

The Pre-Baccalaureate Program at the College

An experimental effort to identify higher educational potential among disadvantaged youth may yield new data on the controversial question: How valid are current admissions criteria?

by Leslie Berger

THE VALIDITY OF current criteria for admission to the City College has become a critical question in recent months. Some faculty members express deep concern about maintaining standards by calling for even more stringent academic admissions requirements than are now in use. It is their strong belief that such admissions requirements and the ultimate quality of education are directly related to one another. They argue from statistical grounds that the chances of a student's success in college is in direct proportion to his high school and entrance examination grades; and they maintain, therefore, that the quality of instruction after the student is in college will also vary according to the level of these admissions requirements.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that higher education should be made accessible to a larger segment of the population. They maintain that current admissions criteria are measures of past achievement rather than potential ability and that they reflect middle-class cultural experience — that their practical effect is to act as barriers to

many disadvantaged persons seeking higher education.

New criteria for selection of college students are constantly being suggested and debated. Qualities of leadership and adeptness in human relations are frequently recommended in lieu of more traditional academic bases of student selection. Personal interviews, and/or recommendations by principals, guidance counselors and teachers have also been advocated as a basis for identifying promising college students seeking admission to City College.

Evaluating the relative worth of these alternate methods of selection poses many difficulties. For example, how much weight should reasonably be given to the recommendations of high school administrators and teachers, when the students' inadequate academic averages for college admission testify to the failure of these same teachers and administrators to guide students to full achievement over a long period? Again, it is at best questionable whether natural endowments of leadership and/or social graces are necessarily indicative of an individual's



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intellectual or aesthetic capacities. Gifted students will often create poor impressions in an interview (and vice versa); and interviews often produce poor conclusions that reflect unsubstantiated or undefined criteria on the part of the interviewer. Yet on the other side of the argument, it can be pointed out that many students who meet the highest traditional standards of admission fail in college.

It is interesting and pertinent to note here that people on both sides of the issue are emphatically questioning student selection methods. Yet it may very well be that the most constructive effect of the dialogue will be the focusing of attention on a reevaluation of *teaching* methods.

The fact is that some 30 per cent of City College students with good high school averages and college board scores fail to complete college. In the face of such a statistic, is it time, then, to reevaluate and improve both our selection predictors and our teaching methods? It is hoped that one of the dividends of the College's Pre-Baccalaureate Program, instituted in the summer of 1965, will be data that can be used in any future reappraisal of this kind.

As presently constituted, the Pre-Baccalaureate program (which is supported through a special grant) provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds — a majority are Negro and Puerto Rican youngsters — with a protracted and individualized entrance process which may last a year or longer. First, we seek to determine as soon as possible whether a student can reasonably expect to matriculate and eventually earn a baccalaureate degree at City College, or whether he should be advised and encouraged to pursue other goals elsewhere.

The student who is judged qualified to pursue the baccalaureate degree has an opportunity during this early period to improve his scholarship to meet standards he could not meet at the time of his initial application. Teachers and counselors work very closely with each student on a personal and highly individualized basis. Placement examinations are administered to all students in English, reading skills, mathematics and foreign languages. On the basis of the test results, the Pre-Baccalaureate student may attend the same classes as regular degree candidates or may be assigned to specially designed sections of courses, when the academic

department considers this advisable.

The specially devised Pre-Baccalaureate sections and courses are designed to integrate remedial work with college level work. A student in such a course is expected to complete the college syllabus for the regular credit course. To accomplish this dual remedial and academic aim, some of the classes meet for one or two more clock hours per week than regular courses covering the same material. Individual tutoring is available to students seeking to remedy past deficiencies, as well as to more capable students who wish to progress more rapidly.

The Pre-Baccalaureate program employs whatever pedagogical, administrative and psychological services are available on the campus to develop an attitude in the student that will enable him to find pleasure in educational accomplishment and that will provide him with a reasonable expectancy of achieving professional status after graduation. For disadvantaged young people the acquisition of such attitudes or prospects often involves a massive change both in personal outlook and in daily routines and habits. It is believed that an experience of mastery and success is a potent motivational force for these disadvantaged students whose backgrounds are so often filled with experiences of frustration and failure. Thus, every effort is being made at the College to provide the student with an educational situation in which chances for success are maximized.

It should be emphatically noted that this prolonged Pre-Baccalaureate process, while providing a challenging experiment in creative teaching, involves

no compromise with City College standards. The above-described procedure of offering special sections and courses protects the matriculated students by "preserving" sound educational standards, at the same time that it provides the Pre-Baccalaureate student with optimum chances for success. Once a student is matriculated as a baccalaureate candidate, he attends regular City College classes in his subjects and must meet the retention standards in effect for all students.

THE PRE-BACCALAUREATE Program at the College is now in its second year. The program began in September, 1965, with 113 students. One year later, 81 of these students are still in attendance.

While it is still too early to draw conclusions, a pattern is beginning to emerge. About half of those who entered have been able to maintain approximately a "C" average or better, which is the grade average of the majority of students in good academic standing. Significantly, there have been no appreciable differences between the grades received by Pre-Baccalaureate students attending the special classes and grades received by these students in "regular" classes in which matriculated students are also enrolled.

Though predictions cannot yet be made on this early evidence, it is hoped that about 50 percent of the Pre-Baccalaureate students will eventually matriculate and receive a City College degree. And it should be emphasized that these are all students who were clearly ineligible by conventional City College admission criteria, which last spring required a composite score (high

school average plus Scholastic Aptitude Test score) of 169. (As noted earlier, of those who do meet these requirements, only about 70 percent are expected to graduate.)

It should perhaps also be mentioned that several of the Pre-Baccalaureates are doing exceptional work. One young man, for example, with a high school cumulative average of only 70.2 has already completed 30 college credits with a straight "A" average, with the exception of Physical Education and one remedial English course in which he received "B"'s. (He received a grade of "A" in the regular English course.) Courses in which he received "A" included Spanish 3, and Russian 51 and 52. Another student with a high school average of 75.6 has completed 16.5 credits with a "B—" average, including an "A" in Social Studies 1 and "B"'s in Math A 36 and Math 2. One of the girls with a high school average of 79.84 has completed 29 college credits, all with "A"'s and "B"'s, with the exception of one "C", in Art 1.

Based on these early but promising results, 190 new students were admitted to the program in September, 1966; and current plans call for admission of an additional 100 students in February, 1967.

In its present form, the Pre-Baccalaureate Program is an innovation. However, it should be noted that the School of General Studies at the College has provided educational opportunity for more than 50 years for thousands of students whose educational backgrounds differed in many ways from those of the average entering City College freshman. For exam-

ple, it has accepted as non-matriculants those who were not academically eligible as baccalaureate candidates, because they had not taken the proper secondary school courses or had not met the grade requirements set for matriculation. As non-matriculants these students were thus given a "second chance" to prove their ability to perform at a college level, and many were able to do just that. In turn they were then accepted by the College as regular baccalaureate candidates, with full credit for work taken as non-matriculants.

EACH POLITICAL or social upheaval abroad — early in the century in Eastern Europe, later in Central and Western Europe and more recently in the Orient and Latin America — has brought different groups of foreign-born students to the College through the School of General Studies. It is in the spirit of this tradition that the City University and City College are today trying to meet their responsibility toward the Negro and Puerto Rican minorities.

This responsibility is both a challenge and a rare educational opportunity. By evolving new and creative approaches to aid in the quest of these groups for higher educational opportunities, the College is attempting not only to preserve the tradition of high educational standards at City College, but also to uncover new insights at the very heart of the educational process. Thus, in time, all students and faculty members will be beneficiaries through the fulfillment of City College's moral and educational responsibility during this period of social revolution.

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