

CAN WE SAVE MORE OF OUR FRESHMEN?
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In a paper on "The Mortality Rate in Our Freshmen Classes," which the writer presented at the 1922 meeting of this association, it was shown that, on the basis of reports received from 107 institutions, 32 percent of the students who entered our freshmen classes during the preceding three years were lost before the beginning of the sophomore year. Without having accurate data to show why so many college careers were cut off in their early stages, it was taken for granted that the majority of these departures, both voluntary and involuntary, might be attributed to low scholastic standing, and, finally, an effort was made to suggest some possible means for improving freshman scholarship and thereby reducing the mortality rate.

Probably with the idea that scant justice had been done to the topic in the former paper, a respected and well-meaning member of this body introduced a resolution that the study be continued and that special effort be made to determine, as accurately as possible, why freshmen leave college. In order that sufficient data might be obtained to provide an answer to this question and also to furnish a comparison of the freshman mortality rate of the past two years with that previously reported, a questionnaire was mailed to 250 institutions. Of the 170 replies received, more than half were incomplete, since, as might be expected, a great many institutions do not have in available form the reasons for the withdrawals of their students. Furthermore, it was discovered that there was a lack of uniformity in the figures given, since many of them, due perhaps to unfortunate wording of one of the leading questions, were evidently based on the first semester or quarter instead of on the whole freshman year.

As to the mortality rate for the past two years, there is sufficient data to warrant the following report. In the replies of those 72 institutions whose figures are clearly based on the year rather than on the term, there is shown a freshman mortality rate varying from 8 to 55 percent, with a true average for the group of approximately 30 percent. A comparison of this with the rate of 32 percent shown in the former study would seem to indicate an improvement, through it should be borne in mind that the two groups of institutions used as a basis for these figures are not identical.

Owing to the complication mentioned above, and also to the fact that a considerable number of Registrars confessed that they were giving estimates rather than accurate reports, it does not seem possible at this time to compile definite statistics on the various causes for withdrawal. On the basis of 115 more or less complete reports on this question, it is possible, however, to rate the chief causes in their relative order of importance as follows:

1. Failure in studies;
2. Financial reasons;
3. Health;
4. Transfers to other institutions;
5. Family troubles;
6. Conduct;
7. Miscellaneous, including marriage.

It might be of interest to note in passing that the last-mentioned cause was responsible for a number of losses in some of the colleges for women and coeducational institutions. One Registrar in listing miscellaneous causes linked together "marriage, discouragement and death."

With the exception of the first, the causes listed are of such a nature as to be largely beyond the control or influence of the Registrar. While there may be occasions when a needy student can be assisted in finding employment, there are few Registrars who can render direct assistance to those who are financially embarrassed. The health of the students in most cases may be left to the care of the college physician and physical director. Transfers to other institutions are comparatively few and often desirable; and the other causes, including marriage, may be regarded as either unimportant or inevitable. But low scholastic standing, which is rated as the chief cause of our freshman mortality, demands more serious attention. There are a few happy institutions of unquestioned standing who, through a careful process of selection and instruction, are losing remarkably few of their freshmen on account of poor work; there are others who are retaining students in spite of their evident unfitness; and there are others—a large majority—who find that they are discarding rather heavily and that most of their discards are from weakness. Indeed there are not a few who state that from 60 to 80 percent of their freshmen losses are due to unsatisfactory records, and one Registrar goes so far as to report 100 percent for this reason. It would certainly be inaccurate to consider only those who are debarred from reentering, since many who may be technically eligible to remain in college either become discouraged and withdraw or, fearing to test further the hospitality of a committee on standing, they depart before they are invited to do so.

Before proceeding further with the discussion, the writer wishes to refer to an interesting study entitled, "Why Students Leave College," made in the University of Wisconsin, by Mr. C. A. Smith, Secretary of the faculty of that institution. Mr. Smith's study was based on the students who were in

attendance in 1919-20, but who did not return for the first semester of 1920-21. His figures for the freshmen class show that of the 946 who did not return, 612 or nearly two-thirds had unsatisfactory records, although the majority of them were not debarred from reentering. These figures serve to bear our conclusion that the problem of reducing the freshman mortality rate resolves itself into the problem of improving freshman scholarship.

In considering the problem of saving more of our freshmen, the question arises as to whether or not we should save more of them. Standards must be maintained and colleges should not be expected to do secondary work. The blessings of education can be bestowed neither on incorrigible idlers who refuse to pay the price of knowledge, nor on morons whose reach too far exceeds their grasp. It is a hard matter to make two ideas grow where none grew before or to put two gallons of oil into a one gallon can. A considerable number of Registrars have testified that in their institutions the loss on account of poor scholarship is not too high, and one outspoken individual says it is not high enough, thus revealing a thought which may have been in the minds of others, that students are allowed to remain in college who have not really earned the right to do so. The whole question of saving freshmen, it seems, should be based not merely on those who are lost from our registration lists, but also on those who, from the standpoint of present or future scholastic attainment, are lost before the beginning of their second year.

To some this matter is not viewed as a real problem, for they regard the first year or two at college as not unlike the qualifying round in a golf tournament, and are, therefore, unconcerned as to how many are eliminated. Others see in this failure on the part of so many students a great economic intellectual loss. Admitting that under present conditions there are apt to be some in every freshman class who are unfitted by nature or by training to assimilate a higher education, they realize also that the college so long as it fails in a large number of cases to produce results, cannot wholly evade the charge of inefficiency. Either too many of the unprepared have been admitted or else good material has been spoiled in the making.

The question as to how officers of admission can best separate the sheep from the goats is in many institutions a serious one and the certificate system is under fire. While it is true that the small group of institutions which admit only by examinations show fewer freshman failures than the larger group which admit by certificate, it does not follow that the certificate system should be abandoned. Some institutions have found the plan of accepting certificates from only the upper half or upper two-thirds of the class to be quite satisfactory. Others have encouraged secondary school officers in establishing a regulation that a recommendation for admission to college will be given only to those who make a certain average grade. There seems to be no good reason why intelligence tests should not be given in the senior year in all secondary schools, and the result of these tests made a part of the student's admission record. Finally, it should be made more difficult for a school to become accredited and remain accredited. More frequent suspensions for just cause would have a wholesome effect.

It scarcely needs repeating that college instructors and officials are prone to place too much of the responsibility for their freshman failures on the secondary schools. The colleges should face squarely the fact that a share of this responsibility is theirs and that it begins to some degree long before the student arrives on the campus. Various means have been suggested from time to time for helping us to save more of these freshmen who, after our various processes of selection, we find entrusted to our care. The plan of freshman week, which is the subject of another paper on this program, has in some institutions, proved a valuable aid in assisting the freshman to become properly adjusted to his new surroundings and to form at the outset of his career a better sense of values. Sectioning students on the basis of ability or knowledge, especially in such subjects as English and mathematics, has produced gratifying results. Under this plan, which is already familiar to many, the students are given during the first week a brief examination to test their knowledge of the fundamentals. On the basis of the showing made they are divided into three groups, low, average and high, and the instruction is then suited to the need and ability of each group. Monthly reports from all instructors on students whose work is below passing will furnish the basis for a list of those who are to be warned or placed on probation, and such actions will have additional weight if transmitted to parents and fraternity committees on scholarships. This system involves additional labor, but in institutions where it has been given a trial it is believed to be labor well spent.

The plan of having the class divided into small groups of ten or twelve each, with a member of the faculty serving as an adviser or guardian of each group, is excellent in theory, but it does not always succeed, because the advisers are prone to neglect their duties. Probably a more practicable plan is to have one or more deans or directors of freshmen who are expected to devote a large part of their time and attention to this work. And, lastly, to repeat a point which has been more often emphasized than heeded, give the freshman at this crisis of his career not the poorest instruction which the institution dares to

perpetrate, but the very best which it can afford. But if our more careful and intelligent selection of students and our more conscientious efforts toward their higher intellectual and spiritual development fail in some cases to give us our expected reward, let us remember that we are dealing with material in the form of human beings, and that such material cannot be so inspected and so handled that there shall be no loss in the process of turning it into a more useful and more finished product.