

## THE COLLEGE LAGGARD.\*

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### SUMMARY.

A group of 127 delinquent college freshmen were studied statistically and by a questionnaire sent to them and to their high school principals. An excess of laggards is found among the men as compared with the women and among the fraternity as compared with the non-fraternity men. The personality of the student plays a more important role in scholarship than does the college environment. Moral traits, such as resistance to social and other distractions, seem more important than intellectual incapacity in explaining failure.

It is with the hope of stimulating interest in the topic of laggardism in college rather than with the idea of solving its problems that I am reporting in this paper a brief study of a group of 127 delinquents in the academic college at the University of Minnesota. Since this is a comparatively new field of investigation and the study has been mainly local, the results are suggestive rather than conclusive and the opinions decidedly tentative. From the point of view of this paper the important thing is to call attention to the college sphere as an inviting field in which to study the hopeful type of mental retardation. There is one manifest advantage in studying the college laggard. He is sufficiently intelligent and mature for his own introspections to be valid testimony.

The group which I studied was selected by a rule of the faculty which says that any student who receives conditions or failures in 60 per cent. of his work the first semester shall

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not be allowed to register for the second semester. During the past three years under this rule 127 freshmen would have been barred. This is a little less than 9 per cent. of the entire group of 1454 freshmen. In this larger group, I have compared the men and women, the fraternity and non-fraternity students, and the graduates of public and private schools to see what proportion reach the laggard list. I have also attempted to inquire more specifically about certain factors which might influence scholarship, by sending a questionnaire to the laggard students themselves and to the principals or superintendents under whom they graduated from high school. As might be expected this questionnaire met with a sorry fate among the ex-students, only about one in six replying to it. This shows conclusively that the views of the students themselves cannot be reached by the questionnaire method. The replies of 29 superintendents, about half of those written to, when taken together with the students' letters, gave me hints on at least 91 of the laggard group. I shall take up first the statistical inquiry.

The condition at Minnesota for studying sex differences is unusually favorable. During the last three years in the freshmen classes the sexes were about even in number, 627 men to 827 women. The men and women take about the same courses and recite to the same instructors. In comparing the probability of reaching the delinquent list, I find that the fraternity influence is such an important factor that the comparison can better be made between the groups of men and women who are not members of fraternities. Of the group of 482 non-fraternity men, 10.4 per cent. were on the laggard list, as compared with 6.2 per cent. of the group of 675 non-fraternity women. As a check on this method of comparing the sexes I have figured the percentages of delinquent hours of work for the non-fraternity groups in the freshman class for the first semester of the year 1907-8. Here again the men show at a decided disadvantage although not so much as when comparing the laggard lists. The percentages of delinquent hours are as 18.7 to 14.6. Roughly

then we might say that the chances of the first-year men not passing in their work were about 28 per cent. greater than for the women, and of their leaving college for delinquency 68 per cent. greater. There would, of course, be considerable variation in these percentages from year to year. Slosson has published\* the percentages suspended for delinquent scholarship from Stanford University for last year. Comparing the non-fraternity men and women for all classes who live under similar conditions in the college halls at Stanford, we find an even greater relative preponderance of men. The percentages are as 12.5 to 3.6.†

That this difference between the sexes is due to the instructors having favored the women in their grading does not seem to me to be likely. If this tendency to grade women higher were noticeable, we should expect it to be shown more prominently in letting women pass than in giving them the high marks when they do pass. The opposite is true so far as can be judged from the grades at Minnesota for one semester. The women were favored, if that interpretation were allowed, only two-thirds as much in escaping failure or condition as in obtaining the two highest grades, (the grades "excellent" and "good").

The excess of the laggards among the men accords with what has been found by Ayers in the elementary schools. He states from a comparison of the records of 14 or 15 cities that "there is 13 per cent. more retardation among boys than among girls and that there are 13 per cent. more repeaters among boys than among girls." This, with the fact of greater elimination of boys in the grades and high schools, leads Ayers to conclude that "our schools as they now exist

\*The Independent, April 1, 1909.

†At Chicago University Slosson found that from 1904 to 1908 in the Junior College 13.6 per cent of the men failed and 5.8 per cent of the women; 19.2 per cent of the men were conditioned and 11.2 per cent of the women. In 1906 43 per cent of all women and 19 per cent of all men received honorable mention on graduation; 20 per cent of the women and 9 per cent of the men received honors for special excellence in particular departments of the Senior College. Independent, Jan. 6, 1910, p. 33.

are better fitted to the needs and natures of the girl than of the boy pupils."\* I am inclined to think that a similar reason accounts in part for the poorer showing of men in college. The work seems to them ill adapted to their future needs. The men, therefore, find college work less interesting than do women, they have less motive for studying, less desire to make good in that environment.

There may, however, be a native difference between men and women which is expressed in the hypothesis that the male type is more variable. If, then, we had a chance group, we should expect relatively more men to fail and to excel in any environment. Expressing this hypothesis as a mental trait, I suppose we might say that women may be more conservative, hence more conscientious in their work. If the sex difference in laggardism is due to variability, we should find relatively more men also at the other extreme in scholarships, unless some selective factor had disturbed the group. So far as the freshman grades for one semester are concerned, the men in the non-fraternity group show only about three-fourths the chance of the women of getting the two highest grades. I know of no high school data for testing how much selection disturbs the comparison of the sexes in college, but I suspect that the scholastically backward girl in high school is not so likely as the backward boy to go to college. It would also seem likely that outside inducements, such as business, would draw away the bright boy on graduation from high school rather than the bright girl. Until we have more information on these points we cannot conclude that the excessive failures of boys in college is due mainly to the poorer adaptation of the college to their needs.

Fraternity life is perhaps the most important outside influence on scholarship which can be inquired into statistically. Of 145 fraternity men in the freshman class at Minnesota during the past three years, 20 per cent. were on the laggard

\*L. P. Ayres, *Laggards in Our Schools*, New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909, p. 158.

list. Of 152 sorority girls, only 3.3 per cent. were on this list. This indicates about twice as bad a condition among fraternity as among non-fraternity men and only a little more than half as bad a condition among fraternity as non-fraternity women. The favorable record of the sororities is almost entirely explained by selection since for two of these years all but one sorority waited until the second semester to initiate new members. The tabulated records for all the marks for one semester indicate similar conditions.\* There were relatively more delinquent hours among fraternity than non-fraternity men in the proportion of 30.3 to 18.7 and less among the women in the proportion of 7.9 to 14.6. In contrast with these differences, both the fraternity men and women seem to get about the same percentage of the two highest grades as do their non-fraternity competitors.

Whether the record of the fraternity men at Minnesota is typical I am not quite sure. At the University of Nebraska it is certainly quite different. The registrar informs me that at the mid-semester examinations last year there was a smaller proportion of delinquent hours among fraternity than among non-fraternity men, the ratio being as 13 to 22 per cent. On the other hand, at Stanford University the condition resembles that at Minnesota. According to Slosson, for the last ten years "in round numbers about half of the men who have been suspended belonged to fraternities, although they have numbered about a quarter of the masculine student body." The delinquency records of the sorority and non-sorority women for one year at Stanford show no marked difference. So far as Minnesota is

\*Hours work for the first semester, 1907-8.

Non-fraternity men, total hours, 2730; delinquent, 18.7 per cent.; excellent and good, 42.8.

Fraternity men, total hours, 577; delinquent 30.3 per cent.; excellent and good, 41.3 per cent.

Non-fraternity women, total hours, 3076; delinquent, 14.6 per cent.; excellent and good, 57.6 per cent.

Fraternity women, total hours, 647; delinquent, 7.9 per cent.; excellent and good, 53.5 per cent.

concerned the condition among the sororities has been accounted for by their greater care in selecting members, while the bad record of the men's fraternities is more likely due to the distracting influence of fraternity life than to the election of poorer students to these societies.\*

In the minds of high school authorities social and fraternity distractions are apparently the most serious environmental influence on scholarship in college. Among fifteen possible influences specifically considered and checked over by them in replying to the questionnaire, these two were most frequently referred to when accounting for the failure of particular graduates from their schools. If we count as one-half those cases where the factor was regarded as a secondary influence, and they were asked to check in this way, I find that among the 72 students for whom the questions were gone over there were 30 cases in which too much society was checked and  $18\frac{1}{2}$  in which fraternity life was checked. While the number of cases is small, I believe that it is significant that these influences were the most frequently mentioned among the long list of environmental factors inquired about.

The importance of outside distractions is probably also indicated by what might be called the handicap of wealth. The evidence for this is not at all conclusive, but several straws seem to point in the same direction. The Minneapolis high school which had a noticeably worse record than the others is in the wealthiest district in the city; the answers to the questionnaire gave "superabundance of spending money" as sixth among the environmental influences of failure; the percentage of students from private schools who get on the laggard list is about twice as great as from the public schools, it is as 15 to 8 per cent. Among 50 students on the laggard list, about whom I was able to obtain the in-

\*At Yale Slosson notes that 13.6 per cent of the members of the senior societies were elected to the honorary scholarship society, Phi Beta Kappa, as compared with 24.2 per cent of the other students. *Independent*, Feb. 4, 1909, p. 251.

formation, 39 were from families which needed to make no sacrifice to send their children to college. This proportion of four-fifths is, I am convinced, considerably larger than in the class as a whole.

If we try to distinguish the relative importance of personal and environmental factors as causes of failure in the college, one fact stands out prominently. Of 78 students on the laggard list about whom I received reports from the superintendents or principals, 47, or practically two-thirds, would not have been certified to the university for admission on the basis of their high school records if our new requirement had been in effect. This rule provides that in order to be admitted to college without examinations the students must have obtained a record in all subjects offered for entrance of at least 75 per cent., providing the passing mark was 65, or of 80 per cent. if the passing mark was 75. This means that two-thirds of those who became serious college laggards finished high school by a very narrow margin, they were already laggards in their high school environments, at least they were so backward in their studies that the principals have agreed hereafter not to recommend that class of students for admission to the university. Comparing this with Dearborn's results we find how surely personal characteristics affecting scholarship are established by the time of graduation from high school. Dearborn has shown that in a group of 472 students of the University of Wisconsin the Pearson coefficient of correlation of the standings in high school and the freshman year in college was  $+.80$ .\*

This evidence that personality rather than college environment is the main reason for failure brings us to the crux of the problem of college laggardism so far as psychology is concerned. What personal characteristics are most prominent in determining college failure? I feel justified in submitting only one distinction for your consideration. Are

\*W. F. Dearborn, *The Relative Standing of Pupils in the High School and in the University*, Bull. of Univ. of Wis.

they primarily intellectual or moral characteristics? If we take as intellectual functions the capacity to observe, to memorize, to imagine, and to reason, and as moral characteristics the organization and control of the emotions, desires, and impulses, one might expect that the college would have to do primarily with the former and would reject mainly those who are primarily dull. From the study of this laggard list I can find very little to justify such a conclusion and some reason to believe that where one lacks in intellect four are incapacitated by bad habits of control and disorganized characters. To begin with, I have at least 27 instances which indicate that the student has passed high school work creditably or showed reversal of form after leaving Minnesota. Here then are about a third of the 78 cases heard from in which it would be rather absurd to suppose intellectual incapacity.

Some of these letters are decidedly interesting. There are two laggards with a high school average of 90 per cent. Of one of these the principal says he was "an excellent student at all times." Another principal says of one of the laggards, she "did fine work while here." Another, in the opinion of the principal, had "a fine intellect." Of one it is said, "her record was very good with us." Another was said to be the best debater in the Twin City high schools. His principal writes of him, "He was as strong a student as we ever turned out, greatly interested in debate. . . . He has entered a school in Colorado and has the highest scholarship in his school." Another, whose parents are well able to pay his expenses, writes, "I am paying my own expenses at the University of Wisconsin and seem to be doing much better work." Here is another of whom the principal says, "His class work in all subjects was 85 per cent. or more. . . . He was a bright and a good student. . . . He has made good in the college which he entered the next year." Another when at high school was said to be "an inventive genius. He was devoted to wireless telegraphy and constructed the stations at the high school. He had the keenest analytic mind, did

all of his work in high school well, but needed constant advice, one of the finest boys we have had." While the others of the 27 have not as good high school records as these, they at least had creditable records.

In looking over the replies to the questionnaire with the point in mind of judging the importance of intellectual and moral incapacity I find that there are 86 students on the laggard list about whom it is possible to estimate on the basis of the opinion of themselves or their high school officers. My impression from these letters is that the cause of failure in 14 cases might be assigned to influences extrinsic to this problem such as health and necessary outside work; in 15 cases to intellectual incapacity, and in 57 to moral reasons such as lack of purpose, laziness, and inability to resist social, fraternity and other temptations which interfered with work. In other words, four times as many failures seemed to be referable to moral as intellectual factors. Doubtful cases I never classed in the moral group. At best this is only an attempt to tabulate opinions and for only a small group of people, but it is an impression gained from reading a rather unusual collection of letters which had been gathered before the idea of testing this point was conceived. In rather aimless wandering we sometimes hit upon striking facts which might escape us if our attention were fixed upon a definite goal. If this is such a fact it may have important implications for the training of laggards not only in college but in the high school and grades. We are at least coming to learn, as Ayers states, that "the long yearned-for royal road to learning is not always to be found through the surgeon's knife." I should like to suggest that the supplementary teacher in elementary and secondary schools or the college advisor probably has a much bigger problem than teaching the laggard his lesson. It is the problem of developing habits of application, habits of resistance to the distracting temptations of other activities. It is the general problem of interest and control. This, rather than physical defects or intellectual incapacity, may prove the main problem of scholastic retardation.