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Parents Letter #4

Dear Parents of '71:

First, let me wish to you, and to your '71 sons who are our bond of mutual interest and concern, a very good New Year. Most of you will still be together when this letter reaches you - unless something unexpected happens between this writing and the scheduled mailing date, or in the vagaries of the mails thereafter.

First Term Grade Reports

Since this letter is written to accompany the grade reports of your son, we should say something about first-term grades. Very likely there is in your home at this moment too intense a concern about grades: too intense for a variety of reasons in a variety of situations, but, speaking more generally, because (a) grades are never a precise measure of learning and (b) grades for the first ten weeks of a student's college career are often a very imperfect measure of his intellectual potential or his effort.

Your son will get his grades when he registers for the winter term on January 3. He probably already knows pretty well what they are. Anyway, you will now be able to give him The Word from the enclosed report. (One freshman was in just before leaving for the holidays, very eager to get his psychology grade. I told him it hadn't been reported yet, and suggested he could give his instructor the usual self-addressed postcard. "I don't want it on a postcard!" he said.)

These grades won't mean much to you without some frame of reference. (I discovered this when I got an IBM grade report like the enclosed for one of my sons who went to another college, without any explanation: this is one of the reasons why these Parents Letters have been concocted.) Based on the experience of recent years, the breakpoints between the quarters of the Class of 1971 on the basis of point average will be: top quarter: 5.0-4.0; second quarter: 3.5-4.0; third quarter: 3.0-3.5; lowest quarter: 3.0 and below.

In a "Happy New Year" letter like this one, it would be nice if all these reports could be straight A's, but there will be only about a dozen or so of these.

If your son has always up to now been in the highest quarter in school (as most of them have) and now appears in one of the lower quarters (as three quarters of them do), I can only remind you that he is working now as a member of a rather carefully selected group of students whose range of ability is much higher and narrower than the range of abilities of students in almost any secondary school; and only one-fourth of them can be in the top quarter! Some of us do our sons little justice by holding up to them unreasonable standards of achievement: sometimes, perhaps, because we achieved at that level ourselves; often because we didn't and are looking to him to realize our unrealized ambitions. The compassion of college counselors and deans is spent in largest measure on the student who is pushing himself as hard as he can and being pressured by parents for higher grades than he is earning.

Many of us who make up American society pay little daily heed in the family circle to the life of the mind and to excellence in its exercise. If our sons and daughters combine qualities of competitiveness and competence, they may "compete" themselves into selective colleges and arrive on the campuses without any real understanding of why they are there. If this happens and they get to college without any real feeling of the importance of intellectual exercise for its own sake, this is not their fault, but ours. Certainly the colleges contain more students whose motivations are either of the wrong kind or are insufficient in degree than society can afford. (The undermotivated ones are affectionately known as "loose hangers" in the undergraduate vernacular.)

During the fall many freshmen who participate in the College's financial aid program have expressed to me their concern over the danger of losing their scholarships if their grades were as low as they feared. It is true that scholarship men generally are a group of superior promise and that the Board on Admission and Financial Aid holds them up to academic standards which are in keeping with their individual promise. However, the Board has never had an inclination, on the basis of first term records, even when these are quite disappointing, to pull the rug out from under scholarship men as long as there are evidences of serious effort on their part. The Office of Financial Aid, in fact, omits sending letters of warning at this time to freshmen whose records are obviously below the acceptable level, assuming (a) they realize this, and (b) they are determined to improve during the coming term.

Has your son during the last term made reference to his doing what is known in the collegiate trade as "heavy booking"? (In periods of maximum intensity it is "power booking.") Allowing, as we have previously, for a bit of hyperbole, there is nevertheless evidence in statistics released by Baker Library concerning book circulation in recent years that the rich resources of the library are being used by this college generation much more actively than heretofore.

#### The January Syndrome

As you receive this, your son will be thinking about his return to Hanover and may indeed be on his way. This is therefore an appropriate time for description of what I call the January Wish-I-Were-Somewhere-Else Syndrome, to which I alluded in the November letter. This is a phenomenon which will be manifesting itself in residential colleges all over the country during the next few weeks. Happily for Dartmouth, the calendar of our three-term, three-course program removes one of the main elements of the syndrome. Your son came home for the holidays with his first college finals under his belt. They weren't anywhere near as traumatic an experience as the sophomores had made him believe. The fact that these first finals are now behind him, for better or for worse, gives the Dartmouth freshman a welcome feeling of relief and of belonging.

But speaking generally, the campus-bound freshman as January approaches is not a happy man. Home had never looked so good to him. You were never so liberal with the keys to the car. The brothers and sisters, if any, were never so indulgent. As for the girl, either (a) she never looked so good, or (b) they broke off, or (c) the worst happened and both of these things occurred. (The latter is known as being "shot down.") None of these three eventualities tends to cheer the student in January as he sets off to return to his college campus. The sense of adventure and discovery which dominated the September departure is missing. In its place is a sort of delayed homesickness. So... the freshman, having vastly enjoyed the all-too-brief hometown exhilaration of being The Returned College Man, goes back to college to face, under most college calendars, the culmination of all his academic insecurities as the dreaded finals approach. Even the Dartmouth freshman, with that particular ordeal behind him, turns his face toward Hanover with a sobering sense of still having his way to make as a college man.

So in January in residential colleges everywhere, freshman deans are talking to freshmen who come in to say they think they should quit college, or transfer; go to work, or join the army, or travel. They talk about their health, their sinuses, the climate; about your health or business problems, or the illness of aunts or grandparents; they yearn for the life of the big city (whether or not they have ever lived in one); they have suddenly discovered that a college nearer home (where possibly a particular girl happens to be attending or planning to enroll) offers courses especially well adapted to their suddenly discovered needs; etc., etc. Things they never mention are (a) homesickness and (b) worry over finals.

For this description of the January Wish-I-Were-Somewhere-Else Syndrome, I have drawn on various colleagues at other colleges. It's a comfort to all of us to realize how universal this experience is.

### Have They Been Happy Holidays?

Our calendar provides a Christmas recess of generous length, but even so you probably will not need all your fingers to count up all your son's evenings at home. Indeed, I surmise you would not find it mathematically too difficult to compute the total of waking hours spent under the family roof, especially if you eliminate those spent at the table and around the refrigerator.

With your sons perhaps at home to read over your shoulders, I hope to sound not too flippant about the foibles of freshmanism. However, one of the many fine qualities of the typical freshman is his honesty and candor, and I am sure he will not mind a few general observations concerning characteristics that may irritate or amuse his elders. After all, parents are People and they are entitled to a Point of View. The main purpose of these letters, beyond the transmission of grades and other essential information, is to make a modest effort at strengthening the insights and the understanding between home and campus; and in this effort I try never to say to a parent anything I would not be prepared to say to the son, or vice versa.

So let's face it: a college freshman is likely to be a pretty self-centered fellow. At the freshman's age and in this once-in-a-lifetime situation of feeling that one must make his place quickly in a new peer group of substantial size and of high and varied abilities, there is a great deal of self-questioning; of self-evaluation in relation to academic challenges, in relation to fellow-students, in relation to girls, in relation to everything. In simple fact, freshmen spend a lot of time thinking about themselves. It is understandable if parents, in the face of this sometimes massive self-preoccupation, occasionally feel rebuffed. It is an odd but widely recognized fact that it never occurs to young men of this age, who are themselves extremely sensitive to criticism from their families, that parents also have feelings, and can also be sensitive about being "wanted."

Some of you have observed, usually with more amusement than irritation, exaggerated assertions of independence by word or deed by these young men who know as well as you do (hence the instinct to assertiveness) their degree of continuing dependence in more than just the financial sense. If some of your freshman sons seem to have all the answers, I can only warn: wait until they are sophomores!

Occasionally tensions build up during the first long vacation and threaten a serious break between the student and his family. "How would you feel," I asked a freshman in one of these situations, "if your son, after having spent only five evenings at home in a three-week vacation, disappeared entirely from the family ken for his last days - including New Year's Eve - and dashed home from the Rose Bowl with just enough time to pick up

his suitcase and add a few final touches to the chaos of his room before rushing off with friends to the airport?"

Well, things usually work out a little better than that and leave a tolerant afterglow of loving amusement behind them. Take as an example this letter which a mother wrote me during a recent January in response to that year's version of this Parents Letter:

"Yes, indeed, the College Man returned! He visited his high school, making sure to wear his 'Dartmouth' jacket although the weather called for the winter coat; and from his talk I later gathered that he made quite an impression. He visited his former French teacher, giving her suggestions which she appreciated, of course. My own ego is only beginning to inflate since his departure. My grammar has been corrected; world events have been explained to me with great patience; and in simple language I have been psychoanalyzed daily. How I ever managed to get through college and hold down a fairly responsible job is still a mystery to me but much more so to him! Yes, it's amazing how much they learn in four short months of college.

"However, I noted a change in him. Living with eight boys has made him more considerate. He waits on himself without complaint and is much nicer to live with..."

#### Since the Last Letter...

As this is being written a few days in advance of its scheduled mailing, grades are coming in and there's no way of guessing what '71's final record for the term will be, but its mid-term record was good. You'll remember that in the November letter I predicted that almost half of the class would get at least one D or E. As it turned out, only 226 out of 826 received one or more reports. Reported in one subject, 189; in two, 34; in three, 3. Total: 226. The Class of '70, of comparable size, showed, respectively, 164, 32 and 8 for a total of 204.

The Class of 1971 has organized its Freshman Council and has elected its officers, as follows: Pete Hutchinson, president, of Rochester, New York; Pete Elitzer, vice president, of East Greenbush, New York; Garret Rasmussen, secretary, of Rye, New York; and Brian Younger, treasurer, of Long Lake, Minnesota. It also has appointed Randy Pherson of Springfield, Virginia, chairman of the Freshman Fathers Weekend committee.

#### Expurgated Glossary of Collegiate Slangage

In case you've had any difficulty understanding some of the language used by your son, I'm about to offer you a helpful aid: an abridged glossary of language used by students in communicating with one another. This is taken from a scholarly compilation made by Professor Henry L. Terrie. As a project in a freshman English course, he assigned his students the task of submitting, on 3 X 5 cards, terms of current usage and their definitions. This provided the source material for the compilation which Professor Terrie has kindly consented to let me share with you, with the warning that this language changes almost from moment to moment and this compilation of two or three years ago may be badly out of date.

If you wish to participate in this exercise, first read the following paragraphs of studentese:

"Dartmouth College is a famous monastery, located in Hangover, New Hampshire. Its president is known as Sloan John. The Dean of Students is Dad Thad, and he is ably assisted by The Great Pumpkin. (If Dean Dickerson has a special name, it has not been revealed to me.) Among the courses offered by the faculty are Apes and Stones (Anthropology), Cops and Robbers (Criminology), Groms (Greek & Roman Studies), Rocks (Geology), Weeds (Botany, also known as Bag 'Em & Tag 'Em), God 1 (Religion), and Nuts and Sluts (Abnormal Psychology). In trouble (taking it in the ear), he may have to drop back five yards and punt.

"Grades: Ace, Bomb, Hook (Charlie Bar), Dog, Eagle.

"After a hard day of work and play, the students retire to their dormitories - if they don't decide to flick out. They may do a little booking, or hit the rack, or have a blast. If the blast is too noisy, a fuzz is likely to appear. They use the horn to call for dates on weekends.

"At the end of four years, if the student is a Super Egg or has done enough power booking and avoided appling up, he will become a B of A. Meanwhile, he has tried to avoid being known as a Tweed Bag, a High School Hot Shot, or a Straight Arrow. By showing that he has gear, he may get into a fraternity and earn the privilege of serving as a tenor sandbag."

Now proceed with your translation with the help of the following glossary. This has necessarily been expurgated more than a little for this family journal.

bennies, sb., abbr. of beneficial: sun rays. Ex. "Let's grab some bennies on Muscle Beach."

book, v.i.: to study. Intensive: power book: to study hard.

eagle, sb. and v.i.: = 'E'. Also, dog, hook min, hook plu, ace.

Emmet, sb.: local New Hampshire native manual laborer. Newt: Vermonter.

gear, sb: (essentially undefinable. Sprezzatura?) Exs. "A person has gear if he has intellect, talent or personality. Usually a sure bet to be a success...ability to drink - lots of girls, date for every occasion." "The things that a student must have to be social." "Capacity." "Class spirit." (In student paper on Paradise Lost: "Satan has what a Dartmouth student would call 'gear.'") Adj., gearful.

loosehanger, sb.: a hot ticket, a casual student who comes out with a 4.7. Ex. "no bookin' tonight? You're a real loose hanger." Cf. a straight arrow.

Mickey Mouse, adj.: academic busywork, or anything simple-minded.

punt, v.t.: to drop a course (cf. being "thrown for a loss"). Ex. "After six weeks of Chem 1, I punted." But cf. boot, v.i. punt has also taken on an intransitive meaning, as any course of action followed to avoid study. Ex. "I punted every night last week."

take pipe, v.i.: to be doing badly (in a course). Also, take gas. Ex. "Bill is taking gas in Math 27." Also, take the tubes. Ex. He's taking the tubes in French 1." Also, take it in the ear.

that's close, derog, exp. of skepticism: commonly directed at a screamer (loud mouth) to score on him. Ex. "'Our outfit is a highly-trained aggregate of dedicated men.' "yeah, fella, that's close."

tweed bag, sb.: hyper Ivy League type, who wears a cool uni.

tool shed, sb., adaptation of tool, "one who does not fit into things," an out-to-lunch student, a unit, a yo-yo, a twink, a fink, a light item, a tight hanger, a straight arrow, a booker, a loser, a gaper, a flamer: a fraternity of such types. A member is a shedder.

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If you've been at all skeptical about this "booking" business, I call to your attention the following item which appeared on the Campus Police log for an early morning hour on an early December Monday:

"5:05 AM Night-watchman Currier reports that there are two students sleeping in the Forensic Union in College Hall. Checked and found the students were taking a short sleep break from their studies. They resumed their studies upon being awakened."

Nevertheless, I've had the impression recently that freshmen might be beginning to listen to the things we all tell them about the self-defeating aspects of "late booking" and "all-nighters."

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I visited the barbershop on the last day of exams. The chairs were full, there was a waiting line, and the floor was inches deep with shorn hair. Just thought you ought to realize what some of you have been spared.

\* \* \*

Thanks to You

I want to thank many of you for your letters, some of which are still on my desk awaiting reply. The "form letter" is probably the least satisfactory medium of human communication, and it is a tribute to your fine understanding that some of you have responded in such warmly friendly and personal ways to these letters.

Dean Palmer joins me in wishing the best in 1968 for all of you.

Sincerely yours,

*Albert D Dickerson*