

## SELECTING AND ENCOURAGING STUDENTS OF SUPERIOR ABILITY

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It may be said that we have one common interest at this conference, despite our highly specialized fields; we are all in search of brains, of superior ability among our undergraduates, and are at all times anxious to promote zeal for investigation, a deep interest in and craving for original and creative work. I have, therefore, determined as your official host to discuss briefly the one topic that I hope will reach you all.

The college as we see it is divided against itself. There are two worlds—that of the students with its multiple interests and increasing stimulations from society outside the college, and that world of scholarly attainments and intellectual ideals to which we ask students to turn. The college is, as President Meiklejohn has observed, primarily, a place of the mind, not of the body, the feelings, nor even of the will. It is a time for thinking, an opportunity for knowing. Against this intellectual interpretation there are two sets of hostile forces constantly at work, the practical demands of a busy commercial and social life, and within the trivial, sentimental and irrational misunderstandings of its own professed friends.

Students come to college for many reasons, they accumulate "credits" and talk of "cuts". They often ridicule Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi as a grind's paradise, 90% average and a little more, which, to the eager-minded and especially the creative-minded, does not represent real intellectual attainment at all. Even the faculty encourages students to think that "student activities" must of necessity be extracurricula and non-intellectual—foot-ball, fraternities, etc. If education comes only through activity, then our very vocabulary tells us its own story; class-room, even laboratory work, is never referred to as "student activity".

These activities are certainly educative when made part of the scheme of things, but to summarize the advantages of the modern college in terms of a country

club or an athletic club, a place to know men, make friends, improve one's too democratic manners, or even to summarize it in terms of lofty ideals of character and citizenship, is to continue to widen the gap between the world of the students and the world of the intellectual life. There is little doubt that we as instructors are responsible at times for a large part of the failure to get over the idea that the college exists to give a "fulness of life", to promote the intellectual life. We cannot afford to be pedants or give color to the comic papers' characterization of a college professor as a man devoid of human interests and lacking in that very "fulness of life" which we accept as our goal.

We deplore the lack of intellectual interests among undergraduates, but seldom wonder over the commonplaces, trivialities, uninspiring conversations, even cheap gossip we sometimes hear when faculties foregather for lunch or recreation. We can only recall the youthful eagerness and idealism of students we know to wonder why they should accept the spurious coinage of "shop talk" or be inspired by things that we are glad to lay aside as we do our working clothes. Intellectual interests must be vital or we have no right to ask youth to accept the disciplining apprenticeship to achieve them. It is possible that we have asked too much of them.

The fact remains that our generation has been faced with a problem of classifying students from kindergarten through college, for a leadership that our grandfathers did not dream of. We deal in numbers. We have many new types, a greater diversity of interests and abilities than in 1900. At no point in this process is the brilliant child given a real chance, in a scientific sense, to achieve leadership. Our curriculum in school and college is keyed to the mediocre or democratic "average". The gifted student is too frequently either not tried out or is allowed to loaf through his training period and come out without ability to use even his native resources. It is hard to accept the principle growing out of the modern science of individual differences: "Keep each student at his highest level of achievement in order that he may be successful, happy and good."

But we are making mighty strides toward this goal in these later days as false conceptions of democracy become evident in American politics. We have too much government by feeling, too little expertness of leadership, and too little of what Tarde speaks of as "government by thought". It is no accident that Thomas Jefferson, the great exponent of democracy, was the father of the public school system from primary grades through the university. He saw the relation of "genius" and its training by the state to the kind of democracy that Anglo-Saxons would finally accept. In proposing in 1776 this educational system which we now have, he insisted that it was poor social economy to exhaust the resources of the state in educating the mediocre at the expense of the gifted. Genius was too important an asset to democracy to be neglected for the mass. In a letter to J. C. Cabell, Jefferson speaks of having written Adams of his proposal for "culling from every condition of our people the natural aristocracy of talent and virtue and of preparing it by education at the public expense for the care of public interests".

Jefferson did not think with some of us that grouping in schools on the basis of abilities and attainment was undemocratic. He did not make that error in judgment even in the day when few went to colleges, when the college was highly selective, at a time when he could not foresee the hordes of students pouring out of the "grammar schools" (high schools, as we now call them) and demanding of society "What next?". It is apparent that he repudiated the theory of laissez-faire that a good man will rise to the top in the educative process, and if he does not, so much the better for society. He feared the leveling process and recognized that ability does not guarantee attainment or right leadership in either school or society. A fundamental knowledge of human nature led him to anticipate modern psychology in holding that good taste, ideals, right habits of thinking or working with the mind presupposed brains, but also presupposed initiative, prolonged effort, persistence, hierarchies of mental as well as physical habits, and those "moral" traits of industry, integrity, courage, tact, co-operation, etc. If we are to

develop common man to "a position of supreme collective control"—the goal of democracy in the United States, we must guarantee leadership by education in the schools as far as the student can be induced to go up the ladder.

Now granting the problem of the schools and its implications for American democracy, the practical consideration is: "What can we do about it?" Our first great care, of course, is to promote by our own scholarly attainments and enthusiasms a respect for the intellectual life. This is not the relatively simple task of the nineteenth century. "We did not pass our college days," says President Alderman of the University of Virginia, "amid the din of the gasoline engine and the jazz of the phonograph, and the allurements and excitements constantly on tap in movies and popular magazines without and the engrossing interest of athletics within, organized on a scale so grandiose and exciting as to tend to drive other topics from the mind . . . . . The effort to show them the glory of scholarship, the fruitfulness of culture, must be commensurate with the vivid influences surging about them and bearing them into other fields. Such effort is the outstanding task of the American college for the next generation."

The second care lies in the practical recognition of individual differences. If the measurement of promise of intellectual and moral leadership has not been reduced by any method to a reliable basis, we, at least, no longer hold to the theory that, as Professor Seashore facetiously words it, "If the Great Creator failed to make all human beings equal, it is the business of the school to make them equal." Still much of our machinery does suggest our faith in it. It has been pointed out at Columbia University that the best students, if allowed to go at a speed commensurate with their interests and ability, do two or three times as much work in four years as the ordinary undergraduate. Some take both the A. B. and A. M. degrees in that period.

Professor Seashore observes that differences in capacity tend to increase in proportion to the complexity



of the task; for example, there are greater differences in mathematics than in plowing. One hundred college students tend to conform to a normal distribution curve:

"Five students at one end can do more than five times as much as five at the other end."

"The next five at one end can do more than four times as much as the next five at the other end."

"There may be one or two who can do ten times the average output for the class, while one or two are quite certain to fail."

His suggestion is that we section our classes according to freshman entrance mental tests, rank in "prep" school, early class grades, or any other evidence of achievement. Then that we say to the student: "Indications are that you can do A, B, or C work, as the case may be, but such grading is accepted in a tentative way; it now remains for you to show where you belong." Promotion or demotion may follow as a result of his trial. The student is apt to find his true level as fair standards for quantity, quality, content and method of work are set up, a fair basis for praise and blame established, and a better morale because the student will feel more responsibility for himself, will feel his opportunity, his power, the reward of achievement, and the stimulus of competition. This is one device.

Another device is our new American system of working for honors, suggestive, as President Aydelotte says in his recent report to the National Research Council, of the older Oxford system. The Oxford system roughly provides for two groups in its colleges: (1) those who come for "honors" or intellectual achievement; and (2) those who do not, primarily. The B. A. degree is given to both, but, we are told, there is as much difference between the pass B. A. and the first honors B. A. as between our American B. A. and Ph. D. The honors degree may mean two or three times as much work and a better quality of work than the ordinary bachelor's degree. The Oxford honors man is not subject to lecture attendance, he is told upon what fields he will be examined, not what and how much to do, and he is not ex-

amined until the end of the two years of his honors course. On examination, he is warned not to attempt to answer all questions in a second-rate manner, but as many as he can in a first-rate manner. "The honors student," we are told by President Aydelotte, "cannot profitably be taught by the same methods as the ordinary man. He will not need the same careful day to day assignments, the same weekly and monthly tests, or the same requirements for attendance at classes. A part of the value of his work will come from the independence and initiative which are cultivated in the doing of it. He should be given larger tasks and longer time in which to do them. If he has individual instruction it should be in the nature of help in the difficulties which he, the student, has encountered; he should take the responsibility for his success and should be allowed to face squarely the task of working out his own intellectual salvation. Classes and lectures should exist for the benefit of the honor student, not the student for the benefit of the classes. He should enjoy as much freedom as can practicably be allowed in the matter of attendance at lectures and in the methods by which he will work."

A third means to this end is the Selective Admission plans, notably Columbia's experiment with entrance mental tests as supplemental to the older Regents, College Entrance Board, and High School Records. Professor Coss of Columbia stresses our inability to measure adequately for classification mental capacity, until we more adequately define the thing to be measured. As it stands, he believes that mental tests have three times the relative efficiency of high school records in determining promise of success in college. Nowhere are we pinning our faith on I. Q.'s, as they may limit educability or classify too strictly mental calibre, but certainly there are many applicants who should never enter college, and yet the problem is not so much one of elimination of misfits or discovery of "sheer brains" as it is the discovery of the best means of firing our students with enthusiasm for creative scholarship.

We have respect for Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi, at least in the attempt of leaders in those organizations to make them count in the solution of this very problem, but we are not quite so sure of the average student's reaction if we follow the college comic papers. We are familiar with the student fallacy that people who stand high in their classes are "grinds" and do not succeed in life. Students do not take the trouble to make a study of Who's Who and other biographies to find that there is a tremendously high correlation between success in life and Phi Beta Kappa in college. The shortcomings of our national honor society lie in the fact that they recognize attainment too late in the course and too late to increase the number of possible Phi Beta Kappa's. Just to make Phi Beta Kappa or Sigma Xi is not enough to stir the imagination of the freshman. Either these societies (at least Phi Beta Kappa, as I know little of Sigma Xi) must change their base somewhat or new honor societies must come to help select able students at the beginning of their course and stimulate and encourage them throughout.

Three years ago we founded such a society at Rockford known as the Socratic Society, organized to appeal primarily to undergraduate interests. At midyear, students of superior attainment and promise are elected from all four classes, particularly the freshman. Three elections during the four years in college make one a permanent member. The standards of scholarship are as high as Phi Beta Kappa. A formal initiation and ceremonial are held at midyear. The claims of the society are placed before the students by the students themselves each year at a special fall convocation. Rockford, it may be said in passing, also attempts to recognize achievement in the appointment of student assistants in the various departments and in the use of a large student aid fund and in a number of other ways common to all colleges.

This matter of a reward and recognition is perhaps the most fruitful field for study in this connection. In the old days when colleges were small, personal contact

was, and in the few small colleges of today is still the great means of accomplishing many of the objectives I have mentioned, but most institutions are no longer small and the majority of students in them have little chance for personal contact with the able and great scholars of their institutions. The tendency has been too great in recent years for the great men of the staffs to give over their teaching to the teaching apprentices of their departments, especially in the under-classes.

The public hears more of the "student activities" referred to above than of scholarly attainment. For years I have heard people ask why intellectual achievement in the colleges should not receive the same publicity that distinction in athletics does. Of course, athletics are social and recreative, but there is really no answer, except that it does not. But it is possible to make creative or constructive scholarship more competitive, less individual, as is the honors system at Oxford—a matter of real community or college struggle for record. As athletic teams fight for scores, the Oxford honors system has the effect of intercollegiate contest among its twenty-two colleges.

In conclusion, it may be said that a great deal is being done toward the solution of this great problem, that it has been talked about periodically for a great many years, but that the constantly increasing numbers have made the situation more critical than it has ever been. Culture and democracy are not necessarily antagonistic, but they tend to be. Our great institutions of necessity have to lower standards. Formal instruction, systematic work, is good for a large group of our college population, but many bright students have to fight the limitations placed on their imagination, creative powers, and originality by the very organization necessary to many of their fellows. And it is our business to search out these very students of high ability for it is they who will pay society's dividends on our university investments.

Professor George W. Stewart of the University of Iowa, who spent last spring studying this whole question in sixty-seven colleges of the middle west, found a wide-

spread desire to effect something in this field and some pessimism over the possibilities of doing more than we are doing. To give the suggestions that he has to make is perhaps the best way for me to close this survey, for, as he says, "the problem in each college must be approached in the spirit of finding the most effective recommendations and activities for that particular college." He recommends a committee on attainment, or what we might call a committee for the promotion of scholarship and the encouragement of creative, constructive, independent work. The activities, he points out, of such a committee should be:

1. To prepare an inventory of present methods for detecting and encouraging students of superior ability.
2. To prepare annual recommendations to the faculty.
3. To increase the effectiveness of student honor societies; to guide students of high ability in the first two years; to organize a study of the senior students; and to co-operate with outside agencies.