

# COLLEGE AND THE POOR BOY

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ON the revival of letters, learning became the universal favorite, and with reason; because there was not enough of it existing to manage the affairs of a nation to the best advantage, nor to advance its individuals to the happiness of which they were susceptible. . . . All of the efforts of the society therefore were directed to the increase of learning. . . . These circumstances have long since produced an overcharge in the class of competitors for learned occupations and great distress among the supernumerary candidates; and the more, as their habits of life have disqualified them for reëntering the laborious class. The evil cannot be suddenly, nor perhaps ever, entirely cured. — THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1803

## I

DURING the vigorous days of our national expansion, equality of opportunity, the battle cry of American democracy, was close to a reality. There seemed to be room for everybody in our growing civilization; even the extravagant claim that any boy, no matter what his station, could become President appeared justified. But when the last natural barrier was passed, the aspect of our national life changed. 'For a century and a half,' James Truslow Adams points out, 'we had been occupied in conquering and exploring a continent. It had been an adventure of youth. Now it was over. Henceforth the work would be one of consolidation rather than expansion.'

That consolidation has been taking place gradually over several decades, and has brought about a high concentration of population in the cities, a relatively rigid industrial system, and an increasingly differentiated social system. Already we can see that our march of progress moves to a slower beat. Each year the tempo of Ameri-

can life approaches more nearly to that of the older countries of Europe. It is no longer so easy for the ambitious young man to rise to the top as it was for his grandfather. Intense competition confronts and defeats the individual at every turn.

As competition became more severe, a conception arose among the American people that a college education was the weapon with which to hew out certain success, and year after year new hordes of raw youth acted upon the thought. Enrollments soared. Of late, however, the colleges have restricted admission, thus making the acquirement of a higher education increasingly difficult. First, competitive examinations were devised; later, other criteria, among them place of residence and personal character, were adopted by some of the larger, privately endowed institutions. Now there are signs that another barrier may be erected. Last June, Yale announced that it would henceforth admit only as many financially needy students as could be cared for through existing channels of aid. Other col-

leges have since approved this action, and a few have declared that they may follow suit.

Coming at a time when the average family can ill afford to spare money for the higher education of its children, this new movement, which will affect those who seem most to need the advantages of a college training, may strike tellingly at the hopes of many parents. It is pertinent, therefore, to inquire into the circumstances which are forcing the colleges to adopt a more careful method of selecting their poorer students. For a generation or more it has been a part of the democratic creed of many Americans that every mother's son is born with an inalienable right to a Bachelor's degree, regardless of his ability to pay for it — regardless, even, of his capacity to earn it. Is this faith essential to the functioning of a democratic society? Was it ever really justified?

## II

American colleges began to solve the financial problems of needy students as early as 1653, when Harvard gave Zachariah Bridgen a job 'ringing the bell and waytinge' on table. Through the succeeding years, more or less informal and unorganized assistance was rendered. But by the beginning of the present century the group of needy students had grown so large that it demanded official attention. President Lowell, in 1909, pointed out to his alumni that Harvard was to a large extent a poor man's college, that there was a good deal of suffering and want, that many students were insufficiently clothed and not a small number insufficiently fed.

To help these men the colleges built up huge scholarship and loan funds and organized employment bureaus to find work for students. The cost

of maintaining these bureaus was not inconsiderable, often running as high as \$20,000 a year in a single college.

Immediately after the World War, these offices were taxed to the utmost by an unprecedented rush of applicants, most of whom came from families of extremely limited means. By 1927, one out of every three students in our colleges was looking for some kind of work. The colleges encouraged the poor to enroll by pointing out in their catalogues how simple it really was to earn one's way. They published stories, which might have come from the pen of Horatio Alger, of boys and girls who had made good. Here is a typical example: —

One man, in spite of the break in his college work caused by the war, recently earned over \$4000 by working as a tutor, salesman, and paid social worker, and became a leader in the college community as well. He was elected president of his class. He was also a member of seven clubs, played on a varsity team, sang with the Glee Club, and was a member of Student Government.

College employment bureaus, eager to show their efficiency, proudly reported annual gains in placements and earnings, broadcasting their figures in pamphlets and in the public press. More needy men were thus tempted to finance their own education. What boy, imbued with the prevalent belief in the magic power of a college degree, could doubt his ability to earn his way when he read that in 611 colleges 162,000 men made over \$27,000,000 in a single year? And what college, seeing placements and earnings through its employment office jump 20 to 30 per cent annually, could doubt its ability to absorb more impecunious students? The colleges, aglow, like the rest of the country, with the wine of prosperity, did not consider it significant that many students could



not get work even in the best of times.

Then came the depression. The number of needy students increased. Amounts to be earned swelled beyond all former limits. No longer could college employment offices neglect the debit side of the ledger; they were forced to turn their attention to those whom they could not help. And then it was that they suddenly realized how inadequate were the criteria which they had been using to estimate their efficiency. The percentage of applicants placed, once a source of pride, was not a valid index, for what did it matter if a student who had to earn \$300 was given only one job paying \$2.75? True, he was henceforth labeled as a placement, but he still needed \$297.25. They began to wonder how proud they should be of gross reported earnings; these meant little if they represented only a small proportion of the amounts needed.

In the cold atmosphere of adversity, the colleges realized that even in boom years they had failed to solve the problems of hundreds of men who had looked to them for help. They promptly toned down the exuberant statements in their catalogues, omitted the encouraging success stories, and inserted portentous warnings about the difficulty of earning one's way in 'this time of stress.' Most important of all, they began a careful study of the whole problem, approaching it no longer through the glittering portal of glib, care-free, hail-fellow-well-met sentimentality, but through the sober door of reason and reality.

### III

Two convictions underlie the change in attitude which has taken place. The first is a new realization that adequate means do not exist, have not existed,

and probably will not exist, to care for the present proportion of needy students.

In 1927-1928, one out of every three college students was looking for part-time or summer work. There are no figures yet available to show conditions to-day, but, since the depression has added thousands of new recruits to the ranks of the needy, it is probably safe to estimate that the proportion of all college students desiring work has risen from 33 to 50 per cent. In most large, privately endowed colleges for men, where limitation is being seriously considered, at least 45 per cent of the undergraduates want jobs.

How many get them? Again, since no nation-wide statistics are available, we must rely upon random figures from a few representative institutions. Among the Eastern colleges, the percentage of placements ranges from 50 to 75. In one large Middle Western university, 60 per cent of last year's applicants secured jobs. It would not be far wide of the mark to say that the average college employment bureau can seldom accommodate more than 65 out of every 100 students who come seeking and needing outside work. The other 35 must shift for themselves.

But, as we have seen, the percentage of men successfully placed is not in itself an infallible index. The vital question in the minds of most needy students is, 'Can the employment office find *enough* work for me so that I can balance my budget?' The figures just quoted indicate that 35 per cent of these men can obtain no jobs at all. And that is only half of the sad truth. A large proportion of those who do get work do not secure enough to solve their financial problems. This is true not only to-day, when jobs are scarcer than ever before — it was true in 1929 when the colleges were issuing jubilant

statements about the huge sums earned by students.

One Eastern college proved this conclusively last year. The amount which each student needed to earn was carefully computed during a personal interview at the beginning of the term. When these estimates were added together, the total need of all applicants reached the rather staggering figure of \$376,000. This sum loomed even larger when it was compared with actual earnings in past years. In 1930, for example, — a record year, — jobs supplied by this office had yielded only \$154,000. Even then the bureau had been furnishing only enough positions to satisfy about half of the financial requirements of its registrants.

These conditions are not peculiar to a single institution. They are found in almost every college in the land. Their cause is plain: so many needy men have been admitted that adequate means for caring for them simply do not exist. They did not exist in 1929. Nor, as we shall see later, is it likely that they would exist even if economic conditions should improve a hundredfold.

#### IV

The second reason for the change in the attitude of the colleges toward the poor man is an increased conviction in the minds of college officials that a student's efforts at self-support, whether successful or unsuccessful, tend to rob college of much of its value and to exert a harmful influence upon the individual. This conclusion has been drawn largely from evidence supplied to deans and placement officers by students in financial straits.

Consider, for a moment, the lot of a student whom the placement office cannot help. In the face of more or less definite storm warnings run up by the college, a boy who has never been away

from home before decides to enroll, hoping against hope that he can make a go of it. He has \$300 in the bank, earned over a period of years by delivering newspapers, selling magazines, working in a chain grocery store on Saturdays, and by caring for his neighbors' lawns and furnaces. His family, subsisting on a small income, can spare only \$200 toward his first year's expenses. He knows that if he is fortunate enough to secure a cheap room, and if he lives as economically as possible, the term will cost approximately \$1100. Since he has failed to receive a scholarship, he is aware that somehow or other he must obtain \$600 through his own efforts.

As soon as he arrives at the college he applies at the employment bureau, to find that three or four hundred of his classmates are doing likewise. Jobs are limited in number. No work comes his way during the first, the second, or the third week. He has paid one quarter of his tuition and half of his room rent, and his board charges at the college dining hall are mounting rapidly. His \$500 has shrunk to \$300. Another term bill is just around the corner. He must get a job.

So he goes again to the director of employment, who regrets that there is no job available for him. He goes to the dean, who is sorry that no loans can be made until the end of the semester. Filled with worry, probably homesick, struggling to orient himself in a strange academic and social environment, the boy writes a despairing letter to his father. A family council is held, at which it is decided that, although the family income is limited and there are other children who must be helped later, a few extra dollars can be saved by careful economy and sent to the boy.

His courage bolstered by this aid,



he goes out looking for a job. He makes the weary round of restaurants, clothing stores, groceries, drug stores, and bookshops. There is nothing. Swallowing his pride, he writes to friends of the family and to prominent alumni of the college who live in his home town, asking for a loan. Perhaps he secures one; perhaps he does not.

If he is able to hang on in this precarious, nerve-racking fashion until midterm, and if constant worry has not sapped his mental vigor and left him incapable of good academic work, he may secure a scholarship or loan from the college which will see him through the rest of the year. If he cannot outdistance the field and win one of these aids, the whole insidious process must be repeated over and over again until the term completes its dreary cycle. And then three more years, equally bleak and discouraging, lie ahead.

The cumulative effect of these experiences, particularly on immature boys, is often tragic. College days, long anticipated with eagerness, become an endless nightmare. The student is unable to concentrate upon his academic work or to take any pleasure in it. The care-free life of his classmates, by its very contrast, generates a strange bitterness within his heart. There seems to be no one to whom he can really turn for help and counsel. More than one case history in the filing cabinets of college psychiatrists testifies to the vicious effects of financial worry.

But even if the student maintains his sanity and manages, through superhuman efforts and wholesale borrowing, to obtain his degree, he has paid a great price for it. The mental suffering may leave an indelible mark. The sacrifices his family have made may hinder younger brothers and sisters in their efforts to get an education.

The debts which he has accumulated may burden him for years after he graduates, increasing his worry if he fails to secure a permanent position at once, preventing him, perhaps, from taking graduate work, or keeping him from marrying until his loans are repaid. All things considered, it is small wonder that some of our colleges, and even some of our college students, are asking themselves whether the game is worth the candle.

## V

The student who is fortunate enough to secure a job does not experience quite so much agony. He has found a means whereby he can obtain the money he so sorely needs. The gnawing worry over immediate finances is alleviated, although the chance that he may lose his position through circumstances beyond his control and the haunting fear that he may not be so lucky another year prevent him from enjoying a feeling of complete security. Of course, if he only gets a job which solves part of his financial problem, he is a prey to the same anxieties which assail the student who can find nothing at all.

A man whose need is not great and who obtains enough work to satisfy it can live a fairly normal life at college and enjoy most of the benefits which college yields. He seldom spends more than fifteen or twenty hours a week earning part of his living. There is still time for him to do his academic work to his own satisfaction and to that of his instructors. He can take part in extra-curricular activities. He can enjoy the society of his classmates and profit by that attrition of undergraduate mind on undergraduate mind which is an important part of the educational process. His sense of values may be sharpened by coming into



contact with the world through his job. He may even emerge from college better oriented and equipped for entry into the competitive struggle of life.

Only within certain limits, however, can these benefits be derived. As soon as a student begins to spend more than twenty to twenty-five hours a week in outside employment, he has to deny himself many of the advantages which he came to college to enjoy. Consider the plight of the man who must earn the major part of his college expenses, and who is fortunate enough to obtain several jobs which will permit him to do so. Perhaps he finds a rooming-house proprietor who will give him a room on condition that he will care for the furnace, rake and tend the lawn, and do odd chores. Perhaps a restaurant keeper will give him his meals in return for twenty-one hours of work a week as a waiter. Perhaps he secures a position evenings operating a switchboard. And perhaps he gets a job selling refreshments at the stadium during the football season.

His days are bound to be full. He gets up at six in the morning, stokes the fire, does the necessary odd jobs, then goes to the restaurant, where he eats a hurried meal before starting work. After waiting on table from eight until nine, he rushes to the lecture hall to attend classes until noon, when he goes back to the restaurant, bolts another meal, and remains on duty until one-thirty. The afternoon must be devoted to study, since the hour from five-thirty to six-thirty is pledged to the restaurant keeper and the hours from seven until midnight are sacred to the switchboard. When he climbs wearily into bed at twelve-thirty or one in the morning, he knows that he must rise again at six o'clock, ready to repeat the tiring round. On Saturdays, of course, there is no time for

study, since he must be on duty at the stadium to supply the wants of the football spectators.

Obviously his contacts with normal college life are reduced to an absolute minimum. Since he cannot afford to live in a dormitory or to eat in a college dining hall, his circle of friends is narrow. For him there is no time for athletics, or for any of the multitudinous extra-curricular activities which play such a large part in the development of the individual in the college environment. His academic work must be sandwiched in between his working hours; he must do his thinking on the run. He probably does not do justice to himself in his studies, for his mind, fagged with long hours of toil, will not assimilate or retain the information which he tries to cram into it, and his professors' lectures strike upon dulled ears. He may even develop a pernicious habit of asking for special favors from his instructors, justifying neglected work by the excuse that he had no time to prepare his assignments — an excuse which any sympathetic teacher, knowing the struggle the boy is making, would find it hard to refuse. The physical strain of such a routine is so great that it may permanently undermine his health.

These are not isolated and unique examples. Our colleges are full of men who are living just such tense, unstable lives, who are wondering where the next dollar is coming from, who are overworking in a mad effort to earn part or all of their expenses.

Those who admire the spirit of the 'go-getter' may see in the frantic strivings of these students an admirable reflection of the national character. Admirable it often is — even heroic. But deans and college placement officers cannot take a wholly idealistic view of the matter. They have seen at close range the truly vicious effects



often produced upon the individual by excessive financial need. They are convinced that our colleges contain too many men who are paying too great a price for a higher education. And some of them are at last determined that something shall be done about it.

## VI

The problem could be neatly solved if student expenses could be drastically reduced and financial aid greatly increased. But there are obstacles in either path.

The American college is not operated for profit. It has always kept its charges down to the lowest possible level, setting a tuition rate which, together with income from endowments, would meet operating expenses. Money from room rents has been used to offset fixed charges, property depreciation, and maintenance. Meals in dining halls have been served at cost. This leaves no margin of profit and automatically prevents a sweeping reduction in student expenses without seriously jeopardizing the solvency of the college or impairing the scope and efficiency of its work. Few would care to see the integrity of our educational institutions thus sacrificed, no matter how worthy the cause.

There are four ways in which students could be given more financial aid: by increasing the number and size of scholarships and loan funds, by establishing coöperative enterprises, by finding more jobs for needy men, and by creating positions for students within the college. Unfortunately, each of these possibilities is hedged with practical difficulties.

The generosity of friends and alumni has enabled the colleges to build up large scholarship and loan funds which yield millions of dollars annually to deserving and high-ranking students.

Although these funds will undoubtedly grow as time goes on and new donors contribute, their growth will be slow, and, in periods of financial drought, may be halted altogether. Even if additional gifts were received during depressions, they could hardly compensate for the inevitable drop in income from the stocks and bonds in which the scholarship funds are invested. Although there may some day be scholarships for all who need and deserve them, that day is far off.

Meanwhile some assistance might be rendered by establishing coöperative merchandising agencies, rooming houses, and restaurants. In many colleges for women and in a few for men, such plans have already proved successful. But whether it will be wise, from the point of view both of the individual and of the college, to institute coöperative endeavors on a large scale is perhaps questionable. Many colleges have developed theories of education which call for the grouping of a representative cross-section of the undergraduates in a single dormitory. To segregate the needy students in coöperative houses and to feed them in coöperative restaurants would defeat this purpose, and might, in addition, breed a class consciousness which is alien to American ideals. Except for this objection, which, of course, varies in importance according to the educational theories in vogue at different colleges, coöperative enterprises seem to offer at least a partial solution to the financial problems of a limited number of students.

The only remaining expedient is to discover or create additional jobs, either inside the college walls or without. If this could be done on a large enough scale, it would solve the difficulty, but it would not alleviate the burden of overwork which even now sits heavily upon too many students.

On the contrary, it might increase the number of men who are getting little from college because they must spend all their spare time earning a living.

Jobs outside the college are, of necessity, limited in number. Since students must attend classes, they can work only at certain times. This automatically circumscribes the field of possible employment. Part-time work is confined chiefly to waiting on table, chauffeuring, doing chores, supervising playgrounds, reading, translating, ushering, tutoring, operating switchboards, and direct selling. But in these fields the opportunities are finite, and the careful and efficient canvasses which college employment bureaus have made during the past ten years have indicated very clearly where the limits lie. In days of adversity they contract sharply; jobs disappear and unemployed men with dependents are given work which was once allotted to students. In days of prosperity they expand, but only to a certain point, determined by economic laws. Many placement officers are now convinced, on the basis of careful study and experience, that even in prosperous eras the boundaries of opportunity will not be extensive enough to encompass all students who seek to find shelter within them.

One hope, then, remains — the creation of jobs within the college itself. Waiting on table, ushering, taking tickets at games and concerts, tutoring, doing clerical or secretarial work for members of the faculty or for other students, proctoring, janitorial, working on the college grounds — all these offer work to students without seriously interfering with their academic achievement or interrupting their normal college life. Some colleges have lately set aside large sums for the creation of additional jobs. There are

great advantages in this kind of employment. The employer is sympathetic, the work can be properly controlled and allocated, need and earnings can be more nearly equated, work hours more easily adjusted to class schedules, student interests and abilities taken into consideration, and stability assured.

But here again limits are inevitable. Some positions students cannot fill because of inexperience or lack of time. Funds to finance specially created jobs are hard to obtain even when economic conditions are good. It is almost impossible for the average college to supply enough work within its walls to adjust the two-to-one difference in ratio which has long existed between students' needs and their actual earnings.

If, then, the level of financial aid cannot be raised to the level of need, if the burden of worry and overwork which so many students are carrying to-day is to be lightened, the volume of need must be reduced. There is only one way in which this can be done, and that is by limiting the number of needy men admitted to college.

## VII

We may assume, I think, that the colleges will tackle the problem, not blindly, but intelligently. The gates will not be shut arbitrarily in the faces of poor men. The aim of limitation will be simply to reduce their number to the point where systematic methods of aiding them will be more certainly effective than they now are.

In formulating a policy of limitation, many factors will have to be considered. Each institution must determine how many additional jobs it will be possible to find or to create. It must estimate how opportunities will fluctuate as economic conditions change.



It must classify jobs according to the amount of time and energy they require, and see what their effect is on the academic work and on the physical and mental well-being of the students who hold them. Finally, the relationship of the self-supporting men as a group to the intellectual and social life of the college as a whole must be studied to determine what percentage of the entire enrollment should be composed of working students. A placement officer has observed, 'As the percentage of self-supporting students increases, the extra-curricular life of the college declines for lack of man-power, and the social life as well.' It is highly important to discover at what point this decline sets in.

Once decisions on these matters have been reached, it will be relatively simple to determine how many students can be adequately cared for and safely admitted without jeopardizing the general welfare of the college. This figure would then become an important guide in the selective process of admission. By coördinating the work of the admission board, the committee on scholarships and loans, and the employment bureau, it would be possible to scrutinize the financial difficulties of all applicants, and to provide adequately for every man whose abilities really qualify him for the double task of earning his way while he is educating himself.

The benefits of such a plan would be enormous. Students would not be permitted to spend too much time in outside work. There would be much less harrowing worry over money, for there would be enough financial aid and jobs to go round. The tremendous competition which exists to-day would be lightened, and the best men would thus be able to obtain the help which they so richly deserve. A healthier

attitude toward academic work and college life would inevitably follow. Most important of all, with limitation each poor student admitted would become an individual case, and not just a card in a filing cabinet. Aid could be correlated with need, and jobs with abilities and interests — an impossible procedure when the needy group greatly exceeds the total facilities for assistance.

Although no obstacles would be placed in the path of able men, applicants of limited ability and mediocre promise would be denied entrance. The unpromising student would be penalized to make room for the promising one. After all, is it not ridiculous to admit large numbers of undistinguished applicants, thus wasting employment opportunities and financial aids which might be used to better purpose in assisting equally needy students of more certain intellectual capacity? Only a confirmed and sentimental believer in the popular notion of democracy could take issue on this point.

### VIII

If such a plan of limitation is extensively adopted, it may bring about far-reaching changes in the theory and practice of American education. For example, it may widen the gap between private and public institutions of higher learning. The privately endowed colleges may become increasingly less representative of our heterogeneous national population, and may come in time to play the aristocratic rôle in American life which Oxford and Cambridge have so long filled in the life of England.

Those who are disturbed by such a prospect should remember, however, that the poor boy of real ability would still be able to gain entrance under an intelligent system of limitation.

They should remember, too, that many applicants, particularly those who come from families without intellectual background, now enter the liberal arts college hoping thereby to improve their chances of success in business, not realizing that such a college will give them little practical training. A vocational school or a state university would have served their purpose better. To prevent these students from making a heartbreaking struggle against circumstance in order to gain a liberal education which they do not really want is not such a crime as it might appear to be. Already many a state university has yielded to popular pressure and added to its curriculum numerous practical courses whose object is the imparting of various skills. It is possible that these institutions may be brought to embrace this function more whole-heartedly, and that they may come in time to fill a place comparable to that of the great polytechnic schools in France.

Although limitation of needy students is an expedient designed to meet a pressing problem of the moment, it may carry deeper implications. That some colleges have been willing to fly in the face of the most sacred of American doctrines may indicate that they realize at last that equality of opportunity in the popular sense cannot be translated into practical terms of educational policy. As long as Nature is capricious enough to endow one child with uncommon ability while denying the gift to the next, there can be no unrestricted democracy in education. A recognition of this fact will make for a clearer conception of the rôle which the college ought to play in our national life.

And the history of the selective process which has been at work in higher education during the last quarter of a century may well be prophetic of the course which American democracy itself is to follow in the years to come.



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