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## THE COLLEGE AS RAT-RACE: ADMISSIONS AND ANXIETIES

In 1950, 2,214,000 students were enrolled in American colleges and universities. By 1960 the total had grown to 3,570,000 and in the last academic year it was 4,207,000. Projections for 1970 range as high as seven million. This increase is not merely a consequence of the growth of the American population. Of 1,000 boys and girls in the 5th grade in 1942, only 205 entered college in 1950. But of 1,000 fifth graders in 1954, 336 entered college in 1962. By the time the present grade school children have reached college age, the proportion may exceed one-half.

The consequent rise in college applications has of course been distributed unevenly among America's colleges. Although there are still many accredited institutions which begin the year with room in their freshman classes, the élite schools—the Ivy League, the seven sisters, the best state universities—are faced with many times the number of students they can accommodate. The result has been a fundamental re-orientation in the attitude of colleges toward the selection of students. Instead of setting admissions *requirements*, they have to develop an admissions *policy* by which to choose from among the excess of well-qualified applicants.

The applicants fall readily into three groups: the clear admits, the clear rejects, and (characteristically) a large middle group of possible admits. In this third segment are to be found the students with strengths and weaknesses which must be weighed against one another and translated into a one-dimensional scale of preference. Should the college admit a boy with strong but not spectacular grades and little evidence of independence, or the boy (from a different kind of school and background) whose relatively weaker but not disastrous grades are balanced by signs of creativity and ambition? Should the admissions committee deliberately strive for a heterogeneous freshman class, or judge each case purely on its merits without reference to the character of the other applicants already admitted?

The situation is aggravated by a number of interactions between the colleges and the high schools. Students, aware of the increasing difficulty of obtaining admission to their chosen schools, begin to make multiple applications in order to protect themselves. The result is an

inflation of applications to the best colleges, forcing them to estimate the percentage of admittees who will actually show up in September.

Simultaneously, the "college advisers" in high schools and preparatory schools, alerted to the problems in the colleges, begin to discourage students from applying to schools to which they have little chance of being admitted. This entirely laudatory move merely worsens the problems for the colleges, for it reduces the number of "clear rejects" in the file of applications, leaving a still more unwieldy group of "possible admits" from which to select a freshman class. The colleges also experience considerable anguish at the thought of gifted students being discouraged by uninformed college advisors.

Meanwhile, the colleges have been making their task still more difficult by their attempts to adopt objective, non-parochial criteria of admission. It is true that athletic ability, the right prep school tie, or an alumnus father will improve a student's chance to get into many schools. But as applications mount and colleges strive to improve their student bodies, these factors play a decreasing role in admission decisions. By and large, the men who run the admissions offices of the top schools are dedicated to the principles of fairness and equality of opportunity which serve Americans generally as ideal standards. Their quite admirable dedication merely intensifies the problem of selecting an entering class from the mass of applicants.

### ***Aptitude Testing***

At this point, a different and originally separate factor in American education comes into play: the increasing use of aptitude and achievement testing. The Educational Testing Service first administered the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, in 1926, almost forty years ago. In that year, only 8,040 students took the examination. In 1961-62, this figure had increased one hundred-fold to 819,339. Virtually every applicant to a good college or university now takes the SAT, and large numbers take achievement tests in particular subjects as well.

The SAT is an objective examination of the multiple choice type. The faults of such tests are too well-known to require rehashing. What is less well appreciated by laymen (although this is clearly understood by admissions officers) is that strictly speaking, the Educational Testing Service does not even *claim* to be measuring intellectual capacities such as intelligence, creativity, receptivity to new ideas, or the ability to see conceptual relationships. It only claims to measure the probability that a student will do well in college. It is, one might say, an extrinsic, or black box, prediction. Students who do well on the test tend to do well in college. This may be because the test measures capacities which are later drawn upon by college work. Or it may be because the test measures exam-taking ability, which also serves the student in college. In any event, it is a statistical fact that the probability of a good college record is higher for the student with a high SAT score.

The test is far from accurate, however, even in terms of its own

criteria. According to the 1961-62 annual reports of ETS, the divergence of any given score from the "true" score (i.e., an average over a long period of time of a student's scores on similar tests) is on the order of 30 points two-thirds of the time. That is to say, "if a student's 'true' score is 500, the chances are two out of three that the score he will actually make on the SAT will be between 470 and 530." Out of every six students, one will probably score more than 30 points above his "true" score, and another probably more than 30 points below.

If multiple-choice tests are suspect in themselves, and if their accuracy as predictions of college success is far from adequate, why are they used so extensively by admissions officers? There appear to be three reasons:

First, and by far the most important, is the admissions officer's need for some way of comparing the cases in his burgeoning file of "possible admits." Fairness and the bureaucratic strictures of committee work require him to produce reasons for favoring one candidate over another. When the dossiers are mixed bags of strengths and weaknesses, it is in practice impossible to defend one's ordering of five hundred or a thousand cases without reference to some sort of objective criteria. The SAT serves as just such a measure.

Closely related to this is the desire of admissions officers to reduce the percentage of admits who flunk out later on. The SAT claims to predict college success: deans are haunted by the possibility that a good and potentially successful student will be turned down in favor of one who eventually fails to complete the college course. Since deans (and professors) by and large conceive of success in education as a matter of grades, credits, and degrees, such a case appears to them to be an educational failure. A low percentage of drop-outs is considered a sign of a good admissions program.

Finally, as the average SAT scores of incoming freshmen classes rise at the elite schools, ambitious colleges begin to treat the scores as a sign and measure of their own place in the educational system. A rise of 50 points in the freshman average is used by recruiters as an additional inducement for prospective students and their parents. What began as a means of handling a swollen tide of applications becomes in the end a measure of educational status.

Here, as with the pressure of admissions itself, there is feed-back to the secondary school level. Parents quickly become informed (and misinformed) about the importance of "college boards." Pressure is put on high schools to coach the college-bound seniors in the mysteries of multiple-choice tests. Despite ETS's insistence that careful research reveals the futility of such preparations, classes sprout in SAT-taking. Soon, high school *juniors* are submitting to "Preliminary SATs" whose purely tentative results are then used to guide the students in their college choices. As figures pile up, tables are constructed showing the statistical relationship between junior and senior SATs. (ETS report, 1961-62, p. 34-35.) Indeed, ETS tells us that it is "possible to make similar estimates

of senior-year SAT scores from the scores on the School and College Ability Test (SCAT) taken even earlier. There are tables which provide these estimates based on SCAT scores as far back as the eighth grade." (ETS report, 1961-62, p. 35.)

### **Damaging Pressures**

The ever-earlier testing is merely the most striking element in the frenzied business of college preparations. Students are exhorted by parents and teachers to raise their grades. The colleges, which have never based their decisions solely on academic achievement, begin to emphasize "extra-curricular activities," and as the news filters back to the high schools, teen-agers are hastily enrolled in dance classes, music lessons, outing clubs, and intra-mural sports. The colleges counter with a search for signs of individuality and originality; desperately teen-agers are pushed into bee-keeping and piccolo playing. And so it goes, on and on—colleges searching for ways to sort the applicants and predict their college careers, students desperately twisting themselves into what they hope will be appealing shapes, anxious to be singled out from the crowd of fellow students.

What has been the effect of the endless testing and evaluating on our high school boys and girls? First of all, the ever-present imperative to "do well" in an objective and measurable way is intensified, to the detriment of real education, or even of non-"educational" growth experiences. Americans have come to treat education as a process of homogeneous, crisis-free absorption of information and development of skills. The irregular, the irrational, the unconforming, the random, is seen as a *failure* of education. The only difference between the traditional and progressive attitudes is that the first blames these aberrations on the student while the second blames them on the school. That they are undesirable is never questioned.

But as so many perceptive observers of adolescents have pointed out, growth from childhood to maturity is *necessarily* ungainly. It is the trying on of ideals and life styles, the committing of new-found emotional energies. As Erik Erikson has shown us through his study of Luther, the "identity crisis" of late adolescence or early adulthood is positively *creative*, and certainly not an embarrassing misfortune to be excused and quickly suppressed.

Unfortunately, the college race has just this repressive effect on many of the most intelligent and sensitive—hence vulnerable—youngsters. Experiment and commitment require a willingness to accept the possibility of failure. They demand an incautious, even imprudent singleness of purpose. The wise counseling and anxious hectoring of the college-mongers is death to experiment.

In his junior year in high school, John, an A student, becomes fascinated by boats. He spends hours at the docks, quizzing sailors about their tasks, cadging rides on tugboats, dreaming of distant places. For a year he is completely wrapped up in the sea. Then, abruptly, the passion

leaves him and he puts behind him as childish the dream of becoming a sailor. He has tentatively tried on a role, given himself up to it, and found that it does not answer to his needs. The year has been immensely valuable to him as a stage in his growing up. But it has been a disastrous year at school. Absorbed in sea charts and sailing manuals, he has had scant time for history, French, math, and physics. In his record there is no indication of the milestone which this year has marked in his life; only the low grades, dropping his cumulative average below the "top college" level. Discouraged by the unaccountable slump of a promising student, John's college advisor directs him to a solid local state college. The competition is so stiff for admission to the élite schools that there seems no point in his trying to overcome the handicap of that junior year.

John has been hurt by the system, for the education available to him at the top schools really is superior to that offered by the local college. But at least he has had his junior year, and he will be a better man for it. Far worse off are the other young men and women who have been cajoled or harassed away from creative adolescent commitments by their parents and teachers. In the name of a "good education" in the future, these well-meaning adults stifle the good education of the present. The energies which should be used by boys and girls for growth, are instead diverted to useless and deadening "college preparation."

Aware of the tragedies of secondary education, many colleges have begun to make room in their admissions policies for a controlled measure of irrationality. Each year, a school will accept a certain number of applicants who defy all their objective criteria, but simply "smell right." Admirable as such risk-taking is, it has no effect on the high school student, for he cannot be sure that he will be one of the mavericks who is saved by an intuitive dean. If the internal dynamic of his growth carries him outside the limits of secondary-school acceptability, he must be prepared to forfeit the race to college.

The successful college applicant has thus frequently mortgaged himself to the future, sacrificing a genuine education in high school in order to obtain a superior education in college. What does he find when he finally enrolls at the school of his choice? No simple description can be given, any more than for the high school, but again trends are visible which are deeply disturbing. Until a very few years ago, the entering freshman at any of a number of top colleges would have been confronted with a mixed program of broad survey courses designed to make him "liberally" or "generally" educated, more specialized courses from among which he could select a sample, and in his last year or two, a departmental "major" requiring him to concentrate on a single discipline. In addition, he would have the opportunity to do independent research, usually as a means to a degree with honors. The premises of this sort of undergraduate program were basically two: first, that the typical freshman had not yet had a chance to roam at will in the realm of ideas, acquainting himself with the excitements and potentialities of

the intellectual life (I remember my astonishment when, as a freshman, I discovered that there was a field of knowledge—sociology—which I had not even known to *exist!* It was like discovering a new color, or better a whole new sense); and second, that several years should be given over to relatively uncontrolled experimentation before a young man or woman was required to make a decision about a career.

### **Race for Education**

In the past decade, however, both of these premises have been yielding to pressures from below and from above. The General Education movement is under severe attack at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard, the three schools which have done most to foster it. The causes are complex, involving problems of personnel and administration as well as of educational principle. One reason is that good high schools have instituted "advanced placement" college level courses using many of the same books which appear on the General Education reading lists. Consequently, more and more students have had the material by the time they reach college. Now just what it means to have "had" Dostoevsky or Freud or Marx is, of course, problematical. It may mean that the student has read works by the author, brooded over the ideas, and grown through his struggle to understand them. It may also mean that he has been intellectually immunized by being inoculated with small, weakened dosages of the author. At any rate, the well-prepared student can pick the right answer out of five choices an adequate number of times, and so he is assumed to be generally educated.

In response to the improved preparation of the freshman (which manifests itself in better language, math, and English composition training as well as in advanced placement courses), the colleges decide to "enrich" the undergraduate curriculum. The job is turned over to the departments, or—at universities—to the graduate faculties, whose general view of undergraduate education is that it is a watered-down version of graduate education. Everywhere the same solution is hit upon: give the bright, able, well-prepared undergraduates a first-rate training in some graduate department. Administratively, this amounts to listing graduate courses in the undergraduate catalogue and requiring the concentrator to take baby generals and write baby dissertations. At a school like Harvard, for example, a senior honors thesis in history may be a 150-page research monograph, and the honors generals in English demand a professional mastery of large segments of the literature of the last millenium.

At the same time, pressures of military service, post-graduate professional training, and the cancerous growth of specialized knowledge, place a premium on choosing a career early. The sciences have long insisted that they cannot give adequate graduate training to the college graduate who has not already tucked some of the requisite material into his mind, and medical schools of course set "pre-med" requirements. But now the same song is sung by economists (who fancy them-

selves really mathematicians), psychologists, philosophers, and historians. As the undergraduate population swells, the admissions squeeze reappears at the best medical, law, and graduate schools. Once more, the education of the present—for which the student gave up so much in high school—is sacrificed to the demands of the future. Eager to relax and reap the fruits of his race to college, the student must climb onto the treadmill to graduate school.

But here the race for education ends. Upon entering graduate school, the student—now an adult—is told that his education lies *behind* him. From this point on, his intellectual and spiritual maturity is taken for granted. Graduate schools do not educate the whole man; they train the specialist. So it seems that somewhere, somehow, the successful student has lost an education. Always it was before him, over the next exam, beyond the next degree. Now suddenly it is behind him, and that unique moment of potentiality in the growth of the soul is gone.

What has gone wrong? The answer is simple: Each present was sacrificed to the future, until the presents were all past, and the future an empty present. It is a familiar enough story in our society. We call it prudence, or deferral of gratification, depending on our tastes in moral discourse.

#### **Available Alternatives**

What can be done? Alas, the answer is not so simple. It won't help to administer the system with more intelligence, awareness, compassion, and imagination. These qualities are already in surprising abundance among the educators of our country. The solution, if there is one, must cut to the root of the problem. It must reverse the order of priority, and at every stage subordinate the education of the future to that of the present. A good high school experience must count for more than admission to a great college. An exciting college education must in turn take precedence over pre-professional preparation for post-graduate training. How can this be done?

First of all, there is no point in demanding that college admission procedures be made *fairer*. The harm they inflict on high school students does not flow from their imperfections. It flows from their very existence. So long as the education in our colleges varies widely in quality, and admission to college is based on an evaluation of pre-college performance, parents and teachers will push students into a competition for admission. Nor should we issue pious warnings to high school students about the dangers of listening to their elders. They do not yet have the inner resources to withstand the threats and seductions of the adult world. Indeed, their spiritual growth demands identification with precisely those individuals who are encouraging them to compete. The adolescent student is faced with an impossible dilemma. If he accepts the values of his elders, he loses his chance for real growth and instead climbs on the treadmill. But if he shies away from the grade race, where else is he to find the adult figures through identification

with whom he can realize himself? As Paul Goodman has pointed out, the only alternative is to retreat into a sterile, adolescent world of beats or gangs.

The solution to the problem, if it exists, must be institutional. The temptations of the admissions race must be destroyed. So far as I can see, there are two ways in which this might be done, neither of which will meet with instant acclaim. Either the value of admission to one college rather than another must be eliminated; or admission to college must be made an irrational process on which the student can have no influence. The first could be achieved by a nation-wide forced homogenization of institutions of higher learning, the second by assigning high school graduates to colleges at random. Both alternatives have analogues within the educational world. The academic high schools of a large city system like New York are kept approximately equal by budget allotments and the policy of teacher assignment. Most students then go to the school in their district. And many colleges assign their students to dormitories at random, for the very sound reason that competition for rooms would lead to discrimination, jealousy, cliques, and all the unpleasantness associated with fraternities or private clubs. My personal preference is for a process of random admission. It is by far the easier of the two to administer, and could be instituted immediately.

The objections are obvious. They will already have sprung to the mind of every person who reads this essay, particularly if he is a teacher at a good college. But before the proposal is rejected out of hand as absurd and impractical, let me urge one consideration in its favor. If I am right that our present educational system stifles the intellectual growth of millions of young men and women, then surely we should be willing to pay a very great price to set them free. It is absurd to build the schools, stock them and staff them, and then hustle our children through them in a frenzy of college-oriented competition. In education, imprudence is a virtue.

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