

R. E. Bell

“Too Much College?”

It may seem strange for a new University Principal to choose “Too Much College?” as a topic, and in fact I will not try to give my own balanced opinion of the situation. Rather, I will try to raise some questions and discuss them briefly, without supposing that I can come to final answers. I will consider the matter of too much college and ignore the many arguments that say we have too little college or just the right amount of college. I hope that everyone who wishes to comment on this paper will keep this basic unbalance in mind.

Leacock's lament

There are many different ways in which one can have too much college. The phrase itself is the title of a book by Stephen Leacock, published in 1939, in which he talks about there being too much college in the lives of those individuals who do go to college. It's not a funny book, although the odd flash of the old Leacock does show through, and it may be that its slight tone of bitterness is partially the result of Leacock's unwelcome retirement from McGill a few years earlier. Leacock likens our school and university programs to a convoy of ships that moves slowly down the widening stream of education, always at the pace of the slowest. Leacock believes that too much is being taught, that what is required is what he calls “a thorough smattering.” He also believes that individuals should be freer to move quickly ahead. He writes,

Any ordinary bright boy could strike out from the convoy, like a sloop from a fleet, like a fast motorboat from among freighters, and distance it by two years. By the time the heavy convoy reached its goal, he would have been there already for years, married, with one and a half

children, an established position, whiskers, debts, life. He would watch the convoy discharging its spectacled neophytes, thirty years old, timid in the daylight, shuddering at life, having lived for thirty years on other people's money.

Later on, Leacock acknowledges that this description is exaggerated, and certainly it is both bitter and over-simplified. Unfortunately the solution is not nearly so easy as Leacock seems to suggest. A "thorough smattering" will not do for a brain surgeon, nor a nuclear scientist, nor a professor of philosophy. Clearly we are going to continue to have long courses of study that are required for a very abstruse, or a very skillful, or a very learned pursuit, whether undertaken in order to attain a high professional position, or simply for the love of learning. Just the same, there is serious doubt whether all these courses really need to be as long as they are, and whether there need to be as many people indulging in them as there are. Far too often, our long courses of study seem to fail to endow people with a genuine love of the subject they are studying, and we regard these long courses as fixed requirements which, once satisfied, need never be thought about again. This applies not only to the long courses, but also to our whole educational system. At every stage — I quote Leacock again —

The students' one aim is to get done with it. There comes a glad time in his life when he has finished mathematics, a happy day when he has done philosophy, an exhilarating hour when he realizes that he has finished with compulsory English. Then at last his four years are out, his sentence expired and he steps out of college a free man without a stain on his character and not much on his mind.

Surely a good deal of the excessive length of these college programs could and should be absorbed by education that continues after the student has left the formal teaching institution, education carried on by the student himself and his friends for the love of the subject or for the sense of accomplishment that self-education brings. I am not here talking about evening classes or extension courses, worthwhile as they may be, because those are simply extensions of the formal teaching process. I am talking rather of the kind of thing that made Einstein write a book on the violin, or Crawford Greenewalt become a foremost ornithologist while he was still President of Dupont Chemical, to take two rather exalted examples. Somehow, instead of endowing our students with the ability to keep expanding after they have finished their courses, we stretch the courses out as if we were trying to

cover every contingency. I have the impression that they do better in this respect in Europe, for example; in any case we don't seem to do very well here. I have to confess that I haven't any clear idea where the remedy lies.

That was Stephen Leacock's concern with too much college, that formal education lasted too long, in part because it was not succeeded by self-propelled education. But there are many other ways in which we can have too much college, and I want to mention some of them.

Probably the most obvious one is that perhaps we simply have too many people going to college. This opinion is very strongly held in some quarters, typically by people of a rather conservative turn of mind. As an example, let me read from an article published recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Dr. Fritz Machlup, a noted economist of Princeton University. He makes five points, or theses.

First thesis: Higher education is too high for the average intelligence, much too high for the average interest, and vastly too high for the average patience and perseverance of the people here and anywhere; attempts to expose 30% or 50% of the people to higher education are completely useless.

Second thesis: Longer education — education beyond high school or beyond twelve years of schooling — has become the marching order of our society; since it cannot aspire to provide higher learning, longer education can only be thinner or broader.

Third thesis: Longer education, even if it is not higher education, may still overtax the interest, patience, and perseverance of most people; young men who have reached physical maturity resent compulsion or other pressures that impose on them several years of boredom and inactivity; the result is frustration, alienation, delinquency and rebellion.

Fourth thesis: If longer education becomes mainly thinner education, a given curriculum being stretched out over more years — for example, a sixteen year program covering what can be learned in ten years — it will have a disastrous effect on working habits and attitudes, even of those students who do not reject the system. . . .

Fifth thesis: If longer education is broader in that it adds new subjects and new approaches to those taught at secondary school, it may perhaps hold the attention of the more patient ones of the people in the age group, but we cannot expect any substantial benefits either for the graduate or for society.

I believe that Dr. Machlup's description is both pessimistic and exaggerated, in other words, that it represents a direction to watch rather than a description of the actual situation in most Canadian universities. Nevertheless there is a strong

point to be made; put in the most brutal way, it says that there is no such thing as universal higher education, because a universal education is average education and not higher education. Later in his article, Dr. Machlup puts it more starkly still. He says, "I define higher education as the level of scholarly teaching, learning, and researching that is accessible to only a small fraction of the people." This is right-wing talk indeed, and I interrupt myself here to remind you that I am giving only one side of the story.

This kind of discussion leads straight to some pretty serious questions. Is it true that universities are reducing academic requirements in the name of social justice and equality of opportunity? Is it true that a majority of the people find higher education "not relevant" to their interests and capacities? Is it true that in our rush to bring the "academically underprivileged" people into university, we are pressuring them into what most of them regard as a terrible ordeal of boredom and repression? If the answer to these questions is "Yes," if it is even a little bit "Yes," then indeed there is a strong argument that we have too much college.

how high the costs?

Closely related to the idea that we may have too many students in college is the undoubted fact that our university systems are getting terribly expensive. I want to refer here to an important paper delivered to a conference in Alberta in October, 1970 by Dr. Miles Wisenthal, formerly of the Faculty of Education at McGill and now Director of the Education Division of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics. His paper is called "The Threat of Increasing Numbers and Costs in Post-Secondary Education." How's that again? The threat? Why only a few years ago the Economic Council of Canada was telling us that the prosperity of the country was directly related to what they called "the stock of education in the country." They gave us tables and graphs to show that the standard of living and the number of people with college degrees marched upwards together; they stated flatly that the costs of education were not costs at all, but investments, and that these investments bore the highest rate of return of any form of investment known to man. True, there were sceptics around at the time who said that the observations of the Economic Council

were like the observation that owning a Cadillac would make you rich, because wherever you see lots of Cadillacs, you see lots of rich people. Now Dr. Wisenthal comes along, and points out, in effect, that owning a Cadillac makes you not richer, but poorer. Now I've gone too far; all I really want to claim is that education costs have become terribly serious, and that there is serious doubt about the automatic investment theory of educational costs.

The costs themselves are really quite astronomical. Education, with all levels included, is Canada's largest industry. It consumes over twenty cents of every tax dollar collected from all sources by all levels of government, an amount equal to 8.5% of the gross national product, the highest proportion in the world. We must be extraordinarily well educated; but as the old Pennsylvania-Dutch saying goes, "If we are so smart, how come we ain't rich?" Dr. Wisenthal's figures on enrolment show that if we call the 1961 university enrolment 100, the 1969 enrolment is 250, and he projects that if things continue in the same way, the 1975 enrolment will be 434 and the 1980 enrolment 582, nearly six times the 1961 figure. His cost figures are much worse. Here the university costs in Canada were 100, say, in 1961, and 508 in 1969, where the enrolment had gone up only to 250. But Dr. Wisenthal's cost projection for 1975 is 1,582, and for 1980, 3,188. On this basis, university education alone would be costing Canadians over 6 billion dollars per year by 1980, an amount approximately equal to the bill for the total of all education today.

Dr. Wisenthal goes on to say, "It would be impossible to explore in depth all the implications of the projected enrolments and related costs." I think I know the main implication, though; it just isn't going to happen. I do not think that one can make a very strong case that we have too much college in the sense of enrolments and costs at this moment, but I think it is easy to make a strong case for an immediate and dramatic slowing down of the rates of increase of enrolments and costs that we have been used to having over the past few years. There is no doubt that the expansion of Canadian universities for the past fifteen years or so has been a dramatic and desirable achievement; there is equally no doubt in my mind that we must have a dramatic slowing of this pace of increase. In some institutions, there will be an actual decrease for the next few years; this will be the case at McGill, for example, if our projections are correct, because of the change to the CEGEP system which shortens the university curriculum

by one year. The effect of the CEGEPs apart, we expect only a very slow growth in the next few years. As everyone knows, we and all the other universities are undergoing government pressure to reduce, or at least not to increase, our levels of expenditure. The same is true of universities across the country. The mighty University of Toronto is running at a deficit, and the University of Alberta, the richest of them all, has suddenly discovered that it is possible to spend more money than you get.

deflated expectations

There are many other aspects that the phrase "too much college" brings to mind, but I want to mention only one more. I think we have been in danger of having too much college in the sense of having too great expectations of what universities can do for us. Some students expect college to bring a magic awakening and wisdom; they are disappointed when they find that college attendance is a fairly ordinary, rather than a mystically illuminating, experience. Others expect the university to be a magic passport to a profitable and satisfying career, a guaranteed certificate for upward social mobility. Parents tend to share this expectation. The expectations of both these kinds of students are sometimes satisfied, but very often they are not. Like all institutions, the university works better for some people than for others and it does not possess any supernatural abilities of any kind.

The community of employers, including the government, also has very high expectations of the university. Employers use universities as talent screening agencies, and as certifiers of competence for employment. Apart from some professional faculties however, the universities are really nothing of the kind, and disappointment with their performance is almost automatic. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that during the period from 1968 to 1980, the supply of graduates will be in balance with manpower requirements. But this forecast begs the question, because, in its words, the projected demand includes not only the professional, managerial, and other people who have traditionally needed a Bachelor's degree or more, but also reflects "rising job entry requirements that make a college degree necessary for jobs once performed by workers with lower educational attainment."

In a word, many routine jobs that formerly did not require a B.A. are being relabelled and redefined so that they will appear to require one, and it may even be true that the downward movement of B.A.'s in the job hierarchy is pre-empting positions formerly open to those without college education, and in effect walling them off from advancement. Once again I interrupt myself to emphasize that I am giving only one side of the story.

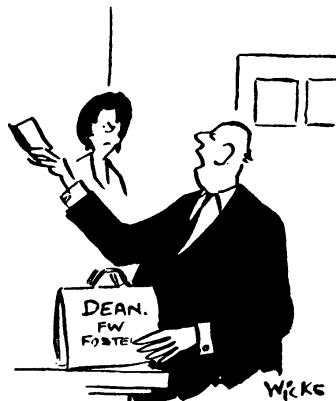
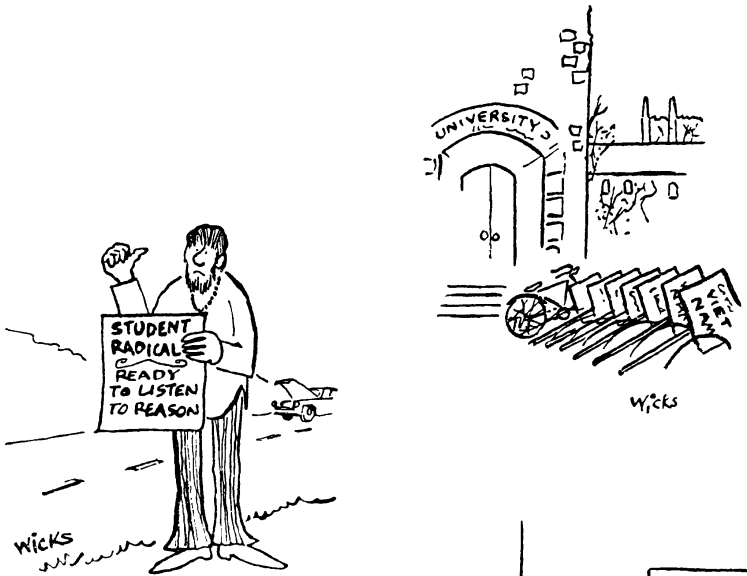
Perhaps the most serious form of what might be called too much college expectation lies in the view that the university is some kind of universal agency that can do anything. Some students and some professors regard the university as the great springboard for political reform or even revolution; they expect the university not only to teach and support them, but also to protect them while they attack the university with all their power, as well as the governments that make the whole thing possible. Other people, both within and without the university, expect it to handle every kind of social work and humanitarian project. Thus, universities are expected, almost as a matter of course nowadays, to lead the fight against pollution and for the environment, to set up day-care centres for all the children who may need them, to operate medical, dental, and legal clinics wherever they are needed, to operate the museums, to provide free library service, to draft the laws and staff the enquiries for governments, to provide unlimited free window glass for high-spirited rioters to break, and to prevent the police from preventing the rioters from breaking it — all this on top of the traditional university duties of providing football for the alumni, parking for the staff, and sex for the students. Well, the universities are over-loaded, humanly and financially, and they just can't do it. Fortunately, I think that the trend towards too much expectation of college reached its peak perhaps two years ago, and is now coming down to more reasonable proportions. I think it still has some distance to go.

Looking at the whole picture, do we really have too much college? On the average, I think not; but we have been lucky rather than wise and for the next while we must be vigilant to strive not for more university but for better university. I return to a sombre passage in Leacock's book in which he talks about the progress of the student through the educational system that he criticizes and its sequel. When this student comes near the end of life, "He looks back over the landscape traversed; a cold wind seems to sweep over it; somehow

he has missed it all, and it is gone. Life, we learn too late, is in the living, in the tissue of every day and hour. So it should be with education." We can easily have too much college, but we will never have college that is too good.

Ben Wicks

ON EDUCATION



"Sorry I'm late, dear. The students made me stay in."