Letters

Disadvantaged Students

In his thoughtful and provocative article "Predicting college success of the educationally disadvantaged" (19 Feb., p. 640), Stanley at least twice expresses his concern about the poor grades earned by such students at selective colleges, suggesting that they might be better off in "easier" colleges where they could earn better grades. Is this not a discriminatory argument, pointed at those for whom low grades were predicted (the "educationally disadvantaged")? Or did Stanley mean to say that all students who earn low grades, including those for whom high grades were predicted, should leave the selective colleges?

I am similarly concerned about the statement: ". . . though such students may pass most of their courses with C's and D's, one wonders what they will be learning, relative to what they might learn in another college where their relative level of ability is average or better." As I understand it, a grade of C represents average college work, and 30 to 60 percent of the students in a course may earn this grade. To get C's in a "hard" school is to have learned a great deal—or are grades, which are defended by Stanley in the article, suddenly open to question? Is it not possible that one learns more (and probably gets better job offers) with C's from a difficult Prestige University than with B's and A's from an easy Podunk?

MARION P. STEININGER
Department of Psychology,
Rutgers University,
Camden, New Jersey 08102

I would like to comment on Stanley's statement: "We need massive federal and local aid to put resources such as scholarships, loans, and counselors where they are most likely to yield the greatest educational increments." The author implies that these "educational increments" are possible for young adults. I strongly question this assumption on theoretical grounds and on the basis of experience in teaching "disadvantaged" students at a "less selective state university." If the desire to make genuinely educational experiences available to the disadvantaged were sincere (and not an expedient for keeping young people off the labor market or off the streets), we would apply resources and effort to the preschool and elementary programs for the disadvantaged. It is sheer nonsense to attempt to implement "remediation and tutoring, reduced course loads, extended probation, counseling, and so on" at the college level, when far better results could be assured by strengthening education for very young children. The human costs of our present efforts are immense for the highly motivated, hardworking, extensively tutored disadvantaged students who fail, or who succeed only because well-meaning educators invent criteria like "persistence to graduation."

JUDITH K. BROWN
Oakland University,
Rochester, Michigan 48063

I was concerned with students who are not normally admissible to a given selective institution. With considerable facilitation, some of these students may persist to graduation, but often with cumulative grade-point averages at or near the bottom of their graduating class. It seems reasonable to compare what they know at graduation with what the least promising students who were regularly admitted know at graduation. General and special-field achievement tests seem the best way to study the question. The prestige of receiving a degree from a selective college will probably wear off quickly if the recipient does not have the knowledge that typifies a sizable percentage of the graduates of that institution.

As for the question with which Steininger concludes the letter, I refer her to the research by Astin, Davis, Werts, and others on the academic "frog-pond" problem. Despite the elitism that makes many persons scorn the "Podunks," it is not at all clear that most students are better served by prestige colleges than by less demanding ones.

I sympathize with Brown's frustration. Every open-door college has a considerable number of students who, in terms of present 4-year curricula, are not "college material," although they may benefit greatly from some education and training, there or elsewhere. Not all of these are children of the poor or of minority groups, nor do all of them score low on standardized aptitude tests. I do not believe that colleges should make herculean efforts to give them degrees. Unless a student is at least minimally qualified for a curriculum in his area of interest in a given college, he should not be admitted to it but, instead, should attend a college for whose curriculum he is at least minimally qualified.

On the other hand, students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds should, if admitted, be given special facilitation to enhance their chances of success. Otherwise, many of them will fail needlessly. Our country cannot afford to write off such persons as hopeless, in favor of concentrating on preschoolers from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is no either-or proposition. Our society must do what it can educationally for the disadvantaged who are in their teens or older, while stepping up Head Start, Bereiter, Weikart, and other programs for the younger ones. This is a special concern of mine (*1*).

JULIAN C. STANLEY
Department of Psychology,
Johns Hopkins University,
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

Reference

1. J. C. Stanley, Ed., *Preschool Programs for the Disadvantaged* (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, in press).

National Decisions

In his review of my book *The Decision to Go to the Moon* (23 July, p. 317), Blankenship reports that I find the Apollo decision "a good one" and "evidence of a political system operating at its best." I do no such thing. I do suggest (p. 171) that "the decision to go to the moon was a representative American action," and was the product of a process "typical of the way many major national decisions are reached." To characterize something as representative and typical is certainly not automatically to designate it as good. The closest I come to passing a value judgment on the decision is to comment that it derived from the same set of