

THE CHOICE OF STUDIES AND THE CHOICE OF A LIFE-WORK

Francis Cummins Lockwood

Francis Cummins Lockwood was Professor of Language and Literature in the English Department at the University of Arizona in 1913, when he published these two addresses in an anthology aimed at introducing first-year students to college life and philosophies of higher education. This textbook, The Freshman and His College, A College Manual, was published by D.C. Heath. Professor Lockwood went on to become a dean and then Acting President of the University in 1922.

It is exceedingly difficult to offer definite advice to the student concerning the choice of his studies; for educators are far from agreed upon this point. Besides, each student must be dealt with as a unit. The conditions that enter into the making of a choice are not the same with any two Freshmen. One thing is certain, though: the student should exercise the greatest possible care in choosing his course of study. Before coming to college he will have sought the advice of parents and friends and teachers, and will himself have tried to find out what his own purposes, tastes, and aptitudes are. After he has reached college, he should not hesitate to go to members of the faculty with his perplexities. Most instructors are eager to help a student and are glad to be on confidential terms with him. "But after all it is you who are to live the life, and do the work, and succeed or fail;" so in the long run the student must make the decisions. But, on the other hand, few decisions are final and fateful. Life is a running battle, and many a brave and intelligent fighter shifts his position in the midst of the fray. It may be that before you have completed your first term you will discover that you have not chosen wisely. Or, perhaps, you will find by the time you have finished your Freshman year that you are on the wrong track. It will not be too late to change your course. What you do, do thoroughly and well, whether you like it or not; and do not drop any work, or make any alteration in your plans, without full and friendly consultation with the officers and instructors involved in the change.

Many Freshmen come up to college with a perfectly definite life purpose before them. They have decided what profession to pursue or what business to engage in, and they know just what course they want to take. It gives one a comfortable feeling to have this momentous question of a life occupation disposed of once for all. But you should not be unduly anxious if you have not yet decided what you will make of yourself. One of the best things about a college course is that it affords just the leisure that a young man needs to test himself, to think over his problems, and to discover what he is fitted for. It is a time of growth, expansion, and enlarging vision; and it is very likely that when you fully come to yourself you will choose at higher intellectual and moral altitudes than would have been possible without the influence of the college. And here, again, it may help you to know that many—very many—of the wisest and most successful men, even after they have completed a college course, have not at once found their true sphere of activity. Some of them have stumbled and blundered more than once before they have been able to gain sure footing in the profession

for which at last they find themselves precisely fitted. And no **honestly-chosen** course of study faithfully carried through, whether pursued for a year or four years, proves a waste. You have gained fair returns and have secured discipline, and in the end there will be little that cannot be turned to account.

A vital and determining question that the Freshman may well ask **himself** at the outset is: **Do I want to choose my studies primarily with reference to my life vocation, or shall I select with chief reference to general culture?** One of the dangers for the **man** who has decided upon his lifework before he comes to college is that he may from the very first direct his attention too exclusively to vocational subjects. If he begins to specialize early in his course, he will fail to secure the breadth and the rich humanizing influences that a **college man** is **privileged** to have. It is to be feared that such a student will fail to lay a foundation broad enough for future eminence in his profession; and it is certain that **he** will realize when it is too late that **he** has in large measure cut **himself** off from the full enjoyment of a cultivated life. He will feel the lack of "sweetness and light." There is a probability, even, that **he** **may find himself** unfitted to respond fully to the **social and civic forces** that surge at **his** very door and electrify the very air **he** breathes.

On the other hand, the youth who chooses the all-around courses must beware lest **he** become a mere loiterer by the way, selecting here a course and there a course without plan or objective. It is all too easy for **him** to become an **elegant idler**—without logical training, without moral discipline, without any symptom of sound scholarship. The elective system sometimes proves a curse to the idle, ill-grounded, ill-guided Freshman. It seems hardly possible that any youth could enter college with such notions of the academic life as those portrayed by Mr. Birdseye in his book on *Individual Training in Our Colleges*. But Mr. Birdseye is serious and well-informed, and recently through his books has rendered valuable service to higher education in America. And what he says is constantly being emphasized by the leading college authorities. Here is the passage that I have in mind, "In the absence of any official guide, a considerable proportion of the students have devised a theory and plan of their own about as follows: 'We are aiming to get a diploma. A certain number of marks by the faculty, based upon cramming, examinations, and not **overcutting**, give us a diploma. There are many things in college more important than studies—although they do not count in getting a diploma—such as athletics, from the **bleachers** or on the team; social, fraternity, literary, and other practical subjects; and seeing life, which may mean some vice—gambling, intoxication, and a little extra **loafing** for good measure and to carry out what we understand to be college custom. For these reasons, we shall elect the "softest" courses, with the easiest professors, and coming if possible in the **mornings, so that we can have all our afternoons and evenings for more important duties**. With "trots" and other extraneous helps, we can easily get the marks which give us a diploma.'

There is, as a matter of fact, no reason why a student already definitely bent toward a specialty, whether professional or business, may not elect largely from the cultural and humanizing subjects that lie at the foundation of any truly liberal education, and still during the last two years in college choose with constantly narrowing accuracy with reference to **his specialty**. Nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why one who believes that in the languages (**in English and the classics, particularly**), in history and civics and sociology and philosophy lie the essentials of a genial and humane culture, **should not elect generously from mathematics and the physical sciences**—why **he** might not, indeed, in some one field



of science gain not only some knowledge of the fundamental principles of that study, but also some idea of scientific method, some skill in technique, some salutary sense of the rigor and accuracy that go to the making of a scientist.

Finally, the Freshman is not too young to realize that any college course is a failure that does not fit a student for service to society. Boys of sixteen and eighteen years have borne arms upon the field of battle, and have sought and found glorious death in order to insure stability and perpetuity to the nation, to win justice for the oppressed, and to keep the flame of liberty alive in the hearts of men. Why should you not strive with equal ardor and unselfishness to keep the holy flame of truth burning before the eyes of men; to keep our civil institutions unsullied from the touch of dishonor; and to push aside the hand of injustice and cruelty that brings the cry of anguish from the weak and the helpless, and that lays upon the bent and bruised back of ignorant labor burdens that are too heavy to be borne? To you much has been given; and it is only fair that you should give much in return. Your education has cost vastly more than came out of your own pocket or out of the pockets of your parents, lavish as they have been. You do not know just what service you will be called upon to render a quarter of a century from now. It may be obscure; it may be distinguished. But, be the demand that the State is to make upon you in the future what it may, the service that you owe just now, in this Freshman year of your college course, is that of organizing within the round of that *self* that you call *yours* such physical stamina, such intellectual vigor, such seasoned moral fibre, such ideals of purity, justice, and honor, and such a disciplined and fearless will as shall prepare you to meet the emergency when the bugle note of duty sounds—no matter how remote the day, no matter where the battle-line may be drawn, no matter what the assignment may be. Your duty now is to be master of yourself that you may later be the master of destiny—the champion of mankind in its hour of need.