

HIGHER EDUCATION'S NEWEST STUDENT

ABSTRACT

K. Patricia Cross

Under all the noise and fanfare of today's protesting activist, one of the greatest transitions in history is taking place in the composition of the American college student body. Unlike the activist who cast's the image for the 1960's, higher education's newest student represents a quite different segment of our society. The activist is in reality the traditional college student -- albeit perhaps in wolf's clothing. He is the bright child of liberal, affluent, college-educated parents, and he is a product of the culturally and educationally advantaged environment that has been represented in the college-going population of this country for a hundred years. Furthermore, he attends the oldest and most selective of the traditional four-year colleges and universities. In vivid contrast to this student is higher education's newest student. He represents the American goal of universal higher education. He comes from the lower socioeconomic levels, and he has less academic aptitude and lower motivation for intellectual pursuits than the traditional college student. He is to be found, not in the well established four-year college, but in the emerging junior and community colleges.

Educational research shows some dramatic differences between the characteristics of the students attending two and four-year institutions. The attitude of parents toward educational and cultural pursuits appear to be related to who goes to college, where they go, how long they stay, and even why they go.

If higher education is to meet the needs of this new generation of college students, we must devise new programs -- programs which represent a departure from our present singular model for excellence in higher education. It hardly seems likely that we will "help each student develop to his fullest potential" by offering a single scheme of opportunities, rewards, and punishments. The great future task is to investigate the ways in which the junior college student differs in kind, or in pattern of abilities, rather than in degree from the traditional college student.

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College students have long been a source of fascination to the American people who are alternately proud, angry, amused, baffled and bewildered by each succeeding college generation. The protesting activist of the 1960's *really* appeared in startling contrast to the silent generation of the 1950's. The veterans of the late 1940's brought new academic intensity to the campuses that had coped with the enthusiastic cause-chasers of the 1930's. *And it is really very* tempting to describe each generation of college students by labeling its leaders and to regard each new characterization as the advance guard of new directions in higher education.

In recent years, the high visibility of a relatively small segment of the college population has led many to believe that college students are changing dramatically, that the generation gap is growing, and that colleges and even high schools are coping with a "new breed." At best these observations are only part truths, and at worst, they are causing colleges across the country to gear their programs to meet the demands of today's protesting activist who, in all likelihood, will never arrive at the great majority of institutions of higher education. I do not mean to imply that some of the reforms effectively initiated by the activists are not good and greatly needed. But I should like to call to your attention the fact that while we struggle to meet the articulate demands of a minority of student leaders with the

self-confidence to confront administrations, a student who may present a far more fundamental challenge is quietly making up the majority.

At the risk of sounding heretical in my times, I should like to suggest that under all the noise and fanfare of the protesting activist, one of the greatest transitions in history is taking place in the composition of the American college student body.

Higher education has just about reached the saturation point for the bright youth from the upper socioeconomic levels, since 80 to 90 percent of this group are now in college. Higher education's newest student is necessarily going to come from the 2nd and 3rd quartiles in ability and from the lower socioeconomic strata of our society.

Anyone who has the temerity to predict the character of future generations of college students in these tumultuous days starts with the observation that these are changing times. And it is a truism to add that young people are a product of their times, but it is a research fact to state that they are very much a product of their past experiences and especially of their home environment. Unlike the activist who casts the image for the 1960's, the coming generation represents a quite different segment of our society. The activist is in reality the traditional college student -- albeit perhaps in wolf's clothing. He is the bright child of liberal, affluent, college-educated parents, and he is a product of the culturally and educationally advantaged environment that has been represented in the college-going population of this country for a hundred years. Furthermore, he attends the oldest and most selective of the traditional

four-year colleges and universities. In vivid contrast to this student is higher education's newest student. He represents the American goal of universal higher education. He comes from the lower socioeconomic levels, and he has less academic aptitude and lower motivation for intellectual pursuits than the traditional college student. He is to be found, not in the well established four-year college, but in the emerging junior and community colleges.

Over the past decade, researchers have collected a vast array of facts about the characteristics of students. I have attempted to synthesize these data into a coherent picture of today's junior college student -- giving special attention to the ways in which he differs from the traditional college student for whom the present system of higher education is planned. While both the quality and quantity of research are sufficient to permit useful generalizations, it should be remembered that to generalize is to ignore temporarily the infinite variety of individuals and institutions.

A fundamental characteristic differentiating two-year college students from four-year college students in the 1960's is the socioeconomic background from which they come. In America we have long attempted to perpetuate the folklore that it is not who your parents are or what your background is, but rather what you are and where you are going that counts. It is only recently that we have faced the reality that family background plays a very large role in determining what an individual is and, perhaps to some extent, what he is capable of becoming. We now know, through educational research, that

various indices of the socioeconomic status of the parents bear an important relationship to who goes to college, where they go, how long they stay, and even why they go. Let me document that rather sweeping statement with some research data.

In a longitudinal study of some 10,000 high school graduates recently reported by James Trent and Leland Medsker (Trent and Medsker, 1967) of the Center for Higher Education at the University of California at Berkeley, it was found that most children of upper socioeconomic families entered college regardless of their ability; 84 percent of the upper two-fifths in ability entered college, but 57 percent of those in the lowest two-fifths of the class also went to college. The proportions, for the same ability levels, of those entering college from the lower socioeconomic levels were less than one-half of these. The bright child of a father who worked at a low level job had about a 41 percent chance of going to college, and if he also had low ability, his chances fell to 20 percent.

The figures are just about as dramatic when the question posed is where young people go to college. Two large national studies (Astin, et al, 1967 and Medsker and Trent, 1965) reported that approximately two-thirds of the students attending private universities were the children of college-educated fathers, whereas the proportion of this group in junior and state colleges dropped to about one-third. There are, of course, numerous ways of measuring socioeconomic status, and Project Talent (Cooley and Becker, 1966)

used seven different indices, including mother's and father's education, father's occupation, number of books in the home, whether or not the student had a room, desk, typewriter of his own at home, etc. They found that the junior college group fell between the noncollege and four-year college group on every index.

In other words, America's newest college student has spent the first 17 years of his life in a different cultural environment from that of the students we're accustomed to teaching in college. He is less likely to have seen good books and magazines around the home, less likely to have been able to retreat to a room of his own, and less likely to have been exposed to discussions of world affairs at the dinner table. Research to date indicates that students reflect rather faithfully the interests and concerns of their parents.

One of the natural accompaniments of a home which is intellectually oriented is an interest in college on the part of the parents and the students. SCOPE, which is an acronym for School to College: Opportunities for Post-secondary Education, is a longitudinal study of some 90,000 high school students as they enter the adult world of jobs, college, or marriage. The research, sponsored by the College Board, is presently underway at the Center for Higher Education at Berkeley under the direction of Dr. Dale Tillery. The first wave of data from the SCOPE study is now in, and it offers testimony to the important role played by the parents in the higher

education of their children. SCOPE data show that students who entered four-year colleges were much more likely to receive parental encouragement than either those who did not enter college or those who entered junior colleges. Not only were the parents of college students more definitely interested in further education, but they were also more likely to have expressed an opinion to their children. Almost half (47 percent) of the young people who did not enter college perceived no particular parental interest in the matter. Twenty percent of the junior college group and only 14 percent of the four-year college students reported this type of parental indifference.

One might hypothesize that the student who started college despite the relative indifference of parents would be more likely to be highly motivated to complete his college education. But this appears not to be the case. Parental attitudes toward college also bear a strong relationship to persistence in college. Seventy percent of the college students who remained in college over the four-year period of the Medsker-Trent Study had stated, as high school seniors, that their parents definitely wanted them to attend college. Only 48 percent of the students dropping out during the four-year period felt that college was important to their parents; for bright high school seniors who did not attend college, only 15 percent reported having received parental encouragement (Trent & Medsker, 1967).

The obvious question to be raised in discussing parental encouragement on the part of those in the lower income brackets is, Is consideration of higher education stifled because of the expense involved? If so, students appear not to recognize it in their answers to questionnaire items. In the SCOPE survey, only 1 percent of the high school seniors who entered junior or senior colleges and 5 percent of the noncollege youth stated that their parents would like for them to go to college but felt that they couldn't afford it. When asked, "What do you think is the one most likely reason you might not go to college?", only about 14 percent of each group (noncollege, junior college, and senior college) picked "too costly". The ACE data are similar. Roughly one third of both junior and senior college freshmen said they had no concern about finances; only about ten percent of each group confessed to having a "major concern" about financing a college education. To judge from the questionnaire responses, approximately equal proportions of junior and senior college students worry about money for higher education.

And yet, the sources of money for college are quite obviously different for the two-year and four-year college freshmen surveyed by the ACE (Astin, et al., 1967). Junior college students tended to lead senior college students in the percentages obtaining money through employment during college, summer employment, and personal savings. Larger percentages of four-year college students reported receiving scholarships, parental aid, federal government assistance, and loans. The sources of financial assistance reflect, in part, the financial aid available in the junior and senior colleges; scholarships and parental assistance are more likely to be available to the four-year college

student, whereas the junior college student is forced to rely more heavily on his own resources. Apparently, then, certain behaviors with regard to money do differentiate between junior and senior college students, even if concern about finances does not.

More dramatic behavioral data are provided by Medsker and Trent's study (1965a) of the college attendance rates in 16 cities which were similar in demographic and industrial features but different in the type of public college available in the community. It was found that the impact of local opportunities for college was most vivid for the high ability students from low socioeconomic levels. Whereas 80 percent of the bright youth from high socioeconomic backgrounds went to college, even if there were none in the local community, only 22 percent of the lower socioeconomic group of same level of ability entered college when there were no local colleges.

The presence of a junior college more than doubled the likelihood of college for bright students whose fathers were employed at the lower occupational levels. In junior college communities, 53 percent of the bright students from lower socioeconomic levels entered college, whereas in communities with no public college facilities, only 22 percent of such students entered college. Between these extremes were the other communities studied by Medsker and Trent. Colleges in the multiple-college communities enrolled 49 percent of bright low socioeconomic youth, state college towns 41 percent, and extension center localities 35 percent.

One can argue that the existence of a junior college in the local community attracts new students to higher education because of the reduction in cost, because of the "educational awareness" brought to the community, or because less intense motivation is required for continuing education in the same community. Perhaps all three factors are usually involved.

The fact that low socioeconomic status consists of many interrelated variables -- limited financial resources, low parental education, little interest in cultural and educational pursuits -- makes any attempt to separate financial considerations from the context in which they occur extremely difficult. The ambiguity between questionnaire responses and college-going behavior raises some rather basic questions. When we ask the student how concerned he is about financing a college education, for example, we don't often know much about his frame of reference when he answers. The wealthy student going to a high-cost private college may state that he has "no concern" about finances, but the same response might be given by the student who is attending a low-tuition junior college in a city where he knows he can work part-time and live at home. Furthermore, the student's motivation influences his perception of the cost of a college education. For some students, college would be worth any price; for others, the necessity of giving up a car would rule out college as "too costly."

In evaluating the role of finances, it is also necessary to give some consideration to how much the student knows about the subject. Knoell and

Medsker (1966) found that many students reported in interviews that they had made very unrealistic estimates of the cost of attending college away from home. They also found that among the junior college students who had completed transfer to a four-year college, financial problems ranked first among the reasons for withdrawal. Forty percent checked "lack of money" as one reason for dropping out.

The relative importance of dollars and cents cost of college cannot be accurately assessed with the research data presently available. Certainly it must be considered a factor related to who goes to college, where they go, and how long they stay. But I also stated earlier that home environment and circumstances had something to do with why young people seek a college education.

Most research is in agreement that students entering a junior college are influenced more by practical considerations and less by intellectual interests than are their peers in four-year colleges (Richards & Braskamp, 1967; Baird, 1967; Knoell & Medsker, 1964b). "Academic reputation" is the most common reason for the selection of a university, whereas "low cost" and "close to home" frequently lead all other reasons given for attending a junior college. When high school seniors in the SCOPE study were asked what type of college they would like to attend even if they were not now planning to enter college, the students who later entered four-year colleges were more likely to select a college description which involved emphasis upon studying,

serious discussions with faculty, and the availability of concerts and lectures than were junior college and non-college youth who tended to prefer a college emphasizing vocational training. By and large, junior college students tend (1964a) to major in the applied fields, and Knoell & Medsker found that over half of the junior college students were enrolled in business administration, engineering, and education, even after transfer to a four-year institution.

The business-practical orientation of the junior college student is further illustrated by the personal objectives which he considers "essential or very important." In responding to each of seventeen objectives in the ACE questionnaire, the percentage of junior college students exceeded that for four-year college students by as much as 7 percent on only two objectives -- to be well off financially and to succeed in business. Senior college freshmen were more likely than junior college students to attribute importance to objectives such as helping others in difficulty, joining the Peace Corps or VISTA, becoming a community leader, keeping up with political affairs and developing a philosophy of life (Astin, et al 1967). Whereas young people from the upper socioeconomic levels tend to see the college experience as an opportunity for intellectual stimulation and the development of the mind, the children from lower socioeconomic families are more likely to see a college education as the pathway to better jobs and upward social mobility.

These differing interests of groups of students are quite apparent in their responses to direct questions regarding their educational goals. But more subtle measures of personality characteristics reinforce these findings. Data from the SCOPE study reveal large differences between the intellectual interests of noncollege youth and junior and senior college students. Dale Tillery and his colleagues in the SCOPE research used a short experimental intellectual disposition scale. This scale, which was derived from the Carnibus Personality Inventory, measures characteristics such as flexibility, openness to new ideas, interest in ideas for their own sake rather than for their practical application, and the like. The scale clearly differentiated among the four-year college students, junior college students, and noncollege youth. Fifty-nine percent of the four-year college students, 36 percent of the junior college students and only 23 percent of the noncollege group scored in the top third on this measure of intellectual interest.

To no one's surprise, intellectual interests tend to parallel intellectual ability. The SCOPE study also involved the administration of a brief test of academic aptitude to the high school seniors in the sample. When the test scores were grouped into the top, middle, and lowest thirds, it was found that 71 percent of the students who entered four-year colleges scored in the top one-third compared with 36 percent of the junior college students and only 16 per cent of the nonscollege youth. While virtually all research is in agreement that across broad samples, four-year college freshmen make higher mean scores than two-year college students on almost any of the traditional tests

of academic ability, it should be remembered that there are individual junior college students who score very high, indeed, on tests of intellectual ability and there are junior colleges in this country whose students make higher mean scores than those in some four-year colleges.

It should be quite obvious, by this time, that today's junior college students are not seeking what we have come to regard as quality in traditional higher education. The problem, I submit, is not in the students but in our singular model for excellence in post-secondary education. There is some evidence that our secondary schools have also adopted an academic model that may be quite inappropriate for large numbers of students. Worse yet, rather than implementing the educational goal of helping young people to develop their potential, we may be doing considerable damage to the self-esteem and feelings of worth of the majority of young people.

It is painfully obvious that higher education's newest student does not fit the academic mold in their concepts of themselves. The SCOPE data show that 57 percent of the four-year students felt that they were "definitely able" to do college work, but only 29 percent of those entering junior colleges expressed such confidence. Students' estimates of their teachers' ratings of them followed the same pattern; 75 percent of the four-year college group felt that their high school teachers would rate them good or excellent students, whereas this confidence dropped to 41 percent for junior college

students. Junior college students were more likely than four-year college students to feel that their high school teachers went too fast and they were less likely to feel that their teachers understood them.

The feelings of academic inferiority of the junior college student were also expressed in the ACE questionnaire which listed seventeen traits and asked students to indicate the abilities on which they felt they were "above average."

The pattern of different abilities in the two-year and four-year college groups was apparent in the students' answers. Larger proportions of senior college students rated themselves above average on traits such as academic ability, drive to achieve, leadership ability, mathematical ability, intellectual self-confidence, and writing ability. The only traits on which larger proportions of junior college students than four-year college students rated themselves above average were: athletic ability, artistic ability, defensiveness, and mechanical ability.

The SCOPE questionnaire used a somewhat different form of question for studying student perceptions of their abilities. Whereas the ACE questionnaire asked students to indicate the abilities on which they felt they were "above average," the SCOPE questionnaire asked for their "best" abilities. The differences between percentages for junior and senior college groups were extremely small in both approaches, but the patterns were totally consistent.

High school seniors in the SCOPE study who later entered four-year colleges reported that their best abilities were in reading, mathematics, writing, music, conversation, and public speaking. The junior college group had larger proportions stating that their best abilities were: working with tools and machines, painting and drawing, sports, and cooking or sewing. Both the ACE and SCOPE data suggest a tendency for the more academically oriented senior college student to feel competent in the academic and verbal pursuits, whereas the junior college students perceive their strengths in the non-academic tasks.

Certainly we need to explore further students' feelings about their own abilities. Is the school experience so pervasive that the nonacademically oriented student learns to respond generally with "below average" -- or are there areas, perhaps not related to present school activities, in which he could experience success and feelings of personal worth?

One cannot help observing that there is little in most elementary and secondary school programs which is designed to help the less academically oriented achieve a more successful school experience. And this observation is reflected in the responses of the students. The SCOPE noncollege group showed the greatest dissatisfaction with the amount of freedom which was permitted in selecting high school courses, whereas the four-year college students indicated the least desire for change in this area. It is also of

interest to observe that 83 percent of the four-year college group found their high school courses "very useful" as preparation for college; a much smaller proportion (48 percent) of the noncollege group found the courses useful for their immediate futures in the labor market.

One thing stands out clearly in this review: we possess only traditional measures to describe a student who does not fit the tradition. The inevitable result is that we picture America's newest college student as being less adequate than his peers at the tasks of higher education -- as those tasks have been developed over the years for a different type of student. We must conclude that intellectual dimensions sharply differentiate junior college students, as a group, from senior college students. The junior college student is less able -- on our present tests; he is less intellectually oriented -- on our present measures; and he is less motivated to seek higher education -- in our traditional types of colleges. If we pose the same tasks for all institutions of higher education, then we run the risk of having the junior college become a watered-down version of the four-year college. Such an eventuality, of course, would subvert the purpose and concept of the junior college, one of the most challenging innovations in higher education of this century.

It hardly seems likely that we will "help each student develop to his fullest potential" by offering a single scheme of opportunities, rewards, and punishments. The great future task is to investigate the ways in which

the junior college student differs in kind, or in pattern of abilities, rather than in degree from the traditional college student.

Arthur Jensen (1967) notes that: "Literal equality of educational opportunity -- if interpreted to mean that we treat all children exactly alike-- makes as much sense as a doctor giving all his patients exactly the same prescription. Even giving every patient different amounts of the same medication would be disastrous. The parallel in education is to be avoided also."

If we wish to avoid offering a weak senior college prescription to the junior college student, then we must begin the long and difficult search for new measures and new programs specifically designed for *higher education's newest student.*

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