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Is a college woman an asset to her community?

Most of us take it so for granted that she is, that we are inclined to resent the question. But is she? Can she prove it? In the minds of not a few people I meet there is grave doubt and I occasionally have taken considerable pains to get at the genesis of these doubts. Always I find that outside of the few who still hold the archaic notion that a woman's mind is not strong and flexible enough to master a stiff curriculum, personal contacts with young women who seemed to the observers to be either of doubtful value or an outright detriment to their communities, are behind the opinion.

Now, I hold, as these critics do, that four years taken from a young woman's life at the age most of them are in college should enrich the community from which she comes. It is not enough that she be enriched for herself alone.

I plead sometimes with fault-finders that it is out of the question for her to be enriched for herself alone, that however indifferent and demanding she may be on her return to her town she still will give out something she could not have given without the broadening experiences of college - a worth while influence, even if intangible. Perhaps I take a chance in a few cases in claiming this - yet I doubt if I do. The girl has

more value, even if for a time it is difficult to appraise it.

But my fault-finders have no patience with intangible values. They feel the young college woman must give a return for her opportunity which can be felt - understood - weighed. It is the public in the final analysis which educates her. It sacrifices in order to make of her something more than her fathers were. The girl owes a debt. They insist she must pay her debt in some understandable way. That at least she should show a sense of obligation - a will to pay.

I am inclined to think that the great majority of college women do feel their responsibility - even if they do not make it clear. Our colleges, all of them, have a percentage - some times large~~st~~ of girls who are "working their way"; and one conscious purpose in making the sacrifices they do is that they may be better fitted to help in their homes - in their towns. They seek to enrich themselves but not for themselves alone.

I have been much impressed with the serious purpose of almost all students that come out of the Tennessee and Kentucky mountains, into such schools as Berea, Oneida, Berry. These boys and girls almost invariably expect to go back to their communities there to teach in local schools, train families to orderly and sanitary habits of life, improve the breed of cattle, introduce modern methods of tilling the soil, restore forgotten handicrafts - and they do it in thousands of cases. They recognize

that their education is not merely a personal matter - it is a community matter.

But it is not only the student who must sacrifice for education that holds it to be an obligation. The percentage of well-to-do or "rich" young women who come out of college tingling with resolution to give active, useful service in their communities is large.

That is, in what I believe to be ^amajority of cases there is no basis for the fault-finding. The tangible contributions are enormous. But there is still "a respectable number" of dubious value; those whose after-college exhibits back up these critics who claim that college makes a girl rather a drawback than an asset to her community.

Who are these girls? What is the matter with them?

Usually when I have run down the complaint I have found that the girl was one of these who had been "sent to college" - sometimes compelled to go. She had looked on her four years as a species of punishment. She went home with a feeling that family and community owed her something for having put the thing through, rather than that she had a debt to pay.

Is such a girl entirely to be blamed? If a young woman grows up at home without a sense of responsibility awakened in her - if she is accustomed always to receiving and never to giving - if she is never on her own - I do not know why

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we should expect her to carry out of college a lively sense of gratitude for opportunities for which she did not ask - which, if she had had her own way, followed her own bent she would have not chosen, ^{is able to} unless the college ^{changes} her point of view.

Is it not up to the college to do this, - to arouse her to a sense of the value of what she is getting - to awaken a feeling of obligation? Certainly something is wrong if she is returned as apathetic and indifferent as she went in; if she still has no sense that she lives in a world which sooner or later demands a return for its unearned gifts ~~or not~~; if she is still resentful because four years have been taken from her and she wants her pay. There are such girls and it is not surprising that they should be, at least for a term of years, a doubtful asset to their communities. They are a sharp challenge to their family and to the institutions which have kept them on their roles and yet failed to awaken them. The truth is the young woman who does not want to go to college better be put at something else which will arouse her interest.

This girl who comes back home "hating college," "glad it is over," is more tolerable I find to most critics than the one who comes back burning to "make over" her town. College has done something to her, though she may have gone in for no other reason than her family expected it of her. It has given her a lively ambition to "arouse" the community, to lead in crusades

and reforms and programs - to "start things." And she dashes in "where angels fear to tread" often making herself a town nuisance, like the girl in Main Street. She has the zeal to serve but she has no sense as yet that zeal and a blue print are not all that are necessary to improve a community. Also, she has not enough background, historical sense, to realize that she is dealing with a growth to which many people have contributed in the past - many are actively contributing at the moment and that if she is to make any impression she must learn to "fit in" to subordinate herself and her ideas until she has convinced her town that she is something more than an over-confident, brash young woman, chock-full of theories, but weak in practice.

It is inevitable that the attacks such girls make on their communities disgruntle those who are running things. They ^{who} do not relish ^{criticism} ~~criticism~~ from inexperience, however distinguished its diploma, are unwilling to undertake projects they consider of doubtful validity in their particular town.

It is a pity, for sometimes the inevitable rebuff knocks the enthusiasm out of the girl permanently. If the town does not appreciate her ability to elevate it why she will find other interests. She becomes a hostile element - supercilious - critical - she joins herself to that rare girl who has come back feeling so incorrigibly superior to her town that from the start she will have nothing to do with it, disdainful of town ways and town ambitions - sometimes even of her own family. She has been

made a snob by college. I think she is very rare myself, but one case in a thousand taints the whole matter of higher education for women for those who come in contact with her.

To the neutrals, unconscious that the time has come when they are expected to give - to the crusaders who hurry to reform the town on their own terms - to those who sneer at the town ways and town activities - we must add a group of girls who return with one thought uppermost - to get away as quickly as possible, find a spot where they can "live their own lives in their own way." They are still ignorant in spite of college that there is no such thing - that even the hermit though he escape from man cannot escape from nature.

But this young woman is no hermit - she wants society, occupation, movement - all without restraint and usually without serving the long apprenticeship required to make a place for oneself in an association of men and women. She does not grasp that re-adjusting herself at home after four years in a different world is probably less difficult than adjusting herself to a world where she is a stranger - a world indifferent to her and demanding proofs of her value. At home she has something to go on - something is granted her there but in the outside world nothing is granted. Her college diploma is so much waste paper until she had forced its recognition.

These are the types with variations which critics quote as sound reason for their opinion that a college training

unfits a girl for life in her community. They add usually that her family is none the happier for her training - that she returns out of touch with the more intimate circle - critical of its ways - unwilling to adapt herself - anxious to escape. What was to make her a family asset has made her temporarily at least a family burden.

Granted that these unwise or unpleasant young women hamper the cause of higher education of women for a good many people - the practical question is: What can be done about them? I have already intimated some of them should never be sent to college or entered should be returned - other avenues of development found for them where they will give interest and co-operation.

But why throw all the burden on the girls who have not been awakened or socialized by college. Are the critics giving the girl a fair show? Have they, as a matter of fact, any sympathetic sense of what she has been through? Consider what has happened to her. She was torn out of the only kind of life she had ever known - was set down in an organization where she was usually an utter stranger. She had to learn new ways of life - form new associations - give her time to studies in which she had scant interest. Under these circumstances it has always seemed to me there was something valiant in a girl carrying on - graduating.

And after college what happens? She goes back to her home another person which she herself may not realize, until she tries to settle into the old environment. She has been living in a highly organized, intelligently directed, efficient society. She has submitted herself to discipline - she has recognized authority - she comes back to a community which on the face of it seems to her to be badly organized, inefficient, occupied only with practical, materialistic problems, deficient in idealism. If she bestirs herself to change things she runs into a stone wall - a stone wall which not only is immovable but which resents her efforts to move it.

What she needs is understanding in some quarter. Where is she going to look for it? She ought to find it among the college women of the community - in the Club. Usually every town in the country of ten thousand, even less, has a few college women gathered into a club. Such a club ought to serve as a link between the returning girl and her old environment. Here are women who have been dislocated for four years as she has been - they have had to learn to re-adjust - to fit in - to find interests and occupations - to live happily and usefully in the community to which they belong. Such a club ought to be a refuge - a guide - a source of information as to what can and cannot be done by the girl. I have been in college clubs which seemed to me just that. They had transferred their college spirit into community spirit - had set for themselves the keeping alive in practical life the

intellectual ideals and interests awakened in college. The newly returned was at home there and through the club learned to relate herself to her family and town. But college clubs do not always see themselves as community centers. Some of them are merely preservers of traditions. They live on their memories of college experiences. They are nothing but groups of individuals who have been to college. They are of the past - are not building out of the past something for the present and future. They are little help in the problems of the young women who are giving the higher education of women a bad name. They may even be giving ammunition to the critics. They need to be looked into as much - or more - than she does.