

Who Should Go To College?

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The question "who should go to college" is being asked more often now than it was in the past, but its importance is not generally grasped, nor, indeed, the necessity for asking it at all. "Obviously," says the realistic man, "anyone should go to college, and does go to college, who has the desire to take a college course, the brains to pass the entrance examinations, and the money to pay the fees and expenses. Why theorize about it when theories will make no difference?"

At the present time our college students, in the main, are those who fulfill the psychological, intellectual and financial criteria just mentioned — those who have the urge, the brains and the cash. We have come a long way from the time when social barriers restricted a university education to the aristocratic and professional classes, or when prejudice debarred half the human race because they were considered the weaker sex. Some think that we have not come far enough; that a university education is the birthright of every boy and girl in a democratic society. But that view confuses equality of talent (which is nonsense).

The fact that they are born equal under the law does not make them equal under the skull. We endorse free compulsory education for all up to a certain age in order that the divergent talents of all our children may be developed; but it would be ridiculous to expect them all to possess the talents for advanced study, for handling ideas, for conceptual thinking, that are needed in university work.

To say that individuals have divergent talents is a statement of fact, implying no contempt for those whose metier lies outside the academic sphere. I emphatically do not regard nongraduates as *hoi polloi* and graduates as the Lord's anointed. I do not share the touching faith of many parents in a university degree as the sole assurance of happiness, success, and good citizenship. I do not believe that a parchment is the passport to pre-eminence or a sheepskin surety of sagacity. However, I do believe that the talent for ideas should not be buried in the ground. It should be developed—not for the purpose of getting a college degree as a meal ticket, but for the enrichment of character and the service of society. In other words, those who are intellectually and morally worthy of handling college work should be able to go to college—that group, that whole group, and nothing but that group.

We are not now getting that whole group in the universities. We are not getting many of those who have the urge and the brains but not the cash. Less than fifteen percent of Canadian university students receive financial assistance; in Great Britain seventy-two percent of the university students are helped, and the average amount received by each student is much more generous than in Canada. Not long ago a survey was made in five Canadian universities of the total financial aid to students. The percentage of the students who received aid varied from twenty-nine percent of the total enrolment at one university to thirteen percent at another. The average aid received by a student varied from \$336 a year to \$120 a year. When there are meals, shelter, tuition, books and clothing to be paid for, \$336 a year does not go very far.

Yet there has never been a time when Canada's need for educated men and women has been so great. To maintain our level of health, we need more doctors, dentists, and nurses, and that means that we must seek out young men and women who have a deep interest in humanity and readiness for service, and educate them to the standard required for the healing professions. To develop our economy

we must seek out those with the things, and dealing with natural attitude for handling material forces, and educate them as scientists and engineers. We need the reflective natures fascinated by abstract questions or by the vistas of history or by the truth and beauty of literature and the arts or by the mysteries of science, and we need to educate them as professors and researchers. We need those with a love of learning, outgoing instincts, endless patience and a kinship with youth, and we need to educate them as teachers. We need clergymen, historians, meteorologists, foresters, social workers, and many more. But men and women cannot pursue these professions without formal education. That is why we need, in the universities the whole group who have the intellectual ability and the moral stamina to profit from university courses.

We are not now getting "nothing but that group". Last year, in one faculty of the University of Toronto, six hundred students who had passed Ontario Grade XIII or equivalent examinations were admitted to the first year; two hundred of them were unable to complete their first year successfully. That is a glaring example, but virtually similar situations can be found elsewhere. The students who failed have wasted their time and their instructors' time, their money (or their parents' money) and the taxpayers' money — for the taxpayers pay from one quarter to three quarters, depending on the particular institution, of the tuition costs of Canadian universities. Moreover, the presence of students who are not keeping up with the work lowers the tone and lessens the effectiveness of the teaching.

Soon we will have double the present number of pupils leaving secondary schools, and the universities' resources in space, time, equipment, and personnel will be stretched to the very limit. Will we continue to put up with so many failures when every one of them will be keeping another student out of university? What can be done? We cannot predict closely enough, without present knowledge, whether an applicant who has passed entrance examinations really has the brains for college work.

We cannot tell whether his urge for higher education is sufficiently deep-seated that he will discipline himself, use his time wisely, and make the arduous, long-continued effort that is necessary for success.

Some would say take nothing but the first-class honor students, the cream of the crop, and then there will be no failures. But if we did that, in many courses there would be no students; and we would lose the good pupils of second-class standing. They often do very well at university, and some of them — "the late starters" — do brilliantly. The question "Who should go to college?" cannot be answered simply by deciding what will be easiest for the colleges.

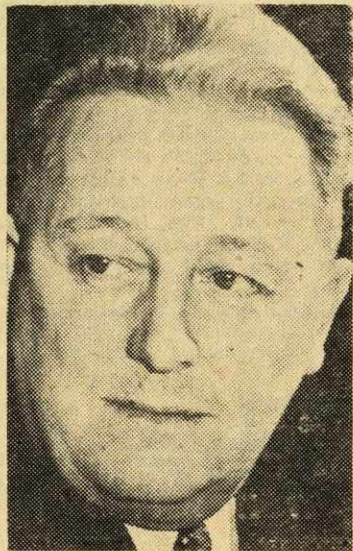
The country's needs in the various professions can be predicted with fair accuracy. The number of high school matriculants can be predicted with even greater accuracy. In a totalitarian state it would be comparatively simple to plan for the filling of the former demand from the latter supply. In Russia, for example, students of ability and promise are selected, groomed, and directed to university to be trained for specialized careers.

I do not like to think that we in the democracies set a lower value on the individual and his capacity than the Russians do. We will never compel anyone to take a certain course or enter a certain profession. But I wonder whether we should not try to make "equality of opportunity" a reality rather than an oratorical flourish. That would mean providing money to send gifted students to college, whatever their economic status. It would

mean more than that. It would mean paying more attention to them while they are at school. Gifted students are the underprivileged in most Canadian schools. There are special classes, special teachers, even special schools, for the handicapped, but there is a strong prejudice against any special provision whatever for those of superior intelligence. The bright boy or girl, in all but a small percentage of Canadian schools, is in a large class where the teacher spends half the time repeating, for the benefit of the average and the dull, points that the bright one has already grasped. He is bored. He becomes mentally lazy.

I do not blame the harassed teachers for neglecting the gifted—it is almost inevitable that they should do so unless some provision is made for special attention to those in the top ranks of the group. Teachers of those students should have time for the demands of that teaching.

In pleading the claims of the superior students, I am not speaking of a negligible number. The report of the Royal Commission on Education in Ontario includes a chart that places twenty percent of Canadian children in the categories of



In the United States, the problem of selecting freshmen is much more complex and difficult than it is in Canada. Many American universities receive applications from candidates who have attended secondary schools anywhere from Maine to California and from Texas to Alaska. To evaluate their secondary school certificates becomes practically an impossible task. Faced with this situation in its early stages, a group of more than 80 American universities established in 1900 a College Entrance Examination Board to assist them in the selection of students. In 1926, that board developed a test known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test. This is almost entirely an "objective" test (that is, the answers are given by circling words or numbering sentences, and the papers can be marked mechanically). The universities that recognize this test usually base their admissions on the test scores along with a statement of the report from his principal.

To me there is something repellent about objective tests; they are mechanical and impersonal and smack of mass production; the individual pupil seems to have been

predictive validity, I believe that we should use them as an adjunct to the Grade XIII examinations, and base our admission policy on a combination of both, along with reports from the high school principals.

I do not advocate the abolition of departmental examinations. The familiar essay-type examination compels the student to organize his material, to marshal his facts, and to express himself clearly and coherently—abilities that are useful to everyone whether he goes on to university or not. In addition to examination results, universities should receive from the applicant's secondary school a statement of his record and a report on his industry and reliability—a report that would reveal any special circumstances (such as heavy responsibilities at home or illness) that should be taken into consideration in assessing his application.

Selection of university students is not synonymous with exclusion. Examinations function as a screen; that is, they keep out the students who get lower marks than those required for entrance to universities. If the Scholastic Aptitude Test or some

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"gifted" or "superior" with the regard to their ability to learn—one fifth of the entire school population. Our university entrants will be drawn from the upper fifth of those who are in schools, and, for the sake of our national welfare, health, progress and security, we should do more for those students than we are doing at present.

The universities are not prone to cast all the blame for failures on the schools. We have examined ourselves, our teaching methods and procedures. We have striven to make an easier transition from high school to university work. I have begun to suspect that, in our anxiety, we may have over-emphasized the difficulty and underestimated the freshmen. University studies are not merely an extension of secondary school work, starting with—to use an Ontario example—a sort of Grade XIV. The university freshman is expected to work under his own steam, as a member of a scholastic community that exists for the extension and transmission of knowledge. His promotion to this estate should be the beginning of a new way of life. The university should be a challenge to all his powers, and if it is bewildering at first, the shock of this experience can be very salutary. I suspect that we lose more than we gain by relieving the shock. If from the very beginning our students were confronted with the real facts of university life, we would probably get better results than we do with much orientation and spoon-feeding. Freshmen who are treated as schoolboys and schoolgirls will respond as such, and we will have a continuation of the immature and irresponsible behaviour that gives the colleges — deservedly — a bad name with the public.

What we need most is some better method of selecting our students, some method that will make a closer prediction of success or failure in academic work.

fed into a calculating machine and reduced to a statistic. Yet it is the overwhelming testimony of eminent American educators that the Scholastic Aptitude Test provides a better index of a student's capacity for higher education, than the familiar essay type of examination.

We should not adopt American practices uncritically. Our Canadian educational tradition, while receptive to North American developments, has been greatly influenced by our parent cultures of Great Britain and France, and France, and those trans-Atlantic influences are not the least valuable part of our inheritance. On the other hand we must give weight to the testimony of wise and experienced American educators. We should be ready to try any method that will bring to the universities those who really can profit from a university course.

In Alberta and in Ontario, surveys of high school students are being carried out in an attempt to arrive at a better method of selection. In the Ontario survey (which is financed by a grant from the Atkinson Charitable Foundation) various tests, including the Scholastic Aptitude Test, will be given to students in their final year in high school, and comprehensive follow-up studies will be made during the next two years of all the students tested—those who go to college and those who do not. By this means it is hoped to find out how many students of university calibre do not go on with their education; what considerations prevent them from doing so; what factors make for success in university courses; and whether the Scholastic Aptitude Test other tests have validity in predicting success in higher education. Whether the survey will actually find out these things remains to be seen. Perhaps the tests will be found to add little or nothing to the results of the Grade XIII examinations. But if the tests prove to have

other test were validated and administered to a high school student, it could function not only as a better screen, but also as a net to draw in the capable youth who have the urge and the brains but not the cash, and strengthen our hand in our appeals for financial assistance for them. They should go to college—even if we have to pay a great deal of money for their tuition and transportation and living expenses, and even if, at the same time, we have to exclude those who cannot or will not, do college work.

The cost of adequate scholarships will be considerable. The cost of expanding university facilities to take care of larger numbers will be enormous. (A university, as President Gilmour of McMaster University said not long ago, is the type of business that operates at a loss to itself, though it produces a gain for everyone else.) Moreover, no single university can expand beyond a certain point without damaging its academic effectiveness, and thereby cheating the citizens and students who believe they are paying for sound education. Therefore there must be, for each section of the country, a plan for higher education that will preserve the integrity of the existing institutions.

We are not accustomed to astronomical figures in connection with higher education. But there is no better investment on the financial page of any paper than our investment in youth. Young men and women are worth more than all our mines and forests. They are more crucial to the country than all our communications networks. They are more worth developing than the St. Lawrence Seaway. They have more potential power than Niagara, Kitimat and Chalk River. They must rely on us for the present, but we must rely on them for the future. We must develop their powers of the full, for their own sake and for the sake of Canada and the world in which we live.