

# Can Underachieving College Students Be Helped?

HERBERT L. HELLER \*

**E**ACH year sees the American goal of education for every young man and woman more nearly approach realization. Not only is a larger percentage of American youth completing a high school education, but more and more are finding their way into colleges and universities. Many educators see our country on the verge of providing college education to all who desire it and can achieve it. However, mass education has both blessings and problems; and among the latter, looming larger and larger as a problem, is the retention of young people in college.

Many college students fall victim to inadequate preparation in earlier schooling, the policy of "weeding out" by college teachers, the effects of cultural deprivation, unfortunate parental influences, personal inadequacies such as lack of goals, pursuit of inappropriate educational programs, lack of effective study habits, psychological problems, and general failure to achieve their academic potential.

In addition to these factors, the increasing complexity of knowledge and the vast expansion of enrollment in higher education serve to create a fiercely competitive academic environment on American campuses. Thus, any defect in the basic academic preparation of a college student almost inevitably emerges in some form of severe disruption or retardation of his academic success, and not infrequently has an effect on his mental and emotional stability.

The academically dismissed college student has usually been treated by one of two courses of action. In many schools, courses in "How To Study," "Orientation to College," or "Remedial Reading and Writing" have been created for these students. Conventional courses of this kind work reasonably well if the student's problems are only those of moderately limited skills. If the problems have proved to be deeper, the procedure is to remove the student from school with the opportunity to "try" again being offered after a period of time and, if given another chance, it is generally under difficult circumstances with attendant stigmas or penalties or both. Although removing failing students from the "educational society" may benefit the school, it is likely to result in very little personal reform or help to the student. Thus both ineffective remedial courses and the practice of removing students from school without further help contribute to a loss of potentially effective brainpower in our country.

## Getting at Causes

In recent studies of college dropouts, students have generally been classified into groups according to the cause of their departure from the academic scene. That is,

\* *Herbert L. Heller, Associate Professor of Education, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio (formerly Assistant Director, Educational Development Center)*

there are those who leave school to go to work, to get married, those who flunk out, or those who enter military service. The Educational Development Center at Berea, Ohio, is concerned with an even narrower segment of college dropouts—those students who reveal ability to succeed in college but who have failed to do so and have been academically dismissed. These students are clearly academic underachievers. To help college underachievers, the Center offers a diagnostic and remedial program sufficiently sophisticated to cope with many of the deep dysfunctions which underlie their underachievement.

The Center was started in March of 1964 by Fred E. Harris and Robert W. Pitcher, at that time respectively the academic dean and the dean of students of Baldwin-Wallace College and who have since become vice-presidents of that institution. The Center is organized on a nonprofit basis with a Board of Directors and with Dr. Pitcher serving as director of the Center in addition to his college duties.

The program is operated on a ten-week quarter basis. Each quarter from twenty-five to thirty students are enrolled with approximately one hundred and twenty students completing the program annually. A fourteen room house on Adelbert Street in Berea has provided facilities for classrooms, offices, language laboratory, student lounge, and study rooms. In the latter part of 1968 the Center will move to larger quarters in a remodeled medical center building near downtown Berea. This will permit the enrollment of a larger group of students each quarter.

In the fall of 1967 the staff of the Center consisted of five full-time members, including an assistant director, as well as nine part-time staff members.

Since its opening, over three hundred students from over one hundred and forty colleges have completed the program of the Center and returned to college. Of these more than 80 percent have performed successfully above the minimum required grade levels of the schools to which they returned. Educational Development Center graduates have returned to college at The University of Louis-

ville, Syracuse University, Miami University, Baldwin-Wallace College, The Ohio State University, Kent State University, Bowling Green State University, Dickinson College, University of Pittsburgh, and others. Quite a few students have completed two-year degrees at junior colleges. Many students are reinstated in the schools in which they were previously enrolled but other students have chosen to transfer to other colleges.

Of the approximately three hundred students completing the Center's program only nine have been ineligible to return to school. Seven were dismissed from the program, one student dropped because of poor health, and one was a graduate student.

Grade results from students completing the program the first two years have been tabulated. From the first year of college after leaving the Educational Development Center, the students' grade point average was 2.32, and from the second year an average of 2.40. Eighty point five (80.5%) percent had a grade average of C or better. Unofficial tabulations of recent graduates indicate this high percentage of success is continuing.

## A Positive Program

The program of the Center has four major aspects: first, educational diagnosis and testing; second, remedial educational experiences; third, college placement, vocational and psychological counseling; and fourth, the accumulation of data on the causes of underachievement at the college level for purposes of research study.

In general, research studies regarding underachievers at college level have been relatively limited in number during the past quarter century, with the larger number being made during the past decade. Two books stand out in the reporting of studies of this kind: Raph, Goldberg, and Passow's *Bright Underachievers*, Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1966; and Pervin, Reik, and Dalyrimple's *The College Dropout and the Utilization of Talent*, Princeton University Press, Princeton University, 1966. Pamphlets published by the United States Office of Education generally have

dealt with the broader concept of college dropouts rather than just the underachievers.

A successful curriculum at the Center requires the best possible insight into the causes of underachievement. For this reason careful records are kept on each student. These records include data from the initial testing as well as the retesting at the end of each ten-week session. In addition, transcripts of high school grades as well as college transcripts from schools in which the students have been enrolled both before and after their study at the Center are filed. These records have been placed on cards for computer analysis.

Not only students who have been academically dismissed from college seek the assistance of the Center but also students with a variety of other problems. Many are merely achieving a low grade point average and wish to help themselves do better; some students are exceptionally uncertain of their academic abilities; some have parents who are desperately striving for their sons and daughters to follow in their "academic shoes" at their alma mater; other students have parents who are demanding too much of them; some have oversolicitous parents whose maternal and paternal efforts have stifled the initiative and maturity of the son or daughter.

In order to ensure the admission of those students who are academically able, those students who need psychological counseling, those who need strengthening of their basic language arts skills and competencies, those who need further experience in critical thinking, and those who need to learn to meet the deadlines of classroom routine and assignments, a three-day program of tests is administered to those students making application to the Center. The results of these tests are carefully diagnosed and imparted to the students and their parents in an interview. If it appears the program would benefit the student and he indicates a desire for it, he is admitted and an individual schedule of educational experiences is developed for him. Since their individual academic needs vary, few students complete the same class schedule. The diagnostic testing sometimes reveals that a student does not need the remedial

program of the Center but shows that it would be more advisable for him to pursue a terminal vocational program in a junior college or vocational school. In other cases the results reveal need for extensive psychological counseling rather than continuation of schooling; and in other instances the results indicate that a student should not continue study toward a bachelor's degree but should turn to the field of business.

During three sessions, Negro students, from disadvantaged areas of Cleveland, who had just graduated from high school were included in the program on an experimental basis. These students were not underachievers but were culturally deprived. They, too, clearly benefited from the program of the Center.

## Work and Study

The educational program of each student is intensive and generally requires his participation in work and study for eight or more hours a day. Group sessions are held daily, five days a week for each ten-week session. Periodic evaluations of the progress of each student are made by each staff member with whom a student works. This information is provided the student's advisor who then meets with the student to discuss it. Any tardiness or failure to meet assignments of any course is also reported to the advisor and all students are continuously faced with their academic responsibilities or any deviation from them.

Special emphasis is placed in the educational program on the expansion and development of the students' language function in all of its forms. A language laboratory is used to provide an opportunity for the students to practice oral expression, to listen to lectures on tapes, and to learn to make notes and outline subject matter effectively. When needed, drill in spelling is provided and crossword puzzles are assigned for vocabulary building.

Writing is heavily stressed, with assignments every day, and extensive remedial reading groups are conducted daily. When needed, group and individual therapy ses-

sions are conducted by a psychologist. The college experience is a discussion of the research findings on college students, faculty, curriculum, rules and regulations, and college government. Critical thinking is developed through oral and written analysis and interpretation of selected articles, after the nature of critical thinking is carefully studied. Thus, a prescribed sequence of educational experiences provides students with opportunities to improve their previously identified, fundamental academic weaknesses.

Two assumptions underlie the program of the Educational Development Center. First, that many academically dismissed college students are intellectually able and merit a second or even a third chance to continue their college studies, that is, assuming they are willing to complete a remedial program such as that of the Center. Second, that basic to a successful remedial program are self-motivation, self-discipline, and self-study.

The entire program of the Center is geared to these assumptions. Students are not helped as much as encouraged and given opportunity to help themselves. Their admission to the program is based on a sincere self-motivation to study and return to college.

The program of the Center is also devised to place the responsibility for study on the student—not the teacher. The supervision of the advisors and the system of evaluation of progress are so conducted that the students are challenged to discipline themselves to meet assignments and deadlines. Thus, character traits such as self-initiative, self-confidence, and intellectual honesty are fostered. This basic philosophy has successfully improved the academic performance of many students and has made it possible for them to continue their higher education.

The brainpower of underachieving college students can be salvaged to benefit our nation and to lead many young men and women to more productive lives. □

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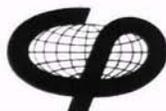
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