

WHY BOYS FAIL IN COLLEGE

Herbert E. Hawkes

Of the boys who do not reach their natural academic boundary during the course of their college career, but who fail to get through, there are two main classes: those who try, and those who do not try. Many boys attempt seriously to make good, and really have the native ability to do so, but find it almost impossible to sit at a desk and concentrate on the tasks assigned. There is the boy who sits down to study, opens his book, but before starting on his work says to himself, "I think that I had better sharpen my pencil; it needs it badly." And when he has sharpened it, he observes that all his pencils need sharpening. And so on, until his time is gone and nothing has been done. Such nervous habits are not easy to uproot, and, so far as I can see cannot be eradicated by anyone but the boy himself. Others can see the difficulty, but the boy must take himself by the collar and make himself cultivate a poise and calm that smothers the fidgets. Until he does this, he does not really try, although he thinks he's trying and often spends more time in the presence of an open book than many a boy of equal ability who does good work.

A common cause of failure is a mistaken ambition for the boy on the part of his parents. More often than I should wish, I find a boy who is not showing any interest in his work, and who is not trying to do it with any distinction, because he is following a direction, mapped out by his parents, that runs counter to all of his interests and abilities. I have made a number of very warm enemies among the parents of college students by telling them that I am certain that the good Lord never intended their son to be a physician, or a dentist, or an engineer. It may be that the boy has ability enough to be anyone of these things, but the long and short of it is, he does not want to be. He wants to be a theatrical manager, or a businessman, or a book-illustrator. It may be unreasonable for the boy to turn his back on a fine opening in the dental profession in favour of business. But reason cannot control all of these matters. As well argued with a person that he ought to like onions when he detests them. As a general thing, the boy wins out in such controversies. And he should. Also, be it said, the parent whom I have offended usually comes around after a term of years and tells me that his son was right and that he is thankful to me for taking the part of the boy in the argument. If such a boy fails, it is because he cannot bring himself to try to do the work that is distasteful to him, and that he feels is leading him in the wrong direction. If the college is alive to its work of advice, such cases are caught before the failure is complete.

Another type of boy who does not try is the very bright boy who has always done his school work without effort, and who has never learned what real application is. He supposes that he can float through college with as little effort as he did through school. I sometimes think that the bright boy who has always depended on his ability to get things quickly, is the most pitiable object among all our failing students. For it is almost a tragedy to see all of this

keenness going to waste, and to feel that the entire opportunity which the college has to offer is passed up because of a too receptive mind. The cure for this sort of thing is again not easy, for it involves an entire change of attitude, and the forming of a completely new set of habits. No one can do this but the boy himself. All that the rest of us can do is to point out what is the matter.

The question of health, both physical and mental, is always one of the reasons for failure. If an adequate health service is available in the college, and if proper cooperation exists between the teaching staff and the office of the college doctor, an immense number of failures can be avoided, and, what is just as important, the reason for inability to do satisfactory college work can be clearly understood by the boy, his parents and the college authorities. In the case of poor academic work, the reason for which is not apparent, it is my custom always to ask the student to undergo a thorough physical examination. It is surprising to find out in how large a percentage of such cases the university physician finds an adequate reason for the difficulty. Tuberculosis, bad tonsils, sleeping sickness, poor digestion, various forms of mental and nervous difficulty have been brought to light by the doctor during the past few months, to the unspeakable relief of the student and enlightenment of the faculty. Occasionally, one meets an old-fashioned person like the father who told me a few months ago that, although we had arranged to have his son's tonsils removed without expense, he would not consent to the operation. He asserted that Allah put those tonsils in his son's throat for some good purpose, and that he would not stand for their removal. Since the boy was absorbing too much poison to permit proper application to his college work, we had to ask him to go home. Of course, such cases are rare. But it is necessary to keep constantly in mind the simple fact that there is no substitute for health, and that, however such a man may know, it is not of much value unless he possesses the physical vigour to bring it to bear on the world's problems.

Nowadays, when most ambitious boys want to go to college, the financial pressure is a very serious one. A few parents take the position that the boy should earn his way through college for the good of his soul. As a matter of fact, no boy ought to be compelled to earn his entire way through college if it can in any way be avoided. Not only does he get a mighty poor living by the process, but a mighty poor education as well. If the boy ought to go to college at all, he ought to be trusted to make good use of reasonable contribution from his parents toward his expenses. Any parent owes this much to his son. The boy did not ask his parents to bring him into the world. They are responsible for his being here, and consequently they have the responsibility for giving him the best equipment possible to meet the world's problems.

Nevertheless, many boys are cast entirely on their own resources for their college expenses. And it is always to the detriment of their health, or the value of their education, or both. Any boy can earn a part of his expenses without hurting himself, and in my experience many boys are willing to earn more than their share in order to save the burden of their

parents. But to see boys by the dozen take jobs lasting from six o'clock in the evening till two in the morning, six days in week; to see boys undergoing transfusion of blood to get money for their food and books, is a heartrending spectacle. Many of our boys of finest character and excellent ability are doing just this kind of thing. And inevitably it is an important reason for apparent failure. Most colleges do all they can with scholarship funds to alleviate this situation, but even when everything possible is done, every dean who knows his students can recall many cases of boys who have been obliged to drop out for the lack of a little money to see them through.

There are always a goodly number of undergraduates whose heads are turned and whose judgement is perverted by the attractiveness of athletic sports and literary (so called) activity. All of these features of college life have their place, and should receive the support of those students who are interested in them. In my experience, the awakening of a clear judgement as to what the college is for, is not as difficult as is often supposed. If a boy is too much interested in these side shows he ought to get out of the main tent and become professional. But most of them really are not, and if reasoned with by a friend who knows youth and understands the importance of the college opportunity, they will not allow themselves to be swept off their feet by athletics. I do not think that this sort of thing is as serious a reason for failure as do some of the critics of our colleges who see things from the outside and at a long range.

A few lazy bluffers drift into college and usually drift out again. Most of them have not found any serious interest in life, and some of them never will. It is usually wise to let them retire to the cold world for a reason and find out by experience how much demand there is for a lazy bluffer. Sometimes they learn their lesson and return to do first rate work. But the burden of proof is always on them to show that they mean business.

On the whole, the problem that the college dean faces calls for about the same diagnostic ability as the physician's. He is helping the young men under him to see life steadily and see it whole. If he can save boys from failure through foolishness, sickness and sin, he is doing his part of the job.

NOTES

Words Explained:

do not....boundary :	do not complete their education, fail to get the required degree, etc.
get through :	pass
native ability :	natural ability
concentrate....assigned :	give full attention to the given work
eradicate :	root out, put an end to

take ... collar :	deals firmly with himself
poise... fidgets :	balance and self-discipline which keep back nervous excitement
mapped out :	planned
run-counter to :	go against
long and short of it :	all that can or need be said
opening :	position which business is offering
detest :	have great hate for
win out :	succeed
controversy :	argument especially of public sort as in a newspaper
offend :	displease
himself to try :	does not feel inclined to try
alive to :	conscious of
application :	to apply
float through college :	pass, get through
keenness :	strong desire
passes up :	not used, not utilized
receptive :	able or quick to receive ideas
attitude :	point of view, way of looking at something
adequate :	enough, satisfactory
health service :	medical aid
apparent :	clearly seen
enlightenment :	knowledge
substitute :	person or thing taking the place of another
to bring it to bear :	apply
earn his way :	earn to pay for his education
mighty :	very large and strong
detriment :	damage, loss, injury
transfusion of blood:	putting blood from one living body into another
heartrending :	very painful
inevitably :	bound to happen, as a matter of course, necessarily
see them through :	enable them to finish their course

heads are turned :	feel very vain
perverted :	get turned to a wrong use
side shows :	games, etc. which are not a real part of college education
professional :	doing a thing for a living
swept off their feet :	allow themselves to be carried away
see things at a long range :	from a distance
bluffer :	one who bluffs to deceive others
drift :	go aimlessly
cold world :	hard unsympathetic world
burden of proof :	obligation to prove a given statement
see it whole :	see life in a balanced way and from all sides

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. According to the author there are some boys who fail because they do not try. Who are they? Can we help them?
2. How does mistaken ambition on the part of boys and their parents lead to the failure of the boys?
3. There are some boys who have done well at school but fail to make their mark at college. Who are they? Do you have such boys in college in your country?
4. How does financial pressure lead to the failure of students described in the lesson? Do you have similar cases in your country?
5. To what extent does the question of health lead to failure at college? How far can the college authorities with their medical officers help students in such cases?
6. What place would you accord to sportsmen in colleges?
7. There are some students who join college for the fun of it. Should they be allowed to stay?
