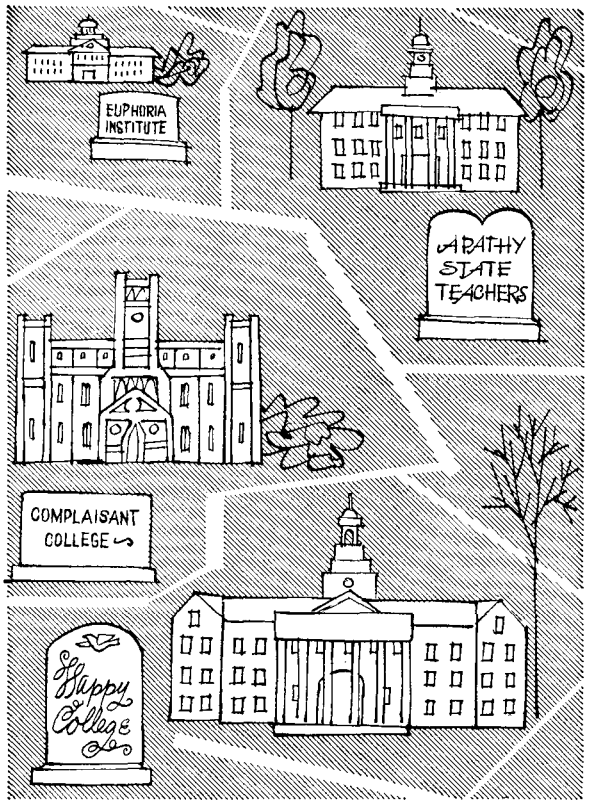
THE GRAVES OF ACADEME

The illumination of weaknesses is the first step in reform. The quality of education in many American high schools has been improved dramatically as a result of the vigorous critical attention given to secondary education in recent years, even though some of the attacks were unduly harsh and some were misdirected.

Colleges have not yet received the same kind of critical attention—perhaps because the professors were so busy telling us what was wrong with the high schools. But higher education, too, has its soft spots and many colleges have defects that should be and can be remedied, once they are brought to public attention. This portrait of "Happy College, USA," was written by a professor in such a college. For obvious reasons he has adopted a pseudonym, but both the college and the professor are real.



—*Doug Anderson.*

By A. LAMENT

THE most popular story circulating on the campus of Happy College last spring was about a group of irreverent students at an Eastern university who registered a dog as a freshman, attended class in his name, and at the end of four years got him a bachelor's degree.

To our undergraduates, such an Ivy League coup was a notable victory in the war against academic pomp and circumstance. To the faculty it had a grim pertinence that roused one jaded full professor to observe, "If they'd sent the dog to our college, he'd have been able to get through on his own."

Such pronouncements from insiders are partial indication of the fact that, when a student enrolls at Happy College, he is entering one of the several hundred colleges which knowledgeable educators privately classify as "easy," "inferior," or simply "bad."

These institutions are not easily identified; most of them are "accredited," some are private or church related, some are state supported, some are community or junior colleges, but they all have characteristics in common which distinguish them from the better schools in each of these same categories. Some of these characteristics are evident in the college catalogue; most are hidden—submerged like the treacherous parts of an iceberg.

Many of these "easy" colleges are impoverished, but some of the publicly supported ones are comparatively affluent. A disproportionately large number are rural, but some are found in large cities and have impressive architecture ranging from Academic Gothic to Ice Cream International. They are found in all parts of the country.

Happy College, like its most affluent fellows, has visible assets. Its grass and bushes are well tended. It has handball courts and sanitary showers. Classrooms have motion picture projectors, green or even pink blackboards, and approved lighting. The toilets always work; soap is always available in dispensers above the wash basins. The missing elements are less palpable: a stimulating faculty, an intelligent administration, qualified students, and an adequate library.

Most striking is the inadequacy of the library. A college on the ragged edge of respectability has in its library 60 to 100 volumes per student; the higher the ratio, the more reputable the school is likely to be. Happy College library has thirty volumes per student, a proportion which helps place us firmly in America's collegiate wasteland.

Any enterprising reader of a college catalogue can calculate the number of volumes per student if the school is brave enough to report figures of its library holdings. Less apparent is the plight of scholarly journals. At all the third-rate institutions—Apathy State Teachers, Euphoria Institute, Complaisant College and other recumbent cousins of Happy College—a periodical is likely to be judged by its popularity: the more numerous its readers, the more certain the renewal of its subscription.

The havoc created by a system where a periodical read by five people for ten minutes has an automatic advantage over one read by a single person for fifty minutes is analogous to the dismal effect that uncritical attention to audience ratings has had on television fare. Our local worship of such numerologies not only fosters the impression that the sum of contemporary knowledge resides in the slick magazines; it drives Happy College faculty members into time-wasting subtleties. Thus interested teachers and their students make periodic forays to the library to check out and return seldom-used items in relays organized solely to raise usage levels to a point where periodicals in

specialized areas of the sciences and humanities can compete in campus readership tallies with *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Unfortunately, the undergraduates seem to match their library in quality. A graph of their scholastic achievements sags ominously at its weaker end, a sag populated not merely by the uneducated but by the uneducable as well, for in pursuing a "healthy student body size," easy colleges tend to develop such holes in the bottom of their entrance requirements that they become like Robert Frost's definition of home: a place "where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

The defense offered for such laxity is not that the ranks of the witless are swollen with late-blooming geniuses but that any college can do something for any student and ought to try. Critics of this view point out that not only are colleges highly inefficient as sociological vats for aging and mellowing the raw by-products of society, but that large numbers of poor students have a deleterious effect on good ones, not to mention their professors, and that the cost of subsidizing education for bad students is exorbitant.

Choked with mediocre students and worse, the Happy Colleges become extensions and duplications of the secondary schools. Thus they bear some responsibility for the much publicized inadequacy of American secondary education. By littering their programs with remedial courses, by taking the worst graduates from the worst high schools and juggling requirements accordingly, Happy College and its easy fellows stimulate the abandonment of rigorous secondary training, thus plunging high school curricula into the wilderness of "life adjustment."

SOME of the most self-conscious of the easy colleges have faced their errors and have attempted to eliminate embarrassing collegiate middens such as the remedial sub-Freshman English course. The result has been heartening, for entering students soon begin to be better prepared. The truth seems to be that, within reason, high schools will do what they need to do to get students into college. But lest anyone grow overconfident, there are still rising on the academic horizon such intellectual mutations as sub-sub-Freshman English—a course for those whose impediments exceed even the vast deficiencies fondled in the normal subnormal course.

Because it is possible to enter college without demonstrating either learning or aptitude, it is hardly surprising that many students at America's easy colleges are suffering from an education so incredibly bad that the harrowing details jar the imagination. One instructor at Happy College tells of a class of freshmen in which a number of students had great difficulty doing rudimentary research work in the library. A brief investigation disclosed that they were ignorant of the sequence of letters in the alphabet and thus could not locate books the library had catalogued in alphabetical order.

Such woeful inadequacies account for the fact that students at Happy College lack even the dubious talent of being able to cheat adroitly, for their inability to read makes them inefficient peekers. One professor maintains that in any room full of cheaters, Happy College students reading from their neighbors' papers will always stand out—they move their lips.

With such cripples in the background, an average student with a creditable secondary education glitters, a fact which gives him and some of his teachers an exaggerated opinion of his talents and accomplishments. Calculating grades, a hazardous job at best, then becomes doubly difficult.

Instructors fresh from more rigorous academic climates soon discover that, when they apply standards quite above the low level of those at Happy College, enraged students are quick to object. One student denounced her professor because he had failed her in spite of the fact that she had attended class regularly. He lacked, she observed, the wisdom and experience to realize that at Happy College, *F* was given to students who were always absent, and *D* was given to students who did failing work but came to class.

In spite of their reputation, America's inferior colleges do acquire some excellent students. Poverty, perversity, and misjudgment can be relied upon to bring in a small proportion, although any superior student who is not grimly self-determining runs the risk of being corrupted by the low level of achievement which surrounds him. Teachers at Happy College, rather than confront a student with work that may be beyond him and thus traumatic, are directed to make all tasks possible. An administrative decree has pointed out that a good teacher never presents students with problems which they cannot solve. As a result, at the end of four years in classes where all things are possible for everyone, better than average students have learned to loaf. Of all the charges made against Happy College, this is the most serious: in its role of adolescent rest camp and buffer against the world's cruelty, it allows the precious little talent that comes its way to atrophy.

Evidence of a similar scholastic myopia is noticeable in the small proportion of Ph.D.'s on the faculties of America's easy colleges. The ratio is significant not merely because Ph.D.'s usually have more learning to impart, but because they tend to gravitate to and remain at better schools. Though there are notable exceptions, generally when such a ratio falls well below half, a college begins to slide toward academic limbo. The Happy College catalogue reveals that less than one-third of our faculty have Ph.D.'s, a fraction which aligns us comfortably with the rest of the nation's bad colleges.

FOR the possessors of advanced degrees, promotion is theoretically achieved through good teaching; but that is hard to assess, so progress up the academic ladder is likely to come through more measurable things: a record of good attendance, prompt return of papers, regular appearance at student functions, the habit of keeping class the full hour, and the possession of that ambiguous quality, "maturity." At such schools professors traditionally find it wise to join service clubs and attend meetings as eagerly as lawyers and insurance salesmen prowling for customers.

Such criteria create havens for the inept and a high degree of transience among younger faculty members. The regularity and speed of their departure are plainly evident in the constantly changing list of faculty which appears yearly in the college bulletin. Comparing this year's staff with that of two years ago shows that not only have almost one-third of the total Happy College faculty left, but among well-trained newcomers with Ph.D.'s in the humanities, the turnover is closer to half.

More significant but seldom discussed and never published is the fact that, like fastidious waiters who refuse to eat in the bad restaurants which employ them, Happy College faculty members send their children elsewhere for an education. Some parents assert their children want to go away to school, a common enough desire—but faculty members at other schools rarely send their children to us.

The new vocationalism, evident everywhere in American education, is epidemic in the third-rate colleges. Students are encouraged not to learn how to write but how to compose business letters, not philosophy but salesmanship. It is assumed that education is something which happens to a person in his first twenty-five years of life and that when education is over, students should have been made so commercially attractive that they will be

able to compete in the job market. Study of the humanities, which presupposes that education is a life-long occupation, is much undervalued and often highly criticized precisely because it can be so difficult a study for those interested mainly in learning a trade.

WORSHIP of the useful and practical reached its peak at Happy College when it was proposed that we prepare our students for their future by instituting a course in home maintenance as a requirement for graduation, the rationale being that, while a man can be a success without knowing about history, it is essential that he know how to fix things around the house.

Students are the victims of rules they didn't make and an unbalanced curriculum they didn't design. At better-known colleges, mathematics courses alone might equal or outnumber those in physical education; at the easy colleges, the opposite is true. The physical education staff at Happy College offers about eighty courses (the obscurity of the descriptive prose in the college catalogue makes an exact tally impossible), more than all those in physics, chemistry, and mathematics combined. The departments of education, physical education, and business together offer over 200 courses, a total exceeding all those given in anthropology, political science, philosophy, German, Spanish, French, chemistry, physics, mathematics, economics and history.

More students are enrolled full time in philosophy than in physical education, but more than twice as many faculty members teach physical education as teach philosophy, a malproportion matched by the fact that the 15 per cent of our student body enrolled in vocational courses receives the attention of 30 per cent of our faculty.

To make such strange proportions work, Happy College follows in the tradition of other inferior schools and chooses not to observe some conventional requirements. Freshmen need not take a full year of Freshman English, an option most endearing to those who need it most. A move to require some students in humanities to add the usual foreign-language study to their programs met with numerous administrative obstructions. The decision finally handed down was that such a requirement could not be introduced unless a poll of the students showed they would not object. Foreign languages won, which surprised everyone.

To balance our sins of omission, we exhibit still another characteristic of inferior colleges—bustling staffs of activity directors and counselors. Students are counseled when they play, when they work, when they study, as well as when they go crazy. Traditions are carefully selected and fostered, for undergraduate puerility is so richly nurtured that students are rendered incapable of acquiring respectable traditions on their own.

No one is called stupid any more. That is undemocratic. Inadequacies are psychogenic and capable of being tuned out if counselors can get a hold on the right knobs. Consequently, America's third-rate colleges now play a therapeutic role, with the result that students sprout the symptoms of patients in analysis, including use of the psychoanalytic jargon which carries over from counseling sessions. Students "relate" to their instructors and have well-chronicled repressions and aggressions to explain misbehavior and inadequacies. There is such an infinity of neuroses available to choose from that *angst* has replaced the dying grandmother as an excuse for absence from class.

Nonetheless, all is not hopeless for the mass of American colleges. The press of students may permit some chronically impoverished schools to become more demanding of themselves and their students, and improved salaries may attract better people into teaching.

BUT to expect a little money and much congestion to bring any permanent improvement is like waiting for atomic war to resolve the problem of urban congestion. Instead, present problems will be magnified beyond solution. The bigger the crowd, the more likely it is that the doors to college will open wider—at both ends—that college degrees will no longer indicate excellence but merely length of attendance. In addition, the increased demand for teachers is less likely to make teaching attractive to intelligent people than it is to force schools to grow more and more tolerant of inadequate faculty members.

What is needed is a clear definition of directions, a survey of just what our colleges provide, not what they pretend to provide or even believe they provide. It is a job tailored for the talents and the money of our large foundations, and while even if it were well done it would not resolve all dilemmas, it could do as much for America's colleges as the foundation-supported Flexner Report did fifty years ago to expose the evils and raise the standards of medical education.

Such an investigation would not merely provide immediate correction of some expensive folly masquerading as college education. Its findings could foster the inclusion of demanding requirements in any future federal legislation subsidizing higher education.

There was never a time when a class of institutions set up to do so much permitted itself to do so little to start humans on the life-long job of developing historical perspective, knowledge of the world, and an awareness of man's achievement. Throughout life, men have needed such knowledge desperately. Now, with the prospect of life's abrupt end, they need it even more.

Footnotes To History

As the 1961-62 academic year passes into history, it might be appropriate to call attention to several noteworthy records established on various college campuses:

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A student at Union College in Schenectady claimed a new world record by keeping a cigarette lighter flame alive for 83 minutes, 30 seconds.

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Nearly a hundred students at California Polytechnic staged a telephone talkathon that lasted 504 hours, which they claimed was 46 hours better than the former mark set by students at Texas Tech.

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Four Fordham students, reviving a campus cultural activity that flourished two decades or so ago, swallowed fifty-seven goldfish.

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Eighty students at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, engaged in a see-saw endurance contest, teeter-tottering in relays for 144 hours.

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In what was billed as the first intercollegiate elephant race in history, a four-and-one-half ton pachyderm named Sonita, wearing the colors of Harvard, lumbered to victory over entries from 15 other colleges at a California oat field christened for the occasion Dumbo Downs.

TEACHERS VIEW THEIR STRIKE

In this article, four teachers in the New York City School System, all members of the United Federation of Teachers, present what they believe to be the true feelings of most of those teachers who went on strike April 11.

By AARON BENDER, ARTHUR FEINBERG, HARVEY GOLDENBERG, and ED SVIGALS.

WE CONTEND that teachers have a philosophic and moral right to strike. We teachers believe that when all other remedies have proved to be ineffective, teachers have the right in a free society to withhold their services. In the history of the West, there are numerous examples of challenges to unjust laws. Moreover, at the present time, the strike weapon is employed by teachers in many of the most democratic countries of the world. During the same week in which the New York teachers' strike occurred, teachers all over Italy walked off their jobs. Israel recently had a protracted strike of its secondary school staff, and the strike weapon has been used by teachers throughout the United Kingdom. Thus, what raises a storm of outrage on this side of the Atlantic, is accepted far more maturely on the other side. On the other hand, strikes of any kind are forbidden by such oppressive governments as the Soviet Union and Spain. We find it odd that the exercise of the right of teachers to strike in New York evokes a sanctimonious outcry from many who should know better.

We believe that the Condon-Wadlin (anti-strike) Law is both oppressive and unenforceable. It is more suited to a totalitarian society than to a free state. If the employee in a free society has the right to strike, why should this right be denied to the teachers? Further, two recent teacher strikes in New York have demonstrated that this law cannot be applied without destroying the school system. It may be easy to fire twenty or thirty thousand teachers. Who will replace them?

It should be noted that the challenge to the Condon-Wadlin Law follows the procedure employed in the testing of any law under the Constitution. Our challenge of this law grows out of the same American tradition under which people fought against oppressive segregation laws in the South, and against religious restrictions in other parts of the country.

Why then did the teachers exercise their right to strike on April 11? The reasons are many and complex. One of them is certainly economic in nature. For years there has been an ever-accumulating sense of frustration and rage directed against the city and state governments, the Board of Education, and the public for their indifference to the plight of the teacher. As many of those who condemned the strike had pointed out previously, the salaries of the New York teachers lagged behind salaries in neighboring communities. At one time, New York could boast of paying the highest salaries in the metropolitan area, indeed, in the entire country. This position has been undermined because of inflationary forces and lack of adequate salary increases.

The strike of April 11 also reflects a revolt of the teachers against the growing bureaucracy in the New York school system. In the face of a critical teacher shortage, the ranks of the supervisory group have increased to inordinate proportions. The 4,000 supervisors in New York City constitute a larger group than the entire supervisory staff of the school system in France. The presence of this huge bureaucracy has tended to create an impersonal school atmosphere in which the teacher is continuously frustrated in his efforts to teach. A considerable part of the teaching day is taken up with clerical work in order to meet the demands of the hierarchy. Moreover, in the face of a critical teacher shortage and an imminent strike, the Board chose to allocate millions to create a much higher salary scale for supervisors instead of meeting teacher needs.

Much has been written about the trying conditions present in the New York teaching situation. Mr. Hechinger ably catalogued many of them and further detail is not needed here. The day-by-day battle against these conditions of overcrowding, obsolete buildings, problem students, and textbook inadequacies helped considerably to hone the edge of frustration.

The strike of April 11 was called by the United Federation of Teachers, which is the legally designated collective bargaining agent of the teachers of New York. It won this legal status as a result of an election in which the United Federation of Teachers received more than two-thirds of the votes cast. Contrary to the implications of the press coverage, the vote to strike was carried overwhelmingly. Seventy-two hundred teachers voted to strike; two hundred voted in the negative. The strike vote was secret and all union members were eligible to vote. We are proud that this is a truly democratic union.

THE actions of the Board of Education, headed by Max Rubin, instead of resolving the conflict, helped to inflame it. Max Rubin's reference to the strike as an immoral action created deep resentment, and masked the failure of the Board to use its great influence to bring about fundamental improvement in the school system. He and his colleagues on the Board of Education had a unique opportunity to offer their resignations in order to dramatize the absurdity of the bargaining situation in which the mayor and the governor were playing political football. Surely such a dramatic gesture could have averted the strike and united the teachers with the Board of Education.

As a direct result of the strike, the mayor and the governor found thirteen million additional dollars and New York City teaching positions will now carry the highest maximum salaries of any major city in the country. Talented people will be attracted to the system and those already in will not be reluctant to stay. The United Federation of Teachers, which sponsored the strike, now has greater union solidarity than ever before, and is enjoying a growth in its membership.

We believe that it was the most dedicated teachers who were on strike on April 11. It was these teachers who saw a deteriorating school system and had the courage to fight for their convictions. In conclusion, we affirm that the strike of April 11 was in the interest of better schools for the children of New York City.