
IS COLLEGE WORTH WHILE?

BY ROBERT E. ROGERS



THIS FALL is going to see the crucial test of the American college. Registration has stood up amazingly well, considering the hard times of the past three years. The college authorities have very excusably considered the continued normal registration as proof that the college has come to be considered a necessity in our educational life. But there is reason to believe that some of this registration is an argument against, rather than for, the college as indispensable. It is obvious that a good many young men and women, who in good times would have gone into business, have chosen instead to attend college, simply because there is nothing else to do.

This is true particularly in the states that have tax-supported universities, since the cost of a college education at a state university is comparatively low. In the expensive institutions of the East — and they are growing more expensive every year — the authorities have more reason to congratulate themselves that they are meeting a genuine demand. For such schools the test comes this September. Times are no less hard, there is little more money in circulation, and family reserves must be pretty well exhausted. To send a girl or boy to college or to a school of collegiate grade this year will involve desperate sacrifices for many people. If they still insist on making such sacrifices, it will mean that the college idea has taken

such firm root in the popular imagination that it cannot be eradicated.

The question is whether it is good for the American people to be so completely sold on this idea that nearly every boy and girl thinks of a college education as his by right. In the twenty-five years and more since I entered college, the proportion of young people of very moderate means and very moderate abilities who take college for granted has increased enormously. All sorts of institutions have sprung up, purporting to offer college education and grant degrees, often with no adequate entrance requirements and as often with low standards of attainment. The college degree, A.B. or B.S., means much less to-day, both financially and socially, than it did a quarter of a century ago. It has been abominably cheapened by institutions that sacrifice everything to mere size, to swollen numbers and a large income from tuition.

Twenty-five years ago a college degree undoubtedly gave a young man or woman a decided advantage in the race of life over those who had won merely a high school diploma. This, too, in spite of the fact that the college man in business was still looked upon with skepticism and suspicion by self-made business men of the old school. Slowly even these came to realize that the college degree did mean something that was of value in business and practical affairs.

But curiously enough, that suspicion has almost completely died out just at the time when the degree is no longer a guarantee that its owner is good material, in the first place, carefully winnowed out and selected, or has been, in the second place, adequately trained and genuinely educated. It is not too much to say that to-day a college degree means just about what a high school degree meant forty years ago — and not a bit more.

To-day the ambitious and promising young man or woman takes it for granted that he must go on to professional school, to specialize intensively in the law, medicine, engineering, or even business, if he is to have a preferred place in the competition. Now just here is where the rub comes. It cannot be denied that many thousands of unpromising candidates are able to complete, fairly satisfactorily, the pretty elementary requirements of the general run of our American colleges. But the good professional school is something else again. And most of our professional schools are kept at a pretty high standard of achievement.

There are professional schools whose standards are low. Consider the part-time or evening law school, for instance, which is generally held to be a blight on the legal profession, because it often accepts students whose previous education has been thoroughly inadequate. It turns out hundreds of graduates who are never able to pass the bar examinations, without which they cannot practice.

There, I take it, is the situation. If you are of ordinary ability and merely go through college, your A.B. or B.S. degree is not going to do very much more for you than the high school diploma. Professional school lies ahead. If you have not the brains, the patience and energy, or the money, to go to professional school, your college education is not going to be much of an asset, so far as practical results are concerned.

The trouble, of course, is with the universal craze for a "white-collar" job. At a recent conference on vocational guidance held at Harvard, reports of surveys made in California revealed that "student's choices of preferred occupations showed a wide disparity between the percentage of population actually employed in professions and the percentage of students anxious to work in professional fields, as compared with industrial and agricultural occupations." A few years ago a questionnaire widely circulated among high school boys in the Middle West showed that some 25 per cent of them hoped to go to engineering school and enter engineering work, whereas the great engineering associations have estimated that the profession can assimilate every year not more than two or three per cent of the candidates.

Medicine has saved itself by rigidly restricting entrance to medical schools and boosting the requirements for graduation. But there is literally no limit to the number of men who receive diplomas in the law and subsequently are admitted to the bar, and so long as the alliance between the law and politics is so close there will be no limit. The more lawyers, the better for the politicians. It is becoming plain that all engineering schools ought to be graduate schools. The same holds true of the so-called schools of business administration, many of which are probably not much more advanced than the old-fashioned business college.

CONSIDER YOUR CHILD'S ABILITY

THIS is the problem the average parent of average income must face: Is it going to be worth while to put your nose to the grindstone, make the sacrifice, scrimp, and save the money to send Johnny or Jennie to college, just because other boys and girls are going, and the American people have been sold on the proposition that it is the thing to do? Father and mother ought to consider some things very seriously. In the first place has the child the brains? Not general intelligence, but the kind of brains that differentiates college material from the rest of the crowd. Has he done really well with his high school studies, or has he just slipped by, putting most of his time and enthusiasm on athletics and social affairs? In spite of all the loose talk about examinations and grades, they are the only standard of measurement we have. The high school record should be the primary and the chief test.

Has the child any genuine intellectual curiosity, any real ability to use his mind? Boys that like to tinker with radio sets and electrical apparatus are often considered as predestined material for an engineering school. Often they prove to have no mathematical interest or ability, and so their time and money are wasted. They are tinkerers. They will make good automobile repair men, perhaps, but not engineers. Another boy might make an excellent chain-store manager or salesman, who would be lost in the problems of accounting and scientific business organization. Nor is it necessary to believe that the salesman or the store manager needs

the higher education — say, a school of “business engineering” — to fit him for his job. Millions of dollars are being wasted by the American people on academic training for the kind of jobs that can be taught best by the boss and learned best in the field.

The theoretical answer to all this is that the college does not teach you to earn a living, it teaches you how to live. That is not how the American people regard college. They regard it almost purely as an economic asset, a means to earn more money and to advance more quickly, to have an easier time of it than Dad and Mother had. If it is a social asset, too, all the better, provided it means meeting, not cultivated people but well-to-do people — which is not always the same thing.

“ADVANTAGES” OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION

I HAVE heretofore taken the American popular opinion at its face value. I have been saying that college will not, on the average, do very much for you in the way of a superior job, high wages, or rapid advancement. The combination of heavy competition among college men and the necessary economies in business, a return to pre-boom policies, are going to bear down heavily on the ambitious college graduate. But let me look for a minute, on the bare chance that either parents or children might be interested, at the contention of the colleges that they teach the good life, which in itself should be sufficient without high place or great riches. “Oh yeah!” says the average father and child.

The average college boy and girl may — and often does — leave college after four years, still the comparatively unlicked cub he or she entered it — without any thorough training in mind or body, in speech or manners, without any love of learning for its own sake or any mastery of one beloved subject. Even in the most elementary matters that civilize an uncivilized young thing, the average college does not even do as well as West Point and Annapolis. These government schools at least train the body seriously and add thereto some instruction in social behavior, so that the boy from the sticks, the small-town roughneck, and the nondescript product of the city may graduate with at least the earmarks of a gentleman. Swimming, fencing, golf, dancing,

and even bridge, I believe, are required. If the colleges were to require only those, it would be a whole lot more than they are doing at present.

The average college allows an overemphasis on athletics and social life — particularly in a coeducational college — which seduces the average boy or girl, the natural drifter. To most of these the really unusual cultural opportunities to be found in any good college mean less than nothing. They read only what they are forced to read. They are kept at their work by a high school system of attendance, daily quizzes, hour exams, and finals. They have little opportunity, even if they have the capacity, to do thorough work in some difficult subject which interests them. They amass “credits,” widely and shallowly, over an impossibly varied field. Most of them do not even learn to write their own tongue competently or to speak upon their feet effectively — the two gateways to success. Most of them on graduation still talk like muckers, and think — well, they think like their friends who slid through high school and got jobs in chain stores.

BETTER RETURNS FOR YOUR MONEY

NOW most of this is definitely the college's fault. The authorities will tell you — particularly in the great, state-university cafeterias — that they cannot do much more with the material they have. The answer is that they have steadily lowered their entrance requirements and their graduation requirements to meet the abilities of these thousands who have neither the brains, the aptitude, nor the ambition for learning. The thousands will not do a bit more than is required of them. The vicious circle is complete. Most of them leave college without the slightest idea what it means to be an educated, cultivated gentleman or gentlewoman. They have not learned how to earn a living. They have not learned how to live. So what?

Let me put it like this to the parent who is doubtful about sending his children to college: A thousand parents pay three hundred dollars apiece (and that is an understatement) for tuition alone. That money serves to hire a number of supposedly learned and competent teachers, experts in their subjects. To get their

services solely for your son or daughter would cost you three hundred thousand dollars.

All the boys and girls alike have access to them. On the basis of the general run of college records it is likely that about thirty per cent of the students will get their full money's worth. These will make really good records in their studies. Some thirty per cent more may, as their records show, get something out of it. The remaining thirty per cent will get nothing. They will not even know what it is all about. Strictly speaking, one thousand parents will have been paying pretty heavily to furnish instruction for the children of about one third of them who can really profit by it. The rest is waste of time and money and nervous energy, without appreciable return.

Much better to take that three hundred dollars and pay some competent business man or craftsman whom you respect to take your son as an apprentice in the old fashion. Or hire a tutor to teach him thoroughly some one thing which he really wants to learn.

I have been speaking chiefly in terms of boys, as I know the college boy better than the college girl. But the criticism against the traditional women's college intensifies rapidly. So far as practical preparation for life is concerned, it teaches neither the fine art of being wife, mother, and home-maker nor any useful specialty. It teaches one perhaps how to be a woman school teacher in a land inundated with women teachers. But in the main, and for most girls, the women's liberal arts college of the traditional type is merely a very pretentious finishing school, excellent for social prestige in a small town, but not very useful otherwise. And there can be no doubt that there are colleges where the female pedagogues deliberately discourage their pupils from marriage and home-making and hold up before them the ideal of the independent, unmarried, professional woman as God's noblest work. If you want your daughter to run a fair chance of becoming one of the third sex, send her to one of the big six, an old, fashionable, women's college.

SUBSTITUTES FOR COLLEGE

BUT WE shall be told that the young people must be kept in school longer, since there is no employment for them. Very well.

Keep them in school until they are twenty-one, if you like, as the former Commissioner of Education once proclaimed as the American ideal. Extend the public school system to that end. Eliminate the college preparatory subjects from the high school curriculum and emphasize the arts and crafts and aptitudes which make for a rich and creative use of leisure time. If our children of the future are going to work fewer days and shorter hours at more modest wages, as seems inevitable, teach them to use their leisure creatively, lest Satan find mischief still. . . !

But do not pretend that this education for leisure is "higher education" in any true sense of the term, that it will prepare the youngsters for professional work, that it deserves a "degree," or that it will mean higher salaries or gaudier jobs or more snooty social position. It won't, and it shouldn't pretend to. Its certificate, if certificate there need be, should be merely the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace or contentment. Not a season pass to the precincts of the money-changers in the temple of "the goddess Success."

Why not recruit our boys and girls for pledges to live in the home town, to make living in the home town a useful, gracious, rich experience? To be as good farmers as can be found, as good craftsmen and mechanics as can be trained. To make the high school diploma a badge of honor in itself, as it emphatically is not at present. To make the white collar a proud ceremonial dress of occasion, instead of a badge of poorly paid daily servitude. To make the public library and the book-and-magazine store as much the real centers of town life as the picture theatre and the corner soda fountain. To make the town as proud of its amateur orchestra and choral society as of its twilight league baseball team. To live more abundantly.

In such a town the occasional young college graduate would be respected at his true value and be turned to as a leader in the community, since he would be recognized as having the stuff. Far better that than to be one of hundreds of so-called professional men in a big city, poorly paid lawyers and draftsmen and salesmen and bond peddlers — all college graduates together at a dime a dozen!

THE FINAL VERDICT ON RECOVERY

Will the Supreme Court Support Mr. Roosevelt?

BY PAUL HUTCHINSON

SOME DAY in the not distant future — say shortly before next Christmas — nine men, clad in the lugubrious robes in which, traditionally and rightly, the decisions of the law are announced, will take their seats on the dais of that solemn little room in the Capitol into which awed tourists peek after they have tired of testing the whispering gallery in Statuary Hall. A stiff decorum will hold the place in utter silence. But the crowded seats, the strained attention of the reporters, and the sharp watchfulness of the doorkeepers will all betray the importance of the moment. Who, in that line of Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States sitting in those massive chairs, will lean forward to begin reading the verdict? Will it be Butler, or Sutherland, or McReynolds? Or will it be Brandeis, or Stone? The fate of the Roosevelt program for national recovery may be settled in that first moment when it is revealed whose voice speaks for the majority of the Court. And with the fate of the Roosevelt program there will be tied up, for years to come, the fate of the nation.

It is not too early to consider that coming scene, for its enactment is as certain as the continuation of the American judicial process. In an effort to rescue the country from the economic slough of despond into which it has sunk, and to guard against a recurrence of similar catastrophes, Congress has enacted, under presidential pressure, measures which change not only the methods but the whole philosophy and prospect of our industry. Some industries, or some industrialists, too deeply impregnated with traditions of rugged individualism, are certain not to submit to the authority of these new Rooseveltian laws until their last legal recourse has been exhausted. Some coal mining company in southern Illinois, some textile manufacturer in the

Carolinas, some hosiery mill proprietor in Pennsylvania — someone, somewhere, will seek an injunction restraining the Federal Government from putting into effect the provisions of the recent legislation. Such a case may be taking form in the lower courts before this article can be published. From the lower courts it will inexorably travel upward until the day comes when the nine men on the Supreme bench — “nine old men,” they have been called in the realistic pages of *Washington Merry-Go-Round* — render their final verdict.

It is amazing, when seen in the light of the approaching decision, how enormous is the power which precedent and the fears of the founding fathers have placed in the hands of these nine men. Consider! Here is a nation so close to collapse that its entire banking system has had to be closed down in order to save any of it. A nation forced to abandon its currency standard; forced to suspend (or shall we be frank about it and say repudiate?) the operation of many contracts, public and private, and the gold clause in all of them. A nation with a third of its population out of work or dependent on those who are out of work. This nation votes overwhelmingly for a New Deal. The executive and the legislators thus chosen labor prodigiously to translate their popular mandate into laws that shall establish new processes. The economic life of the nation begins to make itself over under the patterns of these new laws. That is to say, something gets under way that promises jobs for desperate men, food for despairing families, and protection for harassed industrialists. And just as this process of recovery and transformation has well started, the President, the Congress, and the 120 million citizens must turn to these nine men on the Supreme bench and ask, “What about it?”