

# Who Should Go To College?

ELBERT K. FRETWELL, JR.

## 1. Defining Aspects of the Situation

**An analysis of the problems posed by the growing number of pupils who are eligible to attend college and also of certain factors which influence college attendance.**

**W**HO should go to college? In a time of vastly increasing enrollments and rising costs, plus shortages of trained personnel in various professional fields, this question is of increasingly great significance. While it seems likely that the American public would reject any rigid, centrally controlled scheme of determining who should go to college—and possibly where—these times do call for more than a hit-or-miss approach. The problem should not be handled on the same basis used for loading a rush hour subway express at Times Square. Yet there may be more similarity between these two challenges than is readily apparent.

Of great encouragement is the fact that the problem posed here has already been given attention by a variety of professional and lay groups. Continuing discussion, planning and action on a long-term basis are all necessary, though, if the most effective use (however defined) is to be made of college facilities now in existence or soon to be created. Obviously the decision as to who should receive a college education will be of vital concern to many groups and individuals. It may be assumed that college experience continues to assist promising young people to carry roles of leadership—as

well as followership—in business, industry, government, the professions, labor and the armed forces. So all of these groups, and more, have a substantial stake in what the college graduate will look like in the future. They may well ponder the question: Can we have quality and quantity both?

The most fruitful discussion of the who-shall-go? problem might well be based on consideration of certain "facts of life" facing higher education today. One of these is the increasing degree of congestion soon to become apparent on already crowded campuses. Another concerns identification of the current influences affecting college attendance. Finally, the need exists to place responsibility for decisions regarding college-going patterns. Steps must be taken to define the factors which must be considered in making these decisions.

### The Problem of Numbers

In a nutshell, this problem has dual aspects: there are now more people of college age, and an increasing percentage of this age group want to go to college. In 1900, for example, there were less than six million youth in the 18-21 age bracket. In 1955 the number was

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well on its way toward nine million. To complicate things even further, the percentage of the age group wishing to enjoy the various benefits of higher education has climbed from 4% to almost 33% since the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> In other words, where once every twenty-fifth college-age youth actually enrolled, now roughly every third person in this category becomes a college student.

And this is only the beginning of what is being called a tidal wave! Unless the national birth rate suddenly slackens, this seeming wave represents a new high water level which takes on aspects of permanency. The President's Committee on Education Beyond the High School notes—as have many others—that the effects of the post-war birth rate increase will hit the colleges hardest in the next ten or fifteen years. By 1970 it is anticipated that the present enrollments will have doubled—from three million to approximately six million.<sup>2</sup>

This promise of increased numbers has been greeted with a variety of reactions. At one end of the educational spectrum are those endowed institutions dedicated to remaining small and to emphasizing ever higher standards. The great wave of future applications presents opportunity for their admissions officers to raise cut-off points and admit students of even higher qualifications than previously from the greater pool of candidates. At the other extreme certain state and urban universities, community colleges, and others dedicated to serving virtually all

interested youth who are high school graduates see themselves being swamped with students whom they feel an obligation to accept.

Heartening news is evident from even a cursory view of the higher education landscape. Moves are being made toward providing more facilities, but are they enough? Many states in all parts of the nation have conducted surveys, formal or otherwise, on the extent of need for additional higher education facilities and what steps are being taken toward providing these. In New York State, for example, a recent State Education Department study revealed that higher institutions—public and private—propose between now and 1970 to create room for approximately 70,000 more students in four-year degree programs. Even so there will be a shortage of over 39,000 spaces in baccalaureate courses of study, to which is added another shortage of facilities for about 34,000 students in so-called technical-terminal programs of a two-year nature.<sup>3</sup> Other states report comparable situations.

Given the resources to expand, many colleges will increase their enrollments from a few hundred to several thousand each. The problem is complicated, as usual, by the uncertainty of funds for plant, equipment and staff. Even if resources are adequate to provide satisfactory faculty salaries, there remains the gnawing question which must already be keeping administrators awake at night: where to recruit the thousands of needed faculty members? And, if the arduous labors of admissions officers allow time for sleep, the nightmarish query must still be faced: were the *right* students

<sup>1</sup> See table in Educational Policies Commission, *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*. Washington, D. C.: the Commission, NEA, 1957, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, August 11, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> *Statement and Recommendations by the Board of Regents for Meeting the Needs in Higher Education in New York State, Adopted December 21, 1956*. Albany: State Education Department, 1957, p. 9.

admitted for next year's freshman class?

### College Attendance Influences

Havighurst and Rodgers have identified five major factors affecting college attendance: mental ability, social expectation, individual motivation, financial ability, and propinquity to a higher institution.<sup>4</sup>

The son or daughter of white-collar suburban parents would represent, quite frequently, a cluster of many or all of these factors. On the other hand, youth living in an isolated rural area where few parents have been to college might possess high mental ability in some cases, but lack the other factors. The student with a minority group background may also face artificial barriers in gaining admittance or following the course of study he desires.

More than half of the top quarter in ability of young people of high school graduation age typically do *not* attend college.<sup>5</sup> This observation is of great import to all those concerned with trained manpower and womanpower. Financial inability has often been cited as the reason. By entering college a student or his family assumes responsibility for whatever tuition or fees exist at the college attended. In addition the student re-

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Havighurst and Robert R. Rodgers. "The Role of Motivation," in Byron S. Hollinshead, *Who Should Go to College?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Hollinshead, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39. Concerning the top quarter in ability of potential college students, Hollinshead found "that slightly over 40% graduate from high school and go to college, slightly under 40% are high school graduates but do not go to college, and slightly under 20% do not graduate from high school. In other words, if we isolate the top quarter in ability, we find that the colleges are now educating over two-fifths of them." Since he drew these data from a report of the Committee on Human Resources and Advanced Training in 1951, it is hoped that by now this situation has improved somewhat.

moves himself from the possibility of entering the labor market, at least on a full-time basis, sometimes moves away from home if he becomes a residential student, and acquires other expenses ranging from such necessities as books to such pleasant luxuries as an Ivy League wardrobe, depending upon his circumstances.

It becomes apparent, then, that the presence of certain factors *without others* (mental ability or individual motivation may be limited, for example) may account for college attendance not because of strong intellectual interests or professional career motivation, but rather because college is "the thing to do." It has been acutely observed by Robert McEwen that "'going to college' is more important to many Americans than getting a college education."<sup>6</sup>

The question must still be raised, however, as to what the basic purpose is—or should be—in college attendance. Is the bachelor's degree to become a sort of good conduct award for having endured four years, or is it to indicate an individual who has gained certain skills and knowledge, and whose intellect and interests have been stimulated to the point where he continues to propel himself toward that elusive goal of becoming an educated man? This question needs to be answered before we can truly determine who should go to college.

### Future Decisions Regarding College-Going Patterns

There are at least two major criteria which will probably condition future decisions regarding opportunity to attend college in the crowded years ahead. One of these is the extent of the desire of our society to assure each young citi-

<sup>6</sup> *College Admissions*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1957, p. viii.

zen that through education he may become all he is capable of being. As is often pointed out, there is still available through higher education the kind of self fulfillment and upward social mobility once represented by the Westward Movement and the actual physical pioneering of new territory. This criterion is very much concerned with the person as an individual. Through it, however, is the concern for a well-educated citizenry in the fullest sense of that term.

Another significant criterion which will have great influence on the kind, as well as amount, of expanded collegiate programs to be made available is the professional manpower squeeze. It is apparent from such sources as the report of the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training that for some time to come well prepared individuals will be in short supply in such vital areas as the natural sciences and engineering (a shortage of some 30,000 per year), teaching at the pre-college level (an insufficiency of about 60,000 per year), and also in medicine, dentistry, nursing, home economics, and other fields to a lesser extent.<sup>7</sup>

If the American public is genuinely concerned over these factors of individual development and sufficient professional manpower, it seems likely that additional funds now sorely needed by both private and public higher institutions will be forthcoming. There appears to be growing feeling, however, that the public wants to know how its funds are being spent, and demands that each dollar—from tax funds or otherwise—must be called upon to do its utmost. This view of value received is in the best American tradition and suggests strongly

that if a person is to be admitted to a higher institution supported in part, at least, by voluntary donations or not-so-voluntary tax collections, he must be a good investment.

What does this mean in terms of who should go to college? In brief, it suggests that now, more than ever before, the oft-lamented diversity in American higher education can be viewed as a substantial strength. As the Educational Policies Commission has observed, "abilities which warrant college education . . . are not narrowly defined. . . . By providing differentiated opportunities, many colleges are meeting the needs of students who have varied interests." And, as the Commission's report continues, "differences among colleges provide opportunity for higher education for a larger proportion of students and for a wider variety of talents."<sup>8</sup>

Since colleges are fortunately not standardized but rather seek to achieve their own particular goals, the question at hand—who should go to college?—might well be broadened. In Hollinshead's words, the question reads: Who ought to go to what college, if he should go at all?<sup>9</sup> This expanded query, to be dealt with in more detail in the statements which follow, suggests the need for even better communication between secondary and higher education people, that each may do the best job of advising and guiding ambitious youth. It suggests that individual colleges should state more clearly than ever before just what their objectives are, and what particular qualities or aptitudes they believe potential students should have demonstrated before admission. It suggests that while an excessively early frost should not be per-

<sup>7</sup> Dael Wolfe, *America's Resources of Specialized Talent*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.

<sup>8</sup> Educational Policies Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Hollinshead, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

mitted to stunt the "late bloomer," perhaps of even more importance is the constant stimulation of the gifted and the nearly gifted.

Still better guidance in the high school, more stimulation of college attendance by such means as scholarships based on merit together with financial need, loan funds, self-help plans, and other devices, are of greatest importance in seeing that many more able students actually enroll and complete college work. There is gen-

eral agreement that these young people, once identified, are good investments.

The pressing question remains, however, as to who else should go to college, since the desire for an academic degree is obviously not limited to, say, the top 25% in mental ability, however measured. Nor is it probable that the needs for skilled personnel for the professions and the semi-professionals can be met entirely by educating this fraction of the

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## 2. Differentiated Opportunities for the Many

**Reasons why differentiated opportunities must continue to be made available to the many are presented and discussed in this statement.**

**T**HE GREAT debate concerning the extent to which there should be educational opportunity beyond the high school has not been concluded, else you would not be reading this symposium on "Who Should Go to College?" Yet, without referring specifically to the many summaries of lay and professional expressions on this question, it seems to me justifiable to say that the weight of judgment favors provision of educational opportunity beyond the high school now and in the future on at least as free and unrestricted a basis as in the recent past. The major reason for this view appears to be that the fabric of our society and its strength now and in the future depend upon continuation of our attempt to enhance the value and contribution of the individual citizen. Thus, it is vital to provide maximum educational oppor-

tunity to all our citizens, average and below average, as well as those above average.

A related and important reason for providing maximum educational opportunity for all should be noted. While agreeing we must be sure to provide education for our future "leaders," we must admit that despite significant advances in methods of scientific appraisal of human abilities and potential it is impossible for us to ascertain in advance those who are going to be influential people in later life. We cannot even identify with fair precision those who will complete successfully a college program in a multipurpose college.

In this latter connection, I should like to refer readers to a recent analysis of the characteristics of the 1955 graduating class of the University of Kansas

which every pupil throughout a state or the nation in the tenth grade would be taught biology at precisely the same hour and in the same way; or where one professor of history would teach all college students in American History his particular interpretation of the causes of the Civil War. Such a condition would be comparable to that existing in the most centralized systems of education. Local control of the curriculum has been a great safeguard against any one point of view dominating the education of students, and it has provided a highly effective means of stimulating progress by combating uniformity and undesirable standardization. Television, as envisioned by some, could well erode this principle

over the years, an outcome which I personally would view with apprehension.

It will be desirable, in my judgment, as we test the uses to which television may be put, to check persistently against the broader criterion of the kind of curriculum and teaching we wish in our schools and colleges. If some things have to be done for the sake of expediency under the pressure of numbers, let us at least recognize when we compromise with desirable standards of teaching and let us be sure that we are not sold an approach to teaching which will save dollars but will impoverish the educational opportunities of American children and youth.

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population. By 1970, 75% more professional and technical personnel and 50% more white collar workers will be needed, according to Devereux Josephs, chairman of the President's Committee on Education Beyond the High School, quoting from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>10</sup>

It becomes apparent, then, that the scramble by employers for educated talent will become greater, rather than less, in the years ahead. "The intensified competition will extend even farther down the line in the years to come," John W. Gardner notes in his perceptive statement, "The Great Talent Hunt."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Devereux Josephs, "Conceptualize, Publicize, Synthesize." *Phi Delta Kappan*, XXXVIII, No. 5 (February 1957), p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Gardner, "The Great Talent Hunt." *Annual Report, Carnegie Corporation of New York*, 1956, p. 21.

It is also quite probable, as various authorities have suggested, that the diversity of types of post-secondary education will continue to increase as both the number and the heterogeneity of students seeking further learning grow. Community colleges, technical institutes, adult education, short-term and part-time study plans, as well as greater use of educational television, will all be called upon to shoulder a substantial portion of the load.

While it is apparent that colleges and universities will expand within the limits of available funds and staff personnel, it will be a long time, if ever, before there are many vacant spaces in higher institutions. Under these circumstances, it is absolutely essential that the best wisdom and counsel be sought toward the logical and equitable solution to the constant enigma: Who should go to college?

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