



PSYCHOLOGY'S SOMMER and his SECRETARIES . . .

photo by Conrad Stenton

STAFF CRUSHES STUDENT QUEST

by Jon Whyte

Gateway Features interviews the formulator of Sommer's Law (productivity equals the number of secretaries times the average typing speed divided by the number of scientists). Dr. Robert Sommer, department of Psychology, spent four years with the staff of the mental hospital at Weyburn, Saskatchewan. This is his first year at the University of Alberta.

"In the ideal university students have acquired the values of the scholar and the truth-seeker, the love of learning, and taken them over as their own."

The psychological basis for school spirit, as Dr. Sommer understands it, is a desire for identification with something larger than the self. Most students are undergoing a split with family life and branching out on their own. School spirit is one means of satisfying this drive.

Before continuing with the common understanding of this spirit (or perhaps the students' union's concept) there is need for definition. Dr. Sommer defines school spirit as "being identified with the community of scholars, the values of the school, and the student's role."

Although back-slapping, hell-raising, and game-attending are left out of his definition, the athletic and social basis for school spirit should not be entirely excluded as they are part of the community, but Dr. Sommer feels they should not be

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confused with the idea of the university. They are as much a part of university life as the academic side because they lead to camaraderie and fellowship within the community.

Gateway also asked Dr. Sommer about fraternities and their basis. He said they arise out of an individual desire for acceptance by a larger group and are a "way of making sense out of such a large community as a university."

The better student, even in the socially-participating light, is not the "rah-rah type" but the student involved with the spirit of the school, the student who

realizes the select group he is in, who understands the split between the 'we' in university and the 'they' on the other side of the ivy.

"The university atmosphere should be an inspiration to the student." Most students are in a period of transition and the scholastic spirit tends to "facilitate the acquisition of new values and hasten the loss of old values."

More school spirit is apt to be found in residential universities because the young scholar is "thrown into contact with university people hour after hour, day after day." The student who lives at home is not placed in intimate contact with the

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school and what it stands for, he doesn't "feel the tradition" as the residential student does.

The young student is "responsive to the values of the institution when he enters, that is, he is most impressionable in the early years; he has the spark that can be fanned into flame." Unfortunately this quest for knowledge is quite frequently crushed by the time the student enters graduate school. Dr. Sommer believes that smaller classes in the undergraduate years would better nourish the desire for learning. "What student is going to stand up in front of two hundred others and ask questions?"

And how can you tell if a school has spirit? Dr. Sommer set two criteria: by looking at alumni and seeing how many rally to its assistance when it's under fire, "the number of people in the community who are proud to have been associated with the university;" and secondly, by looking at the number of students who want to go to classes and who regard university as a privilege.

In conclusion Dr. Sommer said that he was "very impressed by the number of students who want to learn, who ask questions, and who do emerge from the crowd" at this university. "If students become apathetic it's the fault of the staff for not fanning the spark into a flame."

AND SOMMER'S SENSE OF BELONGING

FIFTH COLUMN

Students at Canadian and American universities are often taken to task for their lack of interest in public affairs, which extends at times to the concerns of their own universities and personal lives. Commentators compare the man-hours spent here on inter-collegiate football or fraternity activities with the influence of Japanese students on politics and the demonstrations by European students against nuclear weapons. The reaction of the U of A student is likely to be a mixture of superiority and embarrassment, both emotions however having no adequate foundation.

Before condemning North American students as lacking in maturity or "engagement", or Europeans as emotional reactionaries, we should explore first the differences between the systems of education and the average student, if they are to be found.

A comparison can best be made between the University of Alberta and the traditional British university. For the sake of brevity, countries such as Japan and Korea will have to be set aside as special cases but, this done, we find British universities reasonably representative of all non-American systems. (The only material difference is that in some countries it is the custom for a student to attend at least two different institutions as an undergraduate. For example, a Frenchman may study for two years at a provincial university and take his last year and his degree at the Sorbonne.)

Professional schools, e.g. of medicine, engineering or art, are much the same the world over, so it is in the numerically far greater arts and science colleges that we find the difference we seek—the tutorial system. Under this system the individual student does not follow any laid-down programme, but studies under the supervision of one faculty member. In detail, it means that, apart from spending a hour a week, often less, with his tutor, the student is left to his own devices. He is not obligated to attend any series of lectures. And the lectures which are offered in any particular session are akin to those of Alberta's Guild of Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies—they are not "courses," anyone may attend, there are no assignments, requirements or grades.

The British student's only written assignments are an essay he writes every week or two for his tutor. This is commented on and assessed, but no marks or grades are awarded. The use of such essays is confined to the individual's practice in formulating and expressing his ideas alone. If a student were not to write a single paper throughout his undergraduate career, while unwise and impolite to his tutor, it would not affect his grades, since there are none.

On the other hand, the student is examined twice in his three years, and these examinations cover the whole field he is studying. Where there are no courses of study, there can be no sub-division and partition of the subject. To prepare for his two ordeals, the student has old examination papers and the advice of his tutor. Failing the week-long Preliminaries does not necessarily mean that he flunks out, however; he may simply be warned to take himself in hand.

Having called on his tutor, the student has still 167 hours of the week to occupy as he pleases. He spends them in reading, conversation, university clubs and activities, and lectures—in that order. Thus, superficially, he has much more time for "political awareness" than the Canadian; but the real reason lies deeper.

Preparation for this sort of university study is done under a vastly different high school system. The British "grammar school" student specialises from the age of sixteen and writes his university entrance examinations in three subjects at most, more often in one or two. For example, modern languages are not taught at European universities. In order to take a degree in languages, the student must be able to speak, read and write them adequately before he goes to university.

The British system, where the wrong decision is made at the early age of choosing the field of study, fails in a far worse way than can the Canadian; but where it succeeds, as it usually does, it succeeds better than can the Canadian system in preparing the student for study on an adult level.

The higher admission standards of the British system are both traditional and necessary, because of the relatively small number of university places available. Only one student in fifty reaches university, while in Canada and the U.S.A. the proportion is near two in five (although half drop out before completing their programmes.)

Thus both the university systems and the raw material produced for the systems differ markedly on both sides of the Atlantic. Only if the University of Alberta were to expel tomorrow all but the most outstanding 500 students would we be able adequately to appreciate the contrast.

Even then, could any fair comparison be drawn between the Oxford man and the "purged" U of A student? It is doubtful whether the few 500 would have the maturity, wit and intellectual agility to support the European notion of education in the coffee shop and the private sherry party in as fiercely competitive and as rigorously conformist society as are Oxford, Edinburgh, Lund, Bonn or the Sorbonne.