Letters

Random Admissions to College

However evenhanded the arguments, the editorial "Chance, or human judgment?" (27 Feb., p. 1201) failed to relate random selection to the larger issue of open admissions to higher education. In a single institution, open admissions implies the selection of new students without regard to their intellective, nonintellective, and demographic characteristics. The only constraints to such admissions would be physical facilities (and teaching faculty) and the possession of a high school diploma or its equivalent. Randomized selection is a procedure for operationalizing open admissions.

Apparently, open admissions is seen by its advocates as one way of opening up higher education (and its concomitant benefits) to the disadvantaged, particularly minority groups. The proximate goal would be the proportional representation of the disadvantaged in institutions of higher learning. Obviously, the ultimate goal would be proportional representation in the professions, in managerial positions, and in the "good life"—all through equal educational opportunity. It is nearly impossible to quarrel with these goals. However, one might hope for a considered analysis of the possible effects of open admissions via random selection.

The problem of attrition or "dropouts" is critical. Academic failure has remained one persistent outcome of education in public universities, and an outcome that has been predictably predictable from test scores. As long as measures of academic ability (test scores) remain related to performance and hence retention, the use of random admissions to equalize opportunities for admission will not simultaneously equalize opportunities for graduation and entry into the "good life." Indeed, to equalize opportunities for graduation, any scheme of open admissions (except stratified random sampling with larger proportions of applicants selected from minority groups and those with lower ability levels) requires the kind of massive intervention described by Humphreys (Letters, 10 Oct. 1969). We have not yet learned how to produce equal success, because we have no clear description of instructional systems or how student characteristics relate to educational outcomes within the systems. We clearly need to focus research efforts on academic intervention systems designed to interfere with the consistently replicable correlations between academic aptitude (and past achievements) and future academic achievement.

The effect of random selection on the distribution of socioeconomic status (SES) among those admitted will depend upon the distribution of SES in the applicant pool. Institutions traditionally practicing selective admissions may have developed a highly selective applicant pool. Consequently, manipulation of selectivity may have little immediate effect upon the SES distribution of the class admitted. Where the applicant pool is highly self-selective, recruiting efforts need to precede the adoption of randomized admissions.

Should random selection appear to be able to serve an institution's need to equalize opportunity, then financial aid funds must be adequate. Otherwise, the net effect of random selection may be to increase the proportion of relatively economically well-off but academically mediocre students who are admitted, without increasing the proportion of disadvantaged students.

Random admissions appears to represent a limited open admissions system, but one with a serious defect. Highly able applicants are raffled out. Nevertheless, pressures for open admissions will not diminish. Until they become irresistible, strategies other than random admissions may be more palatable, such as special programs at the college level for the disadvantaged. Presently there are over 700 students enrolled in the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP) at the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois. Special early course work, revised regular courses, somewhat reduced course loads, increased advisory and tutorial assistance, and financial aid are all part of the SEOP. Large programs such as this may teach us which kinds and what amounts of intervention are needed and how much it will cost to produce success in regular degree programs.

Without a consideration of all its ramifications, randomized admissions appears to be a somewhat premature compromise between open and selective admissions.

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Vasectomy: Research Proposal

The letters by Nag and Shokeir (3 Apr.) agree with my belief that the combination of a vasectomy and preservation of semen presents the surest and easiest method of contraception without any of the problems caused by the side effects of hormonal substances, not to mention the numerous drawbacks of other techniques. I suggest that (as a free public service) any couple not desiring children at the moment be offered the opportunity of depositing the man's sperm in a sperm bank (its eventual use being limited to him alone), to be followed by his having a vasectomy.

There is another area of research which deserves full investigation and top priority; that is, to determine the length of time during which viable sperm continue to be produced after vasectomy and satisfactory techniques for their retrieval. If any man can continue to be his own sperm bank for a reasonable period of time, many difficulties associated with sperm preservation would be obviated. As a precaution, sperm should, of course, be preserved in advance of the vasectomy in the event a man's fertile period following the operation is relatively brief.

In either case when the time came that *both* partners wanted a child, insemination of the woman would be a simple matter, and it is obvious that the free consent of both would be necessary. The relaxation of abortion laws frees women from having to bear unwanted children; this system would free them from the pill or other methods, and from what is in practice usually their responsibility. It would also pro-

tect unwilling fathers, whose situation has been generally disregarded, and so prevent the birth of any child who is not really wanted by both parents at the time he is born. Such a system on a national scale would introduce no class or ethnic discrimination. The problems involved are not technical, but educational, administrative, and political. My conjecture is that the young generation wou!d accept this solution once they understood that vasectomy does not interfere with normal intercourse.

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Shortage of Caviar

Before we condemn the polluted Caspian Sea for the lack of caviar (Editorial, 10 Apr., p. 199), let us take a lesson from our Columbia River or British Columbia's Fraser River. Both formerly bore good runs of the white and the green sturgeon. Indeed, in 1897, the press described a sturgeon having been landed at Mission which weighed 1800 pounds. There were no oil spills, no industrial waste on the Fraser then. Nor were these hateful things on the Columbia. A sturgeon has been described as a "very slow growing fish" (*1*) and these are unusually vulnerable to overfishing. Perhaps the heady price of caviar has had as much to do with the disappearing Caspian sturgeon as have man's wastes.

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Reference

1. W. A. Clemens and G. V. Wilby, "Fishes of the Pacific Coast of Canada," Bull. 68 (Fisheries Research Board of Canada, Ottawa, 1946).

Which Products Contain Arsenic?

In "Arsenic in detergents: Possible danger and pollution hazard" (17 Apr., p. 389) Angino *et al.* call attention to the problem posed by the possible contamination of water supplies from arsenic contained in detergent products. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that there is considerable variation from one product to the next. Enzyme presoak F, for example, contains only 7 parts per million arsenic compared to 59 parts per