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# **SOCIAL MOBILITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Raymond A. Mulligan**

Relatively few studies have been made of social mobility in the United States within the last three decades. The available studies on this subject have investigated such aspects of social mobility as: The chances a worker has of being promoted to an executive or a managerial position,<sup>1</sup> the economic starting point of American millionaires,<sup>2</sup> occupational succession in families,<sup>3</sup> and trends in the socio-economic distribution of the nation's labor force.<sup>4</sup> Many have assumed that upward social mobility is a general tendency operating on all social class levels at the same rate of speed. It has been found that social mobility, instead of being a general tendency, varies for certain social classes in time and place.<sup>5</sup>

Studies on the subjective aspects of social mobility have revealed that: (1) Individuals with such marked qualities as aggressiveness, drive and self-interest tend to move into managerial positions more rapidly than others; (2) sales managers on the whole seem to display more forcefulness than ordinary salesmen; (3) individuals with personalities characterized by willingness to conform to accepted standards, along with self-confidence, emotional control, and other traits are more likely to move upward economically and occupationally than others; and (4) the success or failure of executives in large business enterprises is partly determined by the presence or absence of a "mobility drive."<sup>6</sup>

The accumulation of wealth, the possession of outstanding talent, beauty or handsomeness, personal achievement, and educational attainment are said to be some of the means by which an individual may improve his social position. However, of all the possible means of vertical mobility, education has been declared to be the most populous and easiest avenue of upward mobility in our society today.<sup>7</sup> If this assumption is valid a study of enrollment trends and the the social origins of students in institutions of higher learn-

ing should contribute to our knowledge of an important phase of social mobility in this country. In the present paper, the writer shall attempt to study social mobility through higher education by: (1) Analyzing college enrollment trends, and (2) examining studies on the social origins of students in institutions of higher learning.

### COLLEGE ENROLLMENT TRENDS

In proportion to population growth, and in absolute numbers, enrollment in our institutions of higher learning has increased greatly in the last seventy to eighty years. In 1870, according to various estimates, approximately 50,000 to 60,000 students were enrolled in colleges out of a total population for the United States of 39,904,000. By 1900 college enrollments had increased to 237,592 students and the population to 76,129,000; in 1940 some 1,500,000 students out of a population of 131,949,000 were enrolled in college; and in 1949 it is estimated some 2,500,000 students out of an approximated population of 150,000,000 were found in college. From 1870 to 1949 the general population of the nation increased by less than fourfold and college enrollments multiplied approximately fifty times.<sup>8</sup> However, it should be noted that post-war college enrollments were increased abnormally by students who either had their college educations postponed or interrupted during the war years, and by many returning veterans, many of whom undoubtedly would never have been able to attend college without the G. I. Bill of Rights. The year 1940 rather than 1949 in comparison with 1870 would thus be more likely to yield normal trends in college enrollments. Such a comparison results in a population increase of better than threefold for the period between 1870 and 1940, while during the same period college enrollments increased approximately thirty times.

The growth of college enrollment is also indicated in the following findings. In 1910 sixty-seven individuals out of every thousand in the United States entered college or a

similar institution. By 1938 one hundred and fifty persons out of every thousand attained this educational level.<sup>9</sup> Between 1910 and 1938 college enrollments increased by over one hundred per cent, whereas the population increase for this same period was only approximately 38 per cent.

In the twenty-five years between the two World Wars the proportion of college graduates among white American military selectees doubled, while the general population experienced an increase of only 21 per cent. Five per cent of all World War I white males selected for military service attained a college level of education, whereas 11 per cent of the selectees in World War II reached this same level.<sup>10</sup>

The increase in college enrollments shows similar upward trends as measured by the proportion of students in the age group of eighteen to twenty-four. In 1900 four per cent of this age group were enrolled in institutions of higher learning. By 1930 over 12 per cent were enrolled, and in 1940 sixteen per cent were enrolled.

The above statistics present a picture of an ever-increasing proportion of our population attending college. However, on the basis of this evidence it would be premature and injudicious to conclude that a direct ratio exists between the size of college enrollments and the magnitude of upward social mobility through higher education in the United States. The evidence may also indicate, or for that matter only indicate, that: (1) Educational mobility is increasing in this country; (2) more and more upper class families are sending their children to college; (3) certain occupational pursuits are now calling for advanced education; or (4) our institutions of higher learning have added to their traditional functions activities that were formerly carried on in other social institutions. C. Wright Mills claims that higher education increasingly does not insure a high salary, better occupational positions, security, or high social prestige as there is a decreasing need for higher education and skill in white-collar jobs.<sup>12</sup> The relative value of a college education appears to be diminishing, since the

long-term trend in many professional and semi-professional fields is one of overcrowding and uncertain earnings.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly social mobility has taken place and is continuing to occur through higher education, but to assume that everyone who attends or graduates from college is bettering his class position is unwarranted.

A truer picture of the situation appears to be that social mobility through higher education is a function of socio-economic background. In other words, the significance of a higher education as a social levator is relative to socio-economic background. For example, a college education for the son of an unskilled laborer might almost be a guarantee of vertical mobility; for the son of a school teacher a guarantee of at least social continuity or horizontal mobility; and for the son of a banker have no more significance than that of a social grace. A propos to the last point, Hollingshead<sup>14</sup> found in his study that the upper class did not highly regard education, either as a tool for a career or for knowledge in itself. In Elmtown, only about half of the boys and a third of the girls from the upper class graduated from institutions of higher learning.

If the assumption is granted that social mobility through higher education is a function of socio-economic background it follows that of the two broad socio-economic groups, white collar (professional, business, and clerical), and blue collar (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled), the latter is the one most likely to experience social mobility through higher education. The degree to which this type of social mobility is occurring in this country can be approximated by studying the social origins of students in institutions of higher learning.

### **SOCIAL ORIGINS AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

In the last thirty years, several studies have been made of the social origins of students attending public and private junior colleges, liberal arts colleges, teachers' colleges, and state universities. However, one has to exercise caution in

making generalizations from these studies as: (1) They were made over a wide range of years; (2) the methods used for the collection of data were not uniform; (3) in most cases a standard scale for the socio-economic grouping of gainful workers was not available or used; and (4) the institutions involved and their community settings differed as to type and size. Nevertheless, in reviewing these studies one salient factor stands out. The lower or blue collar classes (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled) were found to be greatly under-represented in all institutions of higher learning.

One of the earliest of these studies was made by Koos<sup>15</sup> in 1921-22. He found that students from the upper classes were heavily over-represented and the lower classes under-represented in sixteen public junior colleges, seven private junior colleges, three liberal arts colleges, one state university, and one private university.

A study of all pupils in regular attendance at the Lyons Township High School, La Grange, Illinois, from September, 1923 to June, 1925, was made by Towell.<sup>16</sup> Although the official records of the high school showed that 70.0 per cent of the graduates attended college the upper classes were over-represented and the lower classes under-represented. In fact, unskilled labor and the personal- and public-service groups had no representatives in college.

Reynolds<sup>17</sup> in a study of fifty-five public and private junior colleges, liberal arts colleges, and state universities found that approximately three-fourths of the students' fathers were engaged in proprietary, agricultural, professional, and managerial service. As in the studies mentioned above the lower classes were poorly represented.

Potthoff's<sup>18</sup> study of students who entered the University of Chicago as freshmen in October, 1924, is much more manageable in scope. He was interested in determining the extent to which the various occupational groups comprising the population of Chicago were represented among the students whose homes were in that city.

This investigation revealed that the upper classes combined had more than four times as many representatives in the university's freshman enrollment than the lower classes, although the latter combination was twice as numerous in the general population of Chicago as the former. Approximately 42 per cent of the students came from the proprietary class, a group which comprised 7.8 per cent of the general population. The professional class was represented by 18.6 per cent of the freshman students, and made up only 5.1 per cent of the city's population. Whereas 16.1 per cent of Chicago's population fell into the unskilled labor group only one student came from this class.

In a study of 1,080 women students in fifteen teachers' colleges it was found that the parents of these students were largely farmers and businessmen.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 15 per cent of the students' fathers were skilled workers and only 4 per cent were unskilled laborers. In this study the lower classes made a relatively better showing, but still they were poorly represented in proportion to their numbers in the general population.

More recently in two studies of women students at Indiana University, Mueller and Mueller<sup>20</sup> found a direct relationship between social class and higher education. In their study of 1944-45 they found that whereas the professional classes represented approximately 4.7 per cent of the state population, 17.7 per cent of the women students were affiliated with that class. The professional classes thus had an index of representation of 377. On the other extreme, the unskilled group, representing 20 per cent of the state population and 3.4 per cent of the woman students, only filled approximately 17 per cent of its theoretical quota. The data in their earlier study show almost identical relationships.

A study of the male students at Indiana University in 1947<sup>21</sup> found the professional group contributing the largest proportion of students, 13.9 per cent, while making up

only 4.2 per cent of the state population, and the semi-skilled group the smallest, 6.2 per cent, while representing 19.4 per cent of the state population. The white collar group (professional, business, and clerical) sent 54.7 per cent of the students to the university, while representing only 24.4 per cent of the state population, the blue collar group (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled) contributed 30.5 per cent of the students, while making up 60.1 per cent of the students, and the farmers (owners and tenants) contributed 9.4 per cent of the students, while representing 14 per cent of the state population.

The usual explanation for the under-representation of the lower classes in institutions of higher learning is that the children from these classes lack intelligence or have no interest in a higher education. To some extent this explanation may be true, but there is no denying of the fact that ambitious lower class children who are seekers after a higher education are often stymied by social and economic handicaps that prevent or preclude social mobility through higher education.

Most people, including some government officials and college presidents, appear to be totally unaware of existing social and economic barriers to higher educational opportunities. "Anyone can go to college who wants to" is heard on every hand. However, the question is, can anyone attend college who has such a desire. The available studies on this subject answer the question in the negative.

### **UNEQUAL COLLEGE OPPORTUNITIES**

Parental income was found to be directly related to college attendance in a study by Goetsch<sup>22</sup> of 1,023 high school graduates of above-average intelligence. The intelligent quotients of these students ranged from 117 to 146. At one extreme, 100 per cent of the students coming from families with parental incomes of \$8,000 and over attended college full-time, and at the other extreme, only 20.4 per cent of the students coming from families with parental incomes of



under \$500 attended college (1938). The higher the parents' income the higher was the proportion of children who attended college.

The relative influence of socio-economic background, and test-intelligence on the terminal educational level of students was made the subject of studies by Sibley,<sup>23</sup> and Warner.<sup>24</sup> These studies were based on data collected in an *ex post facto* investigation made in 1934 by the Pennsylvania State Department of Public Instruction and the American Youth Commission. The data collected included the names of Pennsylvania youth who were in the sixth grade as of 1926, in selected public schools, the highest educational level these students reached by 1934, their test-intelligence, and their fathers' occupation.

In Warner's analysis, 910 of the students with intelligence quotients of 110 or more were divided into two categories on the basis of socio-economic background. Of the upper socio-economic group, 93 per cent graduated from high school and 57 per cent attended college. Of the lower socio-economic group, 72 per cent graduated from high school and 13 per cent attended college. Although both groups were about equal in test-intelligence the chances of attending college increased as socio-economic background increased.

Sibley found in his study, with the influence of parental social status held constant, that a boy with an intelligence quotient of 112 or over held only a four to one advantage over a boy rated 87 or less in reaching an institution of higher learning. However, the influence of socio-economic background on a student's chances of reaching an institution of higher learning was much greater. It was found that boys with fathers in the highest occupational category enjoyed an advantage of more than 10 to 1 over those from the lowest occupational level in their chances of reaching an institution of higher learning. The conclusion was reached that as a student passes through our educational system his

socio-economic background increases in importance per se and in relation to test-intelligence in determining his chances of a higher education.

### DEMOCRATIZING COLLEGE OPPORTUNITIES

That social mobility through higher education can be increased and the going to college made less a special privilege of students from the upper socio-economic groups is revealed in various findings.

1. College enrollments increased sharply with the establishment of the student-aid program in 1935 under the National Youth Administration.<sup>25</sup>

2. Lide<sup>26</sup> in 1934 made a study of the social composition of a junior college organized under the Civil Works Educational Service. He found that approximately 48 per cent of the students came from the lower classes. In comparison with other known studies of this nature these findings represent an unusually high proportion of students from these classes. The results of this study may not be too surprising when it is borne in mind that this particular junior college was established by the federal government for financially circumscribed students, and secondly, the junior college was accessible to a large body of potential day-students. That it takes money to leave home in order to attend college is a self-evident fact that is often overlooked by the proponents of the educational status quo. Helen Goetsch<sup>27</sup> brought this out in her study. She found students who pursued a higher education in Milwaukee came from families with a median income of \$1,604; of youth who went outside of Milwaukee but remained in the state, \$2,571; and of those who went outside of the state, \$3,125.

3. In a study of the effects of the G. I. Bill of Rights on the socio-economic composition of the male student body at Indiana University, it was found that this form of government aid increased the proportion of students from the lower socio-economic groups by over one hundred per cent.<sup>28</sup>

In this study the investigator analyzed the socio-econom-

ic backgrounds of students with military experience and students without military experience. He compared the white collar group with military experience against the white collar group without military experience and found that the former made up 55.1 per cent of the veterans, while the latter made up 61.3 per cent of the non-veterans. The proportion of the blue collar group among the non-veterans was 19.5 per cent, and 32.3 per cent among the veterans. However, when the non-veterans were compared with the veterans who had never been to college (over 47 per cent of the veterans had had some college experience before entering the service) and who had worked at least a year before entering the military, the proportion of students from the blue collar groups increased from 19.5 per cent among the non-veterans to 41.7 per cent among the veterans. The semi-skilled group showed the highest increase, 228.5 per cent, the skilled group was next with an increase of 98.2 per cent, and the unskilled group was last with an increase of 71.4 per cent. The proportion of students from the blue collar groups showed an overall increase of 113 per cent.

### SUMMARY

1. In proportion to population growth and in absolute numbers, enrollment in our institutions of higher learning has increased greatly in the last eighty years.

2. College opportunities are not equal for all socio-economic groups in this country.

3. Public aid to education in the past has increased the proportion of students from the lower classes attending institutions of higher learning.

### CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the above limited study it may tentatively be hypothesized that:

1. Social mobility through higher education in this country is a function of socio-economic background.

2. Increased enrollments in institutions of higher learning do not automatically mean increased social mobility.

3. The opportunities for social mobility through higher education in this country are limited because of the selective nature of higher education and the diminishing value of a college education.

4. A program of national scholarships and fellowships would offer the only opportunities many capable young men and women in our society would have of attending college, and thus enable them to improve their social positions in our social structure. The chances are that such a program would increase the amount of social mobility in this country, which is said to be decreasing, and thus help to prevent the development of a rigid class system which is anathema to this nation's tradition of classlessness, and secondly, since it is no longer merely a matter of opinion that there is a great deal of latent talent among the children of the lower classes, such a system would enable our society to make a more efficient use of its collective ability than it has heretofore done.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 1937, pp. 70-71, and chapter 12; F. W. Taussig and C. S. Joslyn, *American Business Leaders*, 1932, chapters 10 and 11; and W. L. Warner *et al.*, *The Social System of the Modern Factory*, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Sorokin, *Social Mobility*, 1927.

<sup>3</sup> See P. E. Davidson and H. D. Anderson, *Occupational Mobility in an American Community*, 1937; R. Centers, "Occupational Mobility of Urban Occupational Strata," *American Sociological Review*, 13 (April, 1948), 197-203; S. Adams, "Regional Differences in Vertical Mobility in a High Status Occupation," *American Sociological Review*, 15 (April, 1950), 228-235; and C. C. North and P. K. Hatt, "Jobs and Occupations: a Popular Evaluation," *Opinion News*, Sept., 1, 1947, pp. 3-13.

<sup>4</sup> See A. Hansen, "Industrial Class Alignments in the United States," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 17 (Dec., 1920), 417-425; T. Sogge, "Industrial Classes in the United States in 1930," *ibid.*, 28 (June, 1933), 199-203; and A. M. Edwards, *Comparative Occupational Statistics, U. S., 1870-1940*, 16th Census, U. S. Bureau of Census, 1943, pp. 183-189.

<sup>5</sup> See Hansen, *op. cit.*, Sogge, *op. cit.*, Edwards, *op. cit.*, Adams, *op. cit.*, and C. W. Mills, "The Middle Classes in Middle-sized Cities," *American Sociological Review*, 10 (April, 1945), 242-249.

<sup>6</sup> See D. S. Bridgman, "Success in College and Business," *Personnel Journal*, 9 (Jan., 1930), 1-19, and W. L. Warner *et al.*, *Social Class in America*, 1949, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> See W. L. Warner *et al.*, *ibid.*, p. 23, and W. L. Warner *et al.*, *Who Shall Be Educated?*, 1944, p. 36 and p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> See P. H. Landis, *Population Problems*, 1943, p. 24, J. F. Cuber, *Sociology*, 1951, p. 512, and S. Eldridge *et al.*, *Fundamentals of Sociology*, 1950, p. 547.

<sup>9</sup> W. L. Warner *et al.*, *Who Shall Be Educated?*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> J. F. Cuber and R. A. Harper, *Problems of American Society: Values in Conflict*, 1951, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> See P. H. Landis, *Man in Environment*, 1949, pp. 304-305.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by R. Tunley in "Is Your White Collar Strangling You?," *American* (May, 1951), p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> See "Wage Earners Rival Bosses," *U. S. News and World Report*, 29 (Dec. 1, 1950), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> A. B. Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth*, 1949, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> L. V. Koos, *The Junior College*, University of Minnesota press, 1924.

<sup>16</sup> J. F. Towell, "The Social and Educational Status of the Pupils in a Residential Suburban Community," *School Review*, 37 (Jan., 1929), 49-58.

<sup>17</sup> O. E. Reynolds, *Social and Economic Status of College Students*, Doctor's Thesis, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1927.

<sup>18</sup> E. T. Potthoff, "Who Goes to College," *Journal of Higher Education*, 2 (Jan., 1931), 294-297.

<sup>19</sup> M. Moffett, *Social Background and Activities of Teachers' College Students*, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1929.

<sup>20</sup> J. H. Mueller and K. H. Mueller, "Social-Economic Background and Campus Success," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 3 (Summer, 1943), 143-150, and "Socio-Economic Background of Women Students at Indiana University," *ibid.*, 9 (Autumn, 1949), 321-329.

<sup>21</sup> R. A. Mulligan, "Socio-Economic Background and College Enrollment," *American Sociological Review*, 16 (April, 1951), 188-196.

<sup>22</sup> H. B. Goetsch, *Parental Income and College Opportunities*, Teachers College Contributions to Education, No. 795, Columbia U., 1940.

<sup>23</sup> E. Sibley, "Some Demographic Clues to Stratification," *American Sociological Review*, 7 (June, 1942), 322-330.

<sup>24</sup> W. L. Warner *et al.*, *Who Shall Be Educated?*, pp. 51-52 and 175-176.

<sup>25</sup> See W. L. Warner *et al.*, *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> E. S. Lide, "The Social Composition of the CWES Junior College in Chicago," *School Review*, 43 (Jan., 1935), 28-33.

<sup>27</sup> H. B. Goetsch, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> R. A. Mulligan, *op. cit.*; also see E. L. Clark, "Veterans as a College Freshman," *School and Society*, 46 (Sept., 1947), 205-207.

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