



# ACORNS AND OAK TREES

A counselor examines a prevalent academic blight—the *studentius underachievingius*

By DR. J. R. MORRIS

IN RECALLING what he had learned during his first years of college, the great humorist, Robert Benchley, recorded the following items:

1. Charlemagne either died or was born or did something with the Holy Roman Empire in 800.
2. There is a double "L" in the middle of "parallel."
3. A sock with a hole in the toe can be worn inside out with comparative comfort.
4. A good imitation of measles rash can be effected by stabbing the forearm with a stiff whisk broom.
5. You can sleep undetected in a lecture course by resting the head on the hand as if shading the eyes.

These memories may be a little dated in these days when college freshmen are creating new heights of excellence and the educational process is taken a good deal more seriously than ever before, but they do serve to remind us that college students haven't changed all that much and the first year of college for a good many students does not turn out to be much more than Benchley's fragmented recollections.

At the end of each semester, I see large numbers of students—very bright and well-prepared for college work—who for one reason or another never got caught up by the prevailing seriousness of contemporary higher education.

As a matter of fact, last year 35 percent of those who failed to make sufficient grades to return for their second year had above average academic ability. They somehow never got around to applying it.

Interestingly enough, a great many of these students return after having been out of school for a year or more to establish splendid academic records. One student, who represents an extreme example, made 27 hours of F in one year; he returned after two years in the Army and made 32 hours of A. The fact is, of course, that he had the potential for such work all along, but for a variety of reasons was unable to realize it until the second time around.

Students who perform well below their potential are referred to as underachievers, and collectively they pose quite a problem to educators in their attempts to under-

stand and predict student behavior, because in many ways they are unpredictable and can be identified only after the fact.

Of course, some underachievers are victims of circumstances—personal, financial or family concerns—over which they have little control; others are students with rather serious psychological problems, and underachievement is symptomatic of their personal condition. But, for the most part, the underachiever is a young man or woman very happily engaged in the process of becoming an adult, but not fully able to handle adult responsibilities. Having spent several years looking across a desk at some of the world's finest underachievers, I find it easy to predict the self-conscious opening statement, the shrug of the shoulders, the embarrassed confession, the brilliantly concocted explanation, the appropriately contrite attitude, the firm resolution and the rosy optimism.

Because there are striking similarities among these students, I would like to describe a typical member of the species.

In the first place, he is 18 and just recently out of high school with high hopes of securing a college degree and, consequently, his place in society as a social, financial and educational success. He has not really considered any other possibility; and, if asked, he could not tell you when any decision was made about attending college. It has always been expected.

AT THIS stage of his life he is a person who lacks self-direction, not in the sense of choosing a major or deciding upon a distant goal—for on the whole these things make little difference at the freshman level—but rather in the sense of being motivated from within to carry out responsibly his academic and personal affairs. His behavior is directed largely by external pressures, so that between peaks of stress (like examination time) he basks in a valley of contentment, protected always by the sunny delusion that next time he will do better. Without the threat of examination or evaluation, he can readily get caught up in a snowballing of absenteeism and missed assignments, and suddenly he discovers that there is no longer time to catch up.

*Continued on the next page*

DR. J. R. MORRIS (left) is assistant dean of University College and assistant professor of psychology.



## The underachiever must experience the reality of failure to perform more effectively

He has a remarkable capacity to fool himself—what might be called a lack of self-criticality—and he gets himself into circumstances in which he can no longer win but without clearly ever realizing the seriousness of his situation. For instance, one student had missed 36 out of 45 class meetings because the instructor had said that he would not “count off” for absences. The student felt certain that he could pass the course without attending. (He couldn’t.)

On the average, a student has 20 hours a week between the hours of 8:00 and 5:00 when he is not in class, and normally this is sufficient time to do part-time work or to study or to just “goof off”—or to do all three—but the underachieving student has little sense of time or little judgment with regard to the utilization of time. Time, as he sees it, is his great savior. If he has enough time, he never doubts for an instant that he can build a bridge to the moon or convert stones into gold. Time, inevitably, is his undoing. He will “cut” a class at the slightest temptation. (As Wilde said, the only thing he cannot resist is temptation.) If three friends who do not have a 10:00 class decide to get a cup of coffee, the fact that he does have a class will only momentarily hold him in conflict before he goes joyfully off with his friends—oblivious to the fact that he has four free hours in the afternoon and so do the same friends.

If he has three days before an examination, this means two evenings to relax before one frantic night of prolonged study and a few hours sleep, before he goes in to flunk the examination.

He is a marvelous study in inefficiency.

**T**HE UNDERACHIEVER has an abiding faith that he cannot be hurt by the consequences of his own behavior, and what is frustrating for parents and teachers is that he cannot learn vicariously that he must “pay the price” for his own behavior. More often than not the underachiever must experience the reality of failure to become eventually more effective. He can be advised, admonished, warned, even rescued from the brink of failure by a sympathetic and interested professor—but he rarely profits from such intervention, because he “knew” all along that something or someone would take care of him.

The remark I so often hear is, “I just didn’t think it could happen to me.” And it is this disbelief that blinds the student from seeing the necessity of his own efforts. The very same student, with his next breath, will optimistically announce, “Next semester I’ll make straight A’s!” He doesn’t remember that he made the same statement the semester before.

All these factors are manifestations of immaturity, and it should not be too surprising that among 18- and 19-year-olds, there are large numbers of immature people. However, there are different ways of being immature, and the underachiever’s way is solidly self-defeating. He has a great deal of difficulty in postponing pleasure for work, in

seeing realistically beyond the moment, in realizing the distinction between his personal wishes and his personal responsibilities.

It is easy for an immature student to confuse the fact that education is basically a means and not an end, and if he sees it as an end, in and of itself, his reactions (“It doesn’t interest me.” “The subject is boring.” “I always have other things to do.”) are curiously reasonable, at least to him. When he can see that education is an arduous means toward a significant goal—which does not promise to entertain, gratify or even interest him in all of its particulars—then he can begin to get a more mature view of his responsibilities.

**T**HIS IS the change in attitude which frequently results from a student’s dropping out of school for a while. We are so sensitive to the negative connotations of the term “drop out” that we fail at times to see that it frequently has a salutary effect; and we are too often plagued with the anxiety that “if he drops out he’ll never come back,” a generalization that has little basis in fact. One university in following up students who dropped out after one year found that seven out of ten had college degrees a decade later.

What seems to many to be the worst possible solution to underachievement is frequently the best (if not the only) practical solution. For frequently the underachiever stays in school semester after semester, building up grade deficiencies, getting farther and farther away from the successful completion of his degree.

In a good many cases, the student must have time to “grow up,” before he can make effective use of a college experience. I know of no short cut.

In an academic situation, the individual student must of necessity be personally responsible for himself, his class attendance, his studying, his compliance with university regulations. No one can do these things for him. And the underachiever has not yet learned to do them for himself.

I have never known a student with the minimum academic ability for college work to fail who (1) had a perfect attendance record, (2) who spent two hours studying for each hour in class, and (3) who handed his work in on time. Three simple rules that the underachiever can never manage to follow. While some students can be helped through counseling, it is also true that counseling is not a magical cure-all; and, sadly, many students just do not respond to counseling efforts.

This is not intended as an indictment; it is meant only to point out that there is frequently no nice, clear-cut reason for one’s lack of achievement. The causes are reflected only in the total personality, at a certain stage of development. When parents ask, as they so often do, what can be done to change things, it is extremely difficult to give them a helpful reply.

How does one help an immature person become mature—on the spot, without the benefit of time, of experience, of living?

How do you make an acorn become an oak tree?