American colleges lose half their students in the four years after matriculation. This high attrition rate with its waste of brain-power and cost in human well-being suggests that our institutions of higher education are not very conducive to optimal development of students. Especially those who begin the race for the diploma from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum are disadvantaged from the start. Recently, attention has been focused across the nation on the failures of the educational process at lower levels. However, the negative consequences of college failure or dropout for individuals and for society are no less than the consequences of dropout from the secondary schools.

It is probable that in half or more of all the dropouts and flunkouts from American universities, psychosocial difficulties are an important factor in the failure. Preventive psychiatric measures on the campuses could reduce both educational losses and future psychiatric casualties. These preventive measures and the role of mental health professionals in colleges are elaborated.

When social scientists look at American colleges today they are apt to view them as a system of institutions and practices which are not very conducive to optimal development of the great body of the student population. For example, Riesman and Jencks (1962, pp. 75-77) wrote of our colleges as “personnel offices, feeding properly certified employees into business and the professions.” Again, they depicted colleges as “gatekeepers to the upper middle class” and higher education as an “initiation rite for separating the upper middle from the lower middle class.”

Psychiatrists also view with some misgivings the effects of our higher educational organizations. Whittington (1964), former director of mental health services at the University of Kansas, has spoken of colleges as training grounds for participation in adult life, altogether too much like military training camps. In a satirical vein he described how a visitor from another planet would perceive our colleges. The man from Mars or Venus would view with some astonishment the way we march our youth off to the campuses each September, run them through assembly lines of registration with much confusion, and proceed to drill them in intellectual exercises which often seem to them alienated from their present interests and future pursuits.

Bower (1963), who was a consultant on school mental health with the National Institute of Mental Health, wrote of the apparent need of our society through its schools to classify some individuals as failures in order to preserve the feeling of superior accomplishment for others. Thus our colleges maintain a constant pressure on the student by means of holding over his head the threat that he will be labeled a failure in the competitive race for the diploma.

The visitor from another planet would almost surely be appalled at the waste of brain-power and the cost in human well-being due to the method of higher education still perpetuated by our affluent Great Society; a method which takes in millions of young people, but which regularly eliminates half of them as unfit. They come into college full of hope that they can find a place in the future in keeping with the American vision of the good life. But, as attested by Summerskill’s (1962) authoritative article on college attrition rates, American colleges lose half their students in the four years after matriculation.

The attrition rates vary from 12% to 82% in 35 studies reviewed by Summerskill. Another comprehensive study (Brode, 1964) also concluded that our present college mortality rate is about 50%. It can be argued that these figures are deceiving and inaccurate, that many dropouts later gradu-

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ate from another college. However, the calculations take into account such sources of error and still the result is an overall mortality rate of about 50%.

There are differences between small and large public and private schools. Small comfort may be taken from the fact that one's own institution may be less afflicted with the "virus of dropoutism" than other universities. Or, one may view higher education as the prerogative of the elite so that it is only right and just that the attrition rate is high. But the youth of today are caught between the demands of parents and society for ever more education on the one hand and the impersonal process of elimination on the other. The rejects are cast aside, stamped as defective or inadequate by the standards of higher education. Or perhaps that is too harsh on the colleges, because some students surely do play a part in casting themselves aside. (The fact is not ignored that some students need a moratorium, a period away from college pressures in which to establish more firmly their identity and goals. These students may return with renewed determination. They do not, however, constitute a large part of the dropout group.) Though it is recognized that the student contributes by his behavior to his elimination, this paper will concentrate on the part played by the college in this process.

By the time he comes for an exit interview, the student flunkout or dropout may rationalize that he really doesn't want a college degree after all. He would prefer some other career not requiring a diploma. Thus many dropouts leave quietly, accepting their fate and restructuring their aims. But more than a few are filled with resentment. They may internalize this anger (blaming the self), resulting in feelings of defeat and depression; or they may externally direct it (blaming some aspect of the system), resulting in defiant, rebellious attitudes. Either way is apt to be maladaptive and unhealthy.

A major portion of these dropouts are not so much academically lacking, nor are they below the successful students in intelligence and scholastic potential. Rather, they are unable to find sufficient congruence between their interests and goals and those of the college. They typically give as the main reason for leaving college, "lack of interest in studies." Possibly, it is a good sign in terms of the assertiveness and non-conformity of college youth that half do not fit themselves into the slots provided in higher education. Nevertheless, the net result from both an educational and a mental health standpoint is undesirable. A judgment has been rendered by themselves and/or the institution that they are not suitable for business or the professions. In America today this is almost equivalent to categorizing them as second-class citizens, since a diploma is so essential for the most desirable vocations and for social and economic position.

The underlying assumption on which colleges operate is that the dropouts are lacking in intelligence or diligence for studying. Little consideration is given the many complex factors which importantly influence learning ability. A Darwinian, survival-of-the-fittest philosophy prevails so that the college implicitly tells the student that he either sinks or swims; and if he can't swim at the prescribed speed, he is destined to sink toward the bottom of the economic pool. Those students who begin the race from the lower end of the social and economic spectrum are disadvantaged from the start.

WHOSE FAILURE—STUDENT OR COLLEGE?

Particularly now that the wave of post-World War II babies has reached college age, so that colleges have a selectivity higher than ever, there is little justification for this survival-of-the-fittest philosophy which rejects so many. The rationale for this method of elimination seems more in terms of the need of the college system than in terms of what is really best for the students. The need of the college system seems to be that of reducing its intake of students to more manageable proportions. Thus, it takes in more than it can digest, then regurgitates half back to the community as though they were uneducable.

Recently, society has been focusing attention on the failures of the educational