ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE
IN ANNAPOLIS

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

Supplementary Bulletin

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

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REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

TO THE BOARD OF VISITORS AND GOVERNORS:

The most urgent problems which St. John's College has faced during the past year are of course, as in the case of all American colleges, the problems posed by war. The most important adjustments to the War which St. John's has made have been to furnish instruction for four terms a year instead of three and to admit students from the second year of high school. The addition of a summer term is of course purely a War measure. Temporarily, it means that the next academic "session" of three terms will begin on July 8th instead of in September. The change in requirements for admission, most members of the Board will recall, has been on the College agenda since 1937, when the College introduced the St. John's Program.

I am taking the liberty of recalling this fact to the minds of Board members because I think it worth recording, at the end of the first six years of the St. John's Program, that the College has now taken the last major step which could be predicted six years ago. While the admission of younger students may well prove the least important of these steps, it is not without interest as a milestone and it is not without considerable practical importance if the College is to render to the community the highest possible degree of service.

It would seem desirable to record briefly the series of steps that brought us to the point we have now reached.

First, the Board of Visitors and Governors, convinced that a drastic reform in American undergraduate education was overdue, took council and decided on the main lines which that reform might best follow. I believe it is important to recall that the Board had the daring to postpone dealing with the College's grave financial problems until they had dealt first with the nature and aims of genuine liberal education. Once they had determined upon their purpose and upon the type of curriculum that could achieve their purpose, they showed even more unusual daring. They authorized a major educational reform of the College with no money in sight to carry it out. When the reform had been effected, they and the College administration then sought and found men and women who would help financially. None of these men and women, in my judg-

ment, would have underwritten such a reform in advance either at St. John's or at any other college. It was because the College chose to risk its very existence, in order to achieve its proper purpose, that it found faith and support. Remembering those anxious early years, members of the Board may find a nostalgic interest in the recently published Report from the Committee on the Re-Statement of the Nature and Aims of Liberal Education to the Commission on Liberal Education of the Association of American Colleges.

Having agreed on the proper educational aims of the College, and the broad lines of the curriculum that could achieve such aims, the Board chose a new administration which would be responsible for working out with the faculty the actual teaching practice of the College. So far as the administration's mandate would permit, the existing faculty was utilized. It was obvious that we who would do the daily teaching of the College would have in large measure the arduous task of re-educating ourselves. For we were ourselves the products of the very system whose breakdown had brought us together in this enterprise. It is doubtful whether any other faculty in this country can have worked as ours has had to during these past six years. Moreover, for the first half of that period the College could offer none of us financial security a month ahead. But we early discovered the exhilaration and workmanlike satisfaction that inhered in the curriculum we had determined to teach, and by the end of the first five-year period the College faculty had attained a strength that nobody could have predicted in 1937.

Meanwhile, the Board had completely reorganized itself in the light of the educational purpose of the College and achieved approximately its present membership.

The College then set to work to shoulder the mortgage on its property which the present administration had inherited, in addition to meeting the deficits which its reorganization would inevitably impose upon it during the period of transition. The mortgage was reorganized in such fashion as to provide full repayment to the creditors of the College while giving the College sufficient time to find the means for annual amortization.

But the College's material needs did not stop with inherited cash debts. The physical plant was in desperate need of repair and improvement. However, finding money for these purposes proved, quite naturally, much easier than finding money for inherited debt; and much was accomplished before wartime shortages postponed resumption of our building program.

All the tasks thus far listed were predictable enough in 1937. But two major internal reforms were not foreseen and yet have proven

of great significance to the College community. By the beginning of its second year, the curriculum met in head-on collision with the existing system of intercollegiate athletics. After all, intercollegiate athletics, as conducted just before the present War, had grown up during a period when the American undergraduate curriculum was in rapid decay. Indeed, there is a quite genuine sense in which it had arisen in order to fill a growing vacuum. The hardest solution of the problem seemed to be the only real solution: the College abolished intercollegiate competition and was richly rewarded by the extraordinary development of its intramural sports. Members of the Board have doubtless been reading predictions that, following this War, our colleges will not willingly restore the incubus of intercollegiate athletics as our generation came to know it. They may readily underestimate now the anger and mystification which St. John's caused in 1939 by making a clean break with the whole impossible business and developing an athletic system of its own that would fortify, instead of disrupting and confusing, the College's educational function.

The second internal reform which none of us foresaw was the shift from a social system dominated by national fraternities to one in which the entire student body, which is socially, economically, geographically, religiously, and even intellectually an unusually heterogeneous group, has been welded by common study and play into something very much resembling one fraternity. Incidentally, it is a "fraternity" which would welcome chapters on other college campuses!

It was in the light of these successive reforms that the College faced last winter the new problems posed by the War. Its faculty had lost some of its ablest members to the armed forces, to government administration, or to war research. The drafting of men of eighteen would mean that few of its students would return next session. Indeed, half of them were already in the armed forces, under orders to continue at college until called out. From one end of the country to the other, discussion raged as to whether liberal education for men must be suspended for the duration of the War. The College faced three possibilities, as perhaps every other men's college in America did.

First, it could apply for a contract with the Army or Navy to teach technical courses. None of the faculty was interested in this alternative, although the nature of the St. John's curriculum meant that perhaps no other liberal arts faculty in the country contained so large a proportion of experienced teachers in mathematics and physics. The simple fact was that the armed forces were being

besieged by colleges which saw in war contracts their one means of financial survival. Given that state of affairs, the faculty of St. John's felt there would be many other and more useful ways of helping the war effort.

Secondly, St. John's could suspend instruction until peace had been won and its faculty and students could again assemble and resume where they had left off. This would have worked a hardship on very few students and would in my judgment have been a defensible move. But the difficulties of reassembling a specially trained faculty at the perhaps indeterminate "end" of a global war cast doubt on the wisdom of the proposal.

There remained only one alternative. In December 1942, the faculty by unanimous action decided in effect that their duty lay in continuing their work during those years of their students' lives immediately preceding military service. The Board will recall that they had already had teaching experience with younger students. It was evident that from the point of view of liberal education, the graduate of the average high school was not sufficiently better prepared than the lad with only two years of high school to make the shift imprudent, and in many cases there had been recognizable deterioration within the last two years.

Members of the Board will recall that the Board's action in January, in ratifying this decision by the faculty, was likewise unanimous; and they may likewise recall the two principal reasons advanced in debate. First, it was pointed out that if we were justified in the daring steps we took in 1937, from a conviction that the American college of liberal arts was no longer meeting its obligations and that it badly needed to re-state the nature and aims of liberal education, surely it was even more necessary to stick to the job now, when leaders throughout the country were recognizing that liberal education for young men was in effect suspended, and that this suspension endangered the postwar period. Secondly, it was pointed out that both the Army and Navy were complaining bitterly of the lack in college graduates of disciplines which St. John's was furnishing in eminent degree, and that the College therefore owed it to the war effort to give this type of training to as many young men as it could handle.

St. John's has not been alone in urging that the American school and college system be permanently shortened and strengthened. The President of Fordham University has argued cogently for six years of grammar school, three years of high school, and three years of college, although he doubtless assumes that this time would be spent in genuine studies and not in wandering through the mazes of the

elective system, both in college and high school. We who teach at St. John's heartily wish that other colleges would boldly take lads young enough for them to get a liberal education before military service; that they would do so, not hesitantly, shamefacedly, and in view of various personal circumstances, but in order that the colleges might meet their responsibilities to our country in an hour of great need. Obviously, this would "lessen entrance requirements," at least as to time served in classrooms; and precisely to that extent it would "lower standards." In actual practice it could of course infinitely raise the educational standards of the American people. If the liberal arts colleges of this country could not teach more in the same space of time than is now learned in the last two years of the American high school, then our colleges are in worse shape than even their severest critics suppose.

We wish other colleges would face this grave national problem. We even believe with the President of Fordham that they might indeed learn consistently to graduate men younger than they now do, and we believe that they might collaborate with the schools to do a better job in less time. But our experience of the past six years suggests that they would need to do one thing first. They would have to re-define their educational purpose. Fortunately, there are at the moment hundreds of academic committees throughout the country striving to do just that.

The elective system that has grown up in our country during the past decades will not support the shift. It has inevitably bred a country-club atmosphere and innumerable "college activities" to fill the vacuum it leaves and it is not an atmosphere into which responsible parents should want to introduce younger students—or perhaps any students. If our colleges would assume the task of educating boys before military service, they would first have to construct again a curriculum that could occupy such a boy's time and attention, a curriculum that could challenge his capacities and develop his sense of responsibility.

I invite the Board's vigilant attention during the coming years to one important consequence of the earlier matriculation. It was with this consequence in mind that the College planned in 1937 to make the shift "some day," six years before the brutal necessities of war defined that phrase practically. It is this: the College's present entrance requirements substitute two years of solid study, in such subjects as language and mathematics, for four years of wandering in a diluted and padded curriculum. This should bring us better prepared students, less confused by what are known at St. John's

as "high school habits." And better prepared students will demand better teaching.

For decades now the professor who teaches undergraduates has fallen back on two alibis for the meager results he has usually achieved. First, he does not admit responsibility for the student's general intellectual growth, since he is concerned only with knowledge in a given "field." Secondly, the professor truthfully reports that not much can be done anyhow with the graduate of the average secondary school: he is not prepared for college work.

In 1937, by abolishing the elective system, we teachers at St. John's surrendered the first alibi; and to that surrender I should ascribe much of the teaching strength the College has developed. In the process, the faculty have rid themselves of an intellectual agoraphobia that has made it increasingly difficult in our times to teach the liberal arts. In the pursuit of ideas, no teacher at St. John's can decline a hurdle on the grounds that it would take him out of his field. This has proven important. The men who wrote the great books which our students read did not dwell in fields.

In short, better subject matter has challenged our capacities as teachers, not only to teach but to learn. Now more relevantly prepared students will challenge those capacities again. We have said what we want our students to understand before they come to us. We have discouraged their wasting and misusing time in irrelevant preparation. By defining their responsibilities more clearly, we have again defined our own more clearly. We know from daily experience that to define a teaching responsibility is a most important first step towards meeting it. Since we are determined to meet ours, we believe that earlier matriculation may carry even more important consequences than salvaging liberal education from the blackout of a total war.

STRINGFELLOW BARR

Annapolis, Maryland,
July, 1943.

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Copies of this Report may be had on request. Address:
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