing educational opportunities for Nebraskans and travelers on the I-80 Interstate to view a moving narration about liberators and Nebraska survivors.

A strong basis in administration and supervision from IUC-JIR has grounded my work with the IHE. One of our community partnerships included producing the opera Brundär, originally performed 55 times in the Terezín Ghetto during the war. There were scores of individuals and volunteers who made this production an incredible experience for the community. We were graced to have one of the original actors, Ela Weissberger address our audiences and had local and national talent perform in the production. This show was a joint project with Opera Omaha and the local Rose Children Theater. Close to 10,000 students, educators and others viewed the show. At the core of the story line is the message that Jews had long been victims of bigotry and prejudice. We are all responsible for teaching our larger world how to make a change.

Last year, the IHE brought Jewish Day School students, students from a Catholic Native American school and children from the Western Galilee Partnership together through distance learning and cultural exchange. All students read a book titled, “Martha’s Story: The Daughter We Always Wanted.” The children shared illustrations and discussion about their work through mail, international deliveries and in a three-way distance learning web opportunity. The Winnebago students provided new vocabulary in Ho-Chunk, the language of the Winnebago. An additional video conference with Martha allowed her to

continued on page 7
share her story from Israel to the students in the U.S.

The experiences in this work are truly endless. Every day that we work to tell the story of the Holocaust is precious and the skills I gathered through my years at the College-Institute only provide strength for finding the avenues to accomplish this goal. The educational challenges and interaction with such a variety of individuals and organizations keeps us striving for continued success at the Institute for Holocaust Education.

My Path in Jewish Education

By Adele Lander Burke ('78)

It is hard to believe that I graduated from RHSEO almost 35 years ago! A lifetime ago I studied in amazing classes, learned from outstanding faculty, and gained experience in meaningful internships. My journey has been unconventional but highly rewarding.

When I entered RHSEO I knew from the beginning that I did not want to direct a school. I had little faith in schools as a means of sustaining positive Jewish identity or affiliation. Rather, I was interested in going to work in what were considered informal educational settings—camps, youth work, or museums. So my internships in Los Angeles allowed me to work in a variety of settings from innovative school-camp programs offered by the BJE to leading a temple youth group to establishing a Hillel presence at Loyola and Southwestern Law Schools.

During my tenure at HUC, I took a leave of absence between my second and third years to take a paid internship with the Hillel Foundation at Washington University, my undergraduate alma mater. This experience enabled me to begin to apply all I was learning at HUC. I could directly apply my studies by conducting High Holiday services for 500 people, by initiating the first egalitarian Shabbat minyan on campus, and by creating meaningful encounters with Jewish thought and practice to a wide range of students. I felt comfortable in my role as Jewish authority and educator as I dealt with students from diverse Jewish backgrounds.

In those days, we studied “confluent education” under the direction of my mentor, Bill Cutter. We learned to create both cognitive and affective objectives for our work. The goal was to merge the knowledge base of Judaism with the feeling base — students should come away caring about what they were learning and experiencing. The goal of such learning was to help students answer the question: Why be Jewish? If they have learned the basics of Jewish practice and thought but cannot answer that question, then I feel we have failed as educators.

Upon my graduation in 1978, I took a position as Hillel Program Director at Cal State Northridge. This work was extremely rewarding as I worked with a team that included a rabbi and a social worker to create exciting programs, teach classes on Jewish history and culture, conduct Shabbat and holiday services. I read Torah on the High Holidays for a congregation of 1,000. I managed one of the first Persian Shabbat dinners (we would daily meet Persian Jews who were fleeing Iran in those years to settle in Los Angeles) for over 100 students. I arranged for speakers as diverse as Dennis Prager and Wolf Blitzer (then a reporter of the Jerusalem Post).

Of course, there were parts of that job that I wasn’t really expecting — managing the Hillel bowling league or handing out day-glo wristbands at Hillel dances, not to mention working on plans for an expansion and remodel of the facility. But all of this made sense in terms of the training I had. Young Jews wanted to meet one another, learn about their heritage, and generally have a good time.

My next career move came in 1984 when I became Director of Education at the HUC-JIR Skirball Museum. I have remained with the Skirball for 28 years as this institution has evolved to become a major cultural attraction in the community. We serve a broad audience of both Jews and non Jews and seek to share positive Jewish values with all of them. We welcome the stranger, support freedom and liberty, and celebrate Jewish heritage and traditions. In this position I again have relied on my training to develop all sorts of gallery experiences, school tours, and docent training materials. My strong background in Jewish history and text has been a valuable resource as both Jewish and non Jewish staff come to me frequently for advice. What is the difference between Tu B’shvat and Tisha B’Av?!

Today I serve in a senior management position at the Skirball Cultural Center and I relish the challenges in my work as this institution strives to redefine how American Jews relate to contemporary Jewish life.

HUC-JIR taught me to be a leader — to be able to handle the details while also creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere — a place where people will choose to come to experience a positive Judaism. Over 35 years, the curriculum at HUC-JIR has undergone major changes. However, ultimately, we are trained to lead communities and to help our constituents find their own meaningful connections to Jewish heritage and values. My experience at RHSEO laid the foundation for me to succeed in this endeavor and I am grateful for what I experienced there.
Faculty Bookshelf: For Your Continuing Professional Learning

This “bookshelf” has been initiated by the Continuing Alumni Education Working Group in their efforts to provide for your continuing professional growth. For this issue of Tikshoret, we approached Eve Fein (’87) Coordinator of Clinical Education and Admissions Associate for RHSOE, for her recommendations:

My Latest Itch
I was thrilled when Barack Obama was elected president. One reason was that he actually reads books. I even remember that he shared some of the books that were on his nightstand. I can recall the titles of the books. One book was fiction, Netherland; and the other was non-fiction, A Team of Rivals.

My Kindle has replaced the stacks of books previously piled on my nightstand. When I turned on my Kindle to look at what I have been reading, I saw the following titles: Skippy Dies, Sunset Park, The Tigers’ Wife, Academically Adrift, A Visit From the Goon Squad, The Finkler Question, A History of Love, and Tinkering Toward Utopia. I am an avid reader. My passion lies in good fiction (and occasionally popular fiction like the Dragon Tattoo series) and books about leadership and educational reform and trends.

Academically Adrift (by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, University of Chicago Press, 2010) is the book about which I will share. It is one of the most recent books written to address the state of college education. As a parent of college-age children and an educator, I have been wondering about my own children’s college academic experience. This has been my latest “itch.”

The authors of Academically Adrift combine data from two test instruments, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which are used at hundreds of schools. The book is based on detailed results from a good sized sample of students from 29 institutions. The CLA measures things such as aptitude with respect to critical learning and writing skills, while the NSSE mostly measures how students are engaged at school, in large part measured by how they use their time. During the course of reading this book my wonderings developed into real concerns and my itch developed into a full blown rash.

Spoiler alert…Arum and Roksa conclude:
- gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills (i.e., general collegiate skills) are either exceedingly small or empirically non-existent for a large proportion of students
- 36 percent of students experienced no significant improvement in learning (as measured by the CLA) over four years of schooling
- less than one-half of seniors had completed over 20 pages of writing for a course in the prior semester
- total time spent in academic pursuits is 16 percent; students are academically engaged, typically, well under 30 hours per week
- scholarship from earlier decades suggest there has been a sharp decline in both academic work effort and learning
- students majoring in traditional liberal-arts fields…demonstrated significantly higher gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills over time than students in other fields of study. Students majoring in business, education, social work, and communications had the lowest measurable gains
- 35 percent of the students sampled spent five hours or less a week studying alone; the average for all students was under 9 hours

Other aspects of the book were striking as well. The authors addressed the fact that many professors were prepared by their PhD programs to do research and obtain grants and were not necessarily equipped to actually instruct in the classroom. They also highlighted that many college institutions promoted the research and grant writing as higher priorities than classroom instruction.

At the conclusion of the book I was left/am left with an uneasy feeling about these findings. As a parent I am concerned about bankrupting ourselves on college tuition. As parent, I am concerned about my kids’ academic “progress” through 4 years of higher education. As educator, I am sad and frustrated to see that it seems we have yet another broken system of education in this country that we can’t seem to get right.

I think I will drown my sorrows in The Hunger Games Trilogy.