

THOSE YOU NEVER READ ABOUT

By Dean J. R. Morris

Among the six-million college students in America, the most visible are those who fall easily into a type—because of the way they look, the feats they accomplish, the causes they champion, or the acts they protest—and these types have strongly influenced what we regard as typical of the entire generation. But more often than not, what is most conspicuous in a generation is not typical, in the sense of being a norm or average.

Obviously there were non-flappers in the age of flappers; unlost members of the lost generation. But the conspicuous minority gives to its generation its character, its peculiar essence, and the large masses remain essentially anonymous. More recently, the beat generation of the fifties arose out of the great affluence which most of that generation reveled in, but it was this bearded minority in sweatshirts and Levis and sandals who reflected the critical issues and problems of the time and who served as the most relevant prologue to the crises of the sixties.

Today there is such striking diversity among college students, with so many significant minorities, that we have come to speak of student “sub-cultures,” and no single epithet—such as “lost” or “quiet” or “beat”—has been found to capture their uniqueness. Consider the recent emergence of a seemingly unending parade of student types: There is the academic type, variously called the Scholar or Professionalist, whose highest priority is academic achievement. He is almost incredibly bright, knowledgeable, and serious in pursuit of his academic goals. Then there is the Disaffiliate or Hippie, who has “dropped out, tuned in, and turned on”—in one order or another. And

Dean J. R. Morris is professor of psychology and dean of University College.

the Activist, perhaps the most visible member of his generation, who finds much in this world to protest and he does so, not always wisely but with dedication and commitment.

It is the great visibility of these well-defined types which obscures our view of the majority, and we are left with distorted images of what the college student of today is really like.

What, then, is typical? Amid such diversity is there a norm—a mode of

behavior and attitude—that permits meaningful generalization? Several recent reports cast some light on the matter. Most notably, a large-scale study was conducted last fall involving a considerable number of the college freshmen in America (185,848 at 252 different institutions). The American Council on Education is responsible for the study, which has recently been published under the title *National Norms for Entering College Freshmen—Fall 1967*. In many ways, it is a disappointing study, since large areas of political and social attitudes were completely ignored, and much of the study is sheer trivia, unless you find it significant that 17 percent of today's freshmen can identify at least 13 species of birds, that 20 percent can mix a dry martini, or that 43 percent can bake a cake from scratch (only 16 percent of the men students were cake-bakers, but 77 percent of the women brought the average up).

For anyone who wants to test his knowledge of the younger generation, the study provides ample opportunity. Try, for example, the following five questions:

1. What percent of this year's freshmen went with one steady girl or boy friend in high school?
A. 22 B. 34 C. 52 D. 71
2. What percent feel that the faculty should dictate (without student help) what the curriculum should be?
A. 12 B. 26 C. 58 D. 85
3. What percent have fathers with college degrees?
A. 25 B. 35 C. 55 D. 75
4. What is the most popular major?
A. Business B. Education C. Engineering D. Mathematics and Science



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5. What do most freshmen consider the important objective of a college education?
 - A. To become an authority in a given field.
 - B. To become well off financially.
 - C. To be able to help others.
 - D. To develop a philosophy of life.

The answers are: 1.A 2.D 3.A 4.B 5.D.

There is an overwhelming array of such statistics, but what seems most significant are the inferences which one can make from them, the pattern of attitudes which the numbers reflect.

Most surprising, in these days of "free speech" movements and demonstrations for greater student freedom, are the attitudes toward institutional authority. Most students in the study held rather conservative views, in the sense that they felt the faculty should control the curriculum, should take decisive action against disruptive student demonstrations, and have a supervisory control over student publications. They do feel that they should have the right to criticize and evaluate the faculty, but they have no inclination to run the institution.

There is a conformist aura to much of their thinking. About 70 percent felt that freshman peers agreed on most issues, and fewer than 5 percent wanted to get involved in student demonstrations or protests.

When this information is viewed in the light of several other recent reports, a view of today's student emerges which will be surprising to some. In the Winter issue of the journal *Daedalus*, a report indicates that only 2 percent of the current college population actively participates in social and political protests; and while this is perhaps a conservative estimate, most observers would agree that the accurate figure is less than five percent. Nevertheless, only five percent means 300,000 protestors, and they are a more salient and impressive social force than the five-million-plus who remain unheard.

This is, I think, no accidental anonymity for the majority. The typical student does not seek visibility. He does not actively pursue positions of leadership or responsibility;

more frequently he slides down in his chair to avoid them. He is not aggressive in asserting his ideas nor bold in defending his opinions. He likes to play it safe, and he likes to avoid situations which single him out. As every student leader knows, it is not a simple matter to find volunteers among even a very large student body to assume positions of responsibility, to direct projects, to influence actively the will of peers.

While today's students are more fully aware and sensitive to the enormous problems which plague their society, most are perhaps best described as non-committers, to use the term of psychologist Roy Heath. They are not in any active way at war with the status quo. The world has been pretty good to most of them, and they find great security in "the way things are." Their most assertive behavior is limited to bull sessions and intramural sports, and their highest immediate priorities involve things personal—their education, their social life, their happiness. It is not yet time, in their view, to make their impact on society.

Yet, quite clearly, they are aiming beyond themselves, and there is a strong orientation toward service to others. In the ACE study, eighty percent agreed that to be able to help others was an objective of their college study. This is also reflected in their declared majors.

In the post-Sputnik days of the late fifties, the most popular declared majors of college freshmen were in the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering; and while these are still popular fields—as is business—there is growing interest in what are generally regarded as social service areas—education, the clergy, and the social sciences, lending credence to the expressed objective of helping others. Education (primary, secondary, and college teaching) was the most popular choice, with college-level teaching beginning to emerge as an increasingly popular major.

Choices of majors at the freshman level reflect more in the way of attitudes than anything else. If this year's crop is characteristic, over 60 percent of them will change their minds within a year. But their choices do seem

to reflect a prevailing value of the times, a value which is also reflected in the high regard that young students have for those who serve in the Peace Corps, Vista, and other service agencies.

The acquisition of knowledge has high status among today's students. It is obvious to them that the times demand it, and serious scholarship is a widely held goal. Almost 70 percent of this year's freshmen aspire to become authorities in given fields of knowledge, and in pursuit of this knowledge, a surprising 50 percent of this year's freshmen started college with the anticipation of doing graduate work. While many will not realize this aspiration (and others will develop it), such a large figure does reflect the prevailing attitude toward serious study.

There is, of course, an important difference between attitude and behavior, and many freshmen have not developed the mature and responsible approach to "plain hard work" which the realization of their goals demands. The fun-and-games aspect of collegiate life still has enormous appeal.

In some ways today's freshman is a more sophisticated version of his counterpart of, say, a decade ago. He is better educated, more widely traveled, and more socially competent. He has seen and heard and read more about politics, religion, sex, entertainment, human rights, war, and peace than his predecessors of any decade. Yet he still has not lived longer than eighteen-year-olds of any other generation, and there is no indication that he typically has better judgment, makes wiser decisions, or has greater emotional maturity.

Finally, there seems to be an acute awareness that the problems of our time are problems of human values, and if today's freshman has not reached the point of establishing a firm "set of values" or "a philosophy of life"—to use the phrase of the ACE study—he certainly expects his college education to help him do so. It is not enough for him to acquire knowledge without values, skills without purpose. He is not prepared to remain a non-committer, an invisible part of a mass society, and he looks toward education to give direction and meaning to his promised visibility.

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