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Higher Education

The recent first interim report of the President's Committee on Education beyond the High School reminds us once again that the colleges, universities, and training institutions in the U.S. will soon have to face the problem of how to cope with the vastly increased numbers of people who will be seeking further education or training. A series of five regional conferences will be organized in 1957 to bring together groups to discuss the relations of post-high school educational policies and the national welfare, to determine what the regional problems are and what should be done in the individual states, to propose recommendations for action and for determining what the policy of the Federal Government should be in relation to education beyond the high school.

The committee estimates that the number of students in our colleges and universities will double or possibly triple by 1970 and that a quarter of a million additional college teachers will be required. This estimate is based on two factors: the prediction that, barring catastrophe, the number of high-school graduates will nearly double by 1970; and the belief that the base of American education should be broadened. Thus the report states that "the patterns already emerging in our society will necessitate that a much higher percentage of this vastly increased population receive education and training after high school" and that "larger proportions of the much larger number of young people will demand post-high school education and training. . . ."

We are not convinced, however, that the base of college education should be broadened. It seems to us that the committee implicitly proposes to extend the unselective policies of the American high school into institutions of higher learning. Of course, not every student who belongs in college now attends college, but then not every student now attending college belongs there. Before embarking on plans for headlong expansion of our institutions of higher learning, we might well consider the following questions: Who should be highly educated? Is higher education a privilege or a right? Should institutions of higher education attempt to take all comers regardless of qualification?

The interim report of the President's Committee on Education makes the flat statement that "This country will never tolerate the nurturing of an intellectual elite." It is obvious enough that this country tolerates the nurturing of the elites of stage and screen and sport. Why not of the intellect? But this is more a question of quality than a question of status. The population bulge offers the colleges and universities a chance to be more highly selective than ever before, a chance to turn away from their doors the dull, the indolent, and the indifferent, to make higher education a privilege for those qualified for intellectual accomplishments rather than a right for nearly all who are capable of finishing high school.

If the colleges and universities should seize these opportunities to improve the quality of their student bodies, the level of education attained in all could approach that now attained only in the best and the best could improve beyond their present level. We might even, in Woodrow Wilson's metaphor, see a reversal of the tendency of the sideshows to steal the interest that properly belongs to the main tent in the American educational circus.—G. DuS.