Scholarships and Fellowships

Dear Strauss:

It is the night before the night before Christmas and all through this small wooded house not a creature was stirring, not even a pocket rat. I am consequently free from interruption and I'd like to answer your letters of Oct 80 and December 8 on scholarships and fellowships. As you can see by the number of pages of this letter, it may be too long, but I hope I won't bore you by elaborate expositions of the more obvious facts of fellowships. As a matter of fact I am going to avoid elaborating the theme and instead express pre-hand a number of opinions which are personal and perhaps at times eclectic and in terms that will I hope sacrifice completely judicial balance to the hope of preshrugging you with, I hope, one or two fresh ideas that I could elaborate further if they have any interest for you.

Just for the sake of some structural advantages I'll take some points up in this order: Terminology, i.e. Purpose of Setting, Selection procedures, Administrative Methods. These will be some exaggerations and extreme statements but more in the interests of clarity than complete accuracy to the third decimal point.

1. Terminology

I think we'd all benefit by realizing that aid to students
could be discerned a great deal more eloquently if we used the word scholarships for aid to students in high schools in colleges and in professional schools before they receive their degree certificates given usually to students in such schools. Then word fellowships would be available specifically for post-doctoral advanced work or for better working for degrees. The present confusion is largely American; the English reserve the word fellowships for persons paid to do advanced scholarly work. It is probably a lost cause to try to have the words mean the reality that they are really two quite different groups but, damn it, I would put in — I need different words for two essentially different things. And they are different — in point of age or maturity, in size of stipends needed, in administration and in effect as well as purpose. I'll abbreviate with s-ship & f-ship from now on.

2. Purposes

Both s-ships and f-ship can and are given for one or another of a rather vague and loose combination of purposes. There may be:

(a) To help all kinds of education in a given area, to a special race (e.g. negroes), to religious denominations, or class of society (e.g. A.F. L. unions, labor organizations, etc., callings (Nauman fellows at Harvard for journalists, etc.)

(b) To develop some special field, such as nuclear physics, or psychiatry, or history or economics. Though these are usually of the f-ship type an adequately selective program may have to start pretty young and scholarships come to be recognized as necessary and a deliberate concurrence
to the principle of the plant nursery — with a large number of seedlings and a rigorous selection of the most vigorous plants after a trial of one to three years. And certainly a real concession to the principle of trial and error, profit and loss, and other empirical evidences of wastefulness admitted to be inescapable.

(c) To combat the effects of inflation and prevent students who can almost but not quite finance an education they would have gotten without aid in other years. There are many in the scholarship field and put relatively less emphasis on merit and more weight on financial need. I'd rather see the long-term loan practice further developed for such needs and keep scholarships based on merit and such considerations.

(d) To prevent parochialism or provincialism in other forms of inbreeding. How the aid is given to allow the scholar or the student to learn for distant parts and find out much he is in the world — or at least in the U.S.A. When the National Research Council Fellowships in Medicine began, I remember a candidate who was born in New Orleans when he went to High School. He got his AB at Tulane and then an AM, then an MD and an MD thesis. So he proposed to use his NRC fellowship for research in Physiology at Tulane. Faugh! He needed to go elsewhere and was told so.

(e) To aid extremely promising young men to grow, and to expect more of them because they are able. This recalls the fact that coaches in football
work most eagerly on the 'naturals'. But if s-ships or f-ships are used
for originality, brilliance, independence and the like rare traits then I
think it stupid to limit the s-ships or f-ships to any field or preassigned
group of fields. But it often happens. And too often we choose on the
candidate whose past experience has been anomalous, irregular, and unbalanced.
I get tired of seeing brilliant men rejected by various regulations. It used
to be in California that you couldn't be elected to Eta Sigma Xi
unless you'd had one year of Elementary College French.

(1) To give a deserving human being some part of a higher education. This
is much more common in the scholarship field and rare I think in the
fellowship group. It is really paying a college for dividing its unimproved
advantages among a large number of students; it doesn't improve the
level of teaching very clearly. But it gives the donor a pride thrill.

3) The setting for s-ships and f-ships confuses many persons and committees
as well as the recipient. Most higher education costs more than the tuition,
so most students are far more realistic view the unnamed recipients of aid
in their education. This confuses the picture quite seriously, especially in
weakening tax-nips with which s-ships and f-ships are awarded. I'd
like to see tuition bills sent to university and college students in this form:

Cost of your instruction (prorated cost of the institution)
  divided by the number of students
Reduction caused by income from endowments, gifts, etc.
Balance to pay (Tax-hin)
Only in that way can we get people generally to understand what tuition is and time to understand what a scholarship is for tuition or some part of it, or more than the tuition. I think the right view of scholarships and especially of ships is that the institution is paying for the collaboration of a fine mind and character just as it pays or for a productive human being on the institutional force. More youthfulness does not extinguish the importance of a fine mind.

In the general setting I think the following paradox deserves attention: we all admit that the outstanding and essential characteristic of man is the length of his infancy and adolescent or pre-maturity period. That is what makes education and cultivation and culture possible. But we start kids at 6 in primary school so they get to college at 18 or thereabouts. We call those students brilliant who are brilliant for 18 and we proceed to reward the precocious and forget that slowness of maturation is the very thing that is the glory of man. If you want to see an expansion of that theme I gave a talk at the Alpha Omega Alpha on Emergent Ability which I enclose. Please return it when you are through.
Selection

The most interesting procedure for scholar selection in what in England are called "school leaving scholarships." This is an award by a secondary school of a fellowship scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge for three years and well paid (substantial in amount) to a member of the graduating class. This method has these advantages:

(a) The school wants to have the best possible representative of the school - best in character and brains.
(b) The choice is made on the basis of 6 years of close knowledge of the candidates.
(c) The recipient doesn't want to let his school down.
(d) The annual award at graduation is witnessed by the whole school and its availability is clear to boys for six years.
(e) It is a drawing card for the school to have such an opportunity for a first rate boy.

In the fellow field Haverford College has had for some 25 years a three year award of the same sort but for graduate work. It is called the Copus Fellowship (possibly Scholarship) and the President told me that the Copus Scholarship holds an enviable the Who's Who of Haverford. I would be eager to see more of this kind of award.

We have found in the Rockefeller Traveling Fellowships that we do well to require that the candidate be assured a teaching paid position on his return from the fellowship. This protects us from the fellowship
being used as a means of getting rid of a brilliant but otherwise impossible young man who will not be useful to education because he will not get a place. More important this stipulation gives a focus and a motivation to the recipient which is extremely valuable. I think the Rhodes scholarships would have been far better had there been a requirement that the holder knew what he was going to do after the fellowship was terminated.

One other point on selection: break up your committee into pairs with each pair working and reporting on each candidate. If you don't you'll find a committee of 5-10 is dominated by one or two and the rest don't say what they think.

I think that the ability to size up candidates wisely is not uniformly distributed among all the selection committee memberships, and that you could well devise ways of detecting and quietly eliminating the members who have the poorest records at sizing up the candidates. Think of Huxley, Thomas at Bryn Mawr and his remarkable record of selecting the following as instructors or young professors: Woodrow Wilson, William Allan Neilson, Jacques Loeb, TH Morgan, E.B. Wilson the cytologist, Kekulé the chemist, and Riddings the economist. There's a standard!
I was interested to have Adrian at Cambridge tell me that in Trinity Fellowships, they think they are doing well if they pick 25% successes. He calls a success someone who turns out so well you don't worry about the other 75%. Speaking of Trinity College Fellowships, the Secretary of the Nobel Prize Committee in Medicine & Physiology, I. Hiljemark, told me that if they could do it they would reorganize the Nobel Prize to reflect what the Trinity College Fellowships accomplish—but they can't buck the tradition even though Nobel hoped his recipients would all be young men under 35.

5. Administrative Policy - Methods

These should reflect one or more purposes (q.v.) explicitly and not loosely or inadvertently. "Who wants everything loses something" as a Brazilian proverb warns.

Most scholarships give aid that is too small, and thus it can be said that nearly every candidate is deserving, so the award committee must get criticized. Most fellowships give aid for too short a time. Which reminds me of F. H. Clutterton's character in one of his novels who says: "The work of my life is half completed; and with the aid of a whiskey and soda, I hope to complete the other half tonight."

If more time were responsibility and more freedom from direction and geographical restraint characterized fellowships, we might have more such satisfactory results from 25% of the holders, and we could forget
about the rest. I wouldn't dream of restricting the place of study of a man good enough to sit on for a few a few years fellowship.

A most important point about a new fellowship program is to start it small scale in order to have the best exemplars you can find. They set the tone and standard. They attract a good crop of candidates in succeeding years. They eliminate the duds by their example far more effectively than the Committee.

Well it's 1:30 AM and by my watch and perhaps by yours so I'll lay off.

Yours sincerely

Alan Gregg