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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE 6-1858.

The Freshman Class

Newspapers over the country are reporting record college enrollments and the largest freshman classes ever. The increase is largely attributable to the jump in number of births that occurred in 1947; but there is also a continuing tendency for a larger percentage of young people to enter college. Moreover, many college presidents are claiming that their freshmen are smarter than those of earlier years. The facts seem to justify these claims, not only in those colleges that have become more selective but for the nation as a whole.

The best basis for predicting what a person will do in the future is knowledge of what he has done under similar circumstances in the past. It is therefore reasonable to find that school grades and tests of academic aptitude or intelligence constitute the best predictors of college grades. Data recently published by Project Talent (200 South Craig Street, Pittsburgh) and similar data published in 1954 by the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training lead to curves showing the relationship between the intelligence test scores of high school graduates and the probability of their entering college. Comparison of the two curves shows that students from the bottom third of their high school classes are just about as likely to get to college now as they were a dozen years ago; those from the middle of the class are a little more likely now than then to enter college; those from the top third are substantially more likely now to enter college. So far, the rise in numbers has been accompanied by a rise in average quality.

It is reassuring to know that quality is not being watered down and that fewer of the highly talented are having their education cut off prematurely. But the measures of general academic ability and aptitude that justify these reassuring statements leave much to be desired in the help they can give in the identification, encouragement, and utilization of all of the diverse talents in the student population. The star in mathematics may not do equally well in other studies. The most creative writer may not shine so brightly in mathematics or physics. The correlations are positive, but a considerable number of students who are not in the top 10 or 20 or 30 percent on an overall basis may have very high potential in music or mathematics or something else.

Moreover, as both everyday observation and more precise psychological studies demonstrate, college grades and the measures that best predict them are relatively poor predictors of other kinds of achievement and of later success in most professional fields. Stories of the class dunce who turns out to be the most successful alumnus are at best atypical, but the correlations between intelligence or class standing and later success in science, medicine, law, military life, or any other profession are usually discouragingly close to zero. Completely accurate predictions could never be expected; other variables are important in professional success, and much happens after the school years are over. Yet it is nevertheless true that good predictors of professional accomplishment are stubbornly elusive.

Here, then, is a nice problem for anyone interested in the development and utilization of all the diverse forms of human talent. Research on this complex problem goes on, and more should be encouraged. It is useful to know how to select students who can earn good grades. It would be more useful to know better how to select those who will be real achievers in a variety of fields.

—DAEL WOLFLE