

TURNING-POINT EXPERIENCES^a

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In the behavioral sciences there has been growing interest in psychological health and in positive experience that is associated with psychological health. This state of affairs has been reflected in the increasing work being done on study of positive experience, both typical and extreme. This study is an exploration of a kind of positive experience that can be associated with psychological health, the "turning-point experience." A positive turning-point experience was defined for purposes of this study as a turning-point experience which the subject reported as being beneficial, that is, as being followed by beneficial changes.

A turning-point experience was defined as an experience which is perceived by an individual as precipitating a major change in his life. Here, for example, is an experience that was considered a turning-point experience by one subject:

When I graduated from college, I joined the Peace Corps. I spent two years in Chile, mostly among rural people who were poor and primitive. I traveled from one village to another helping them to plan and organize projects. I enjoyed the work immensely and felt I was doing something important. When I returned to the United States, I was a changed person with different values and different ideas. I was more mature. At first I was excited about going back to school for my master's, but before long school work became a chore. Things that used to be important were no longer important; many of the things my friends did seemed rather pointless. Joining the Peace Corps and going to Chile was a turning-point experience for me.

Data for study of these experiences were obtained from written and verbal descriptions of turning-point experiences and from answers to questions about such experiences. Only the one most important turning-point experience of an individual was considered.

Part I of the study was designed to determine in what ways a turning-point experience was perceived as important.

^aThe study as published summarizes a doctoral dissertation completed in August of 1965 at the University of Florida.

In the example above, why is the experience of joining the Peace Corps and going to Chile important? What makes it important to the subject? Importance of any experience will necessarily be in the effect of this experience on a person's self, on his relationship to environment, and or on his relationship to other persons. The hypothesis for Part 1 was: The importance of a positive turning-point experience is more often perceived by an individual to be in its effect on self in contrast to its effect on relationship to environment or to other persons. "Self" is used in the sense of self-as-object and defined as the physical organism, the attitudes a person has toward himself, and the evaluations he has of himself.

To test this hypothesis, a questionnaire was administered to eight groups; each group was from an educational setting, ranging from 8th grade level to graduate school level. Data were obtained by analysis of the turning-point experiences recorded by respondents (N=153). This was done objectively by employing the technique of Content Analysis. Content of questionnaire replies was analyzed for frequency of themes indicating change in self, change in relationship to environment, or change in relationship to other persons. Frequency of themes was assumed to be a measure of importance of the themes as perceived by respondent (Berelson, 1952).

Reliability of analysis of questionnaire content was tested by having three judges score a sample of eight of the 153 descriptions; since scores correlated highly and significantly (ranging from $r=.72$ to $r=1.00$ with $p .05$ to $p .001$), it was assumed that the remaining descriptions were scored reliably inasmuch as they were scored by the writer, who was one of the judges for the sample. A further test of reliability was made by scoring the descriptions twice, the second time three weeks after the first. Again, there was a high and significant correlation between scores ($r=.88$, $p .001$), and it was assumed that descriptions of turning-point experiences had been reliably analyzed for occurrence of themes.

Five of the eight groups perceived importance of turning-point experiences as being in their effect on self significantly more often than as being in their effect on relationship to environment ($p .05$ to $p .001$). The trend for the other three groups was also in this direction. Although differences in percentage for the latter three groups were not significant, they were nearly so, and percentage of themes reflecting change in self was considerably greater than percentage of themes reflecting change in relationship to environment. This is apparent in Table 1.

Two of the eight groups perceived importance of turning-point experiences as being in effect on self significantly more often than as being in effect on relationship to other persons (p .05, p .01). The trend was also in this direction for five other groups.

Table 1

How the Eight Sample Groups Perceived Importance of Turning-point Experiences

Group	N	Percentage of themes indicating that importance of experience was perceived as change in		
		Self	Relation to environment	Relation to others
1	30	37	18	45
2	24	45	15	40
3	24	51	18	31
4	21	46	21	33
5	21	45	17	38
6	10	45	24	31
7	15	53	19	28
8	6	54	23	23
all groups	153	46	19	35

For one group, importance of turning-point experiences was more often perceived as being in effect on relationship to other persons rather than as being in effect on self, although not significantly so. Members of this group were thirteen- and fourteen-year-old 8th graders of a junior high school, and children of this age group are typically oriented toward peers. They are in all likelihood more concerned

about relationships with peers, parents, teachers -- people in general -- than about understanding self. Turning-point experiences that reflect a change in relationships to other persons, then, are probably perceived as more important than those which reflect a change in self.

It was also noticeable that importance of turning-point experiences was more often perceived as being in the effect on relationships to other persons rather than in the effect on relationships to environment, although from data obtained, this finding was significant for only two groups (where $p < .01$).

In this study the technique of Content Analysis was assumed to be a valid technique for determining importance of turning-point experiences, the sample was a limited one, and data were obtained through self-reports. With these limitations in mind, it can be concluded that importance of turning-point experiences is more often perceived as being in effect on self rather than in effect on relationship to environment. Whether importance of a turning-point experience is more often in its effect on self rather than in its effect on relationship to other persons was not conclusively shown in the study, although data tended to be in that direction. And whether importance of a turning-point experience is more often in its effect on relationship to other persons rather than in its effect on relationship to environment was not clearly shown in the study, although again data tended to be in that direction. Further work on these aspects might yield more definite results.

Part 2 of the study was designed to determine whether positive turning-point experiences were more likely to occur during the age interval, 20 - 29, than during any other ten-year interval. Both young and old have turning-point experiences, but when a person looks back on his life after living several decades, one would expect him to perceive as the most important turning-point experience one that occurred during an age interval when major changes are not uncommon. Schachtel (1959) believes that when a man is young, he is more open to the environment than he is in later life. The young man is energetic, bold, pioneering. As he grows older, his curiosity, enthusiasm, and exploration tendencies decrease.

Between the ages of 20 and 30, major changes are relatively frequent and these changes are often momentous; often someone in this age group graduates from school, begins working, becomes married, becomes a parent, moves, or leaves home. The hypothesis tested was that fewer turning-point

experiences would occur when subjects were very young or very old, and that significantly more turning-point experiences would occur during the interval, 20 - 29. Turning-point experiences were expected to occur with increasing frequency before and with decreasing frequency after this period.

Three groups of 25 subjects each were tested, furnishing data on 75 subjects. For one group, the largest number of turning-point experiences occurred during the age interval, 20 - 29, and such experiences occurred with increasing frequency before this period and with decreasing frequency after. For the other two groups, turning-point experiences occurred over a wide span of years and occurred at many ages. This can be seen in Figure 1.

Group 9, whose members reported more turning-point experiences during the age interval, 20 - 29, than during any other age interval, consisted of individuals whose ages were 50 - 59. Group 10, whose members reported more turning-point experiences during the age interval, 60 - 69, than during any other age interval, consisted of individuals whose ages were 60 - 69. Group 11, whose members reported turning-point experiences occurring relatively frequently during the last two age intervals, 60 - 69, and >69, consisted of individuals whose ages were 70 and above.

As Lehner and Kube (1955) point out, our culture emphasizes youth. We see youth as a gay, exciting, dynamic period of life. The young person is full of energy, ready to accept all challenges, bold, confident, courageous, pioneering. The world is wide open for him" (Lehner and Kube, 1955, p. 362). Turning-point experiences would not be surprising among members of such a group, but in this study only members of Group 9 reported more turning-point experiences during the youthful interval, 20 - 29.

For Groups 10 and 11, turning-point experiences were as frequent during later decades of life as they were during earlier intervals. This may well be due to recency of the experiences; subjects remembered these experiences more vividly because they were recent experiences compared to those that occurred 40 or 50 years previously. Another explanation for the increased number of turning-point experiences reported during later decades of life by older subjects is that retirement and its concomitant changes are a probable factor. Eight of the 25 members of Group 10 were retired, and all members of Group 11 were retired. As Reichard, Livson, and Petersen assert, transition from middle age to old age is a period of crucial biological and social change, and "retirement is one of the most critical role changes to which an increasingly large number of people

_____ Group 9, Ages 50-59
 - - - - - Group 10, Ages 60-69
 Group 11, Ages > 69

Number of experiences

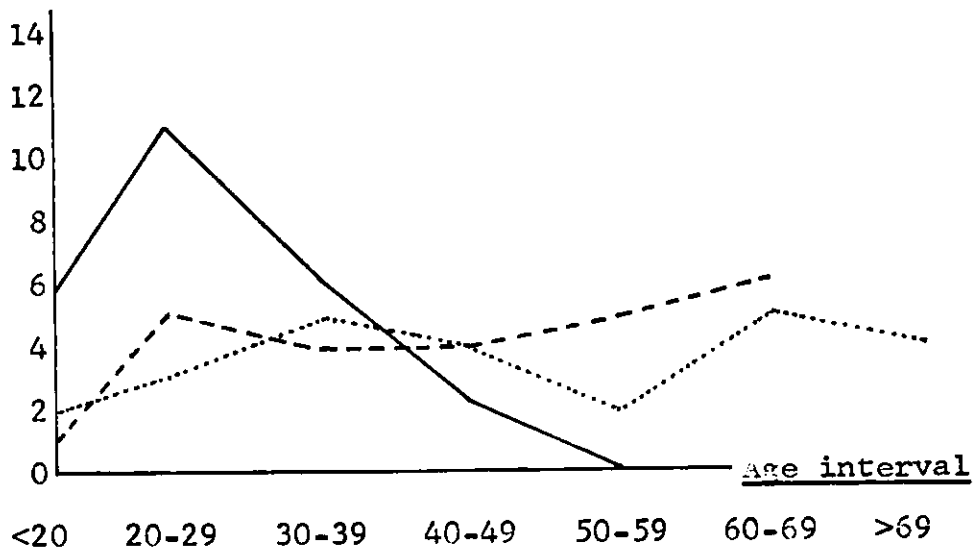


Fig. 1. Frequency of turning-point experiences during ten-year age intervals for Groups 9, 10, and 11.

must adapt in later life" (Reichard, Livson, and Peterson, 1962, p. 4). Contributing also to this critical situation is the fact that many of these subjects moved to Florida late in life (often at retirement) from diverse areas of the country. Twenty-three members of Group 11 moved to Florida at the time of retirement from other sections of the country.

On the basis of data obtained from the three groups of this study, a limited sample (N=75), it would appear that the major positive turning-point experience reported by persons over 50 years of age may have occurred at any age except perhaps the very first few years of childhood. It is not possible to conclude that the age interval, 20 - 29, is the locus for turning-point experiences.

Part 3 of the study was designed to explore turning-point experiences, uncovering if possible data that would be useful for formulation of further hypotheses. One aspect considered for Part 3 was that of classification, and data for classification were obtained from questionnaire replies of eight groups, a total of 153 subjects. It was found possible to classify positive turning-point experiences into a number of broad categories, and Table 2 presents this classification.

The most frequently occurring kind of positive turning-point experience was reported to be one in which there was death or serious illness of a relative, often a parent. One subject reports:

I think the death of my mother was a turning point in my life. Her death put me in a very responsible position. No longer did I have a mother to do for me. Instead, it was my job to do the shopping, cook the meals, clean the house, and do the laundry. My father was a big help, but it isn't the man's job to run a house. He had his hands full making a living. In a way, I feel that this point in my life cheated me out of some gaiety during my teen years. I know it made me mature faster. I didn't have time to do some of the silly things other kids my age were doing. I had to forfeit doing some of the things I wanted to do because of my responsibility at home. However, I'm sure this experience changed my life for the better. It taught me early the serious side of living and as a result, I have learned to make the best of any situation. I am thankful for the maturity I gained from the experience.

Moving was a frequently reported kind of turning-point experience. A subject writes:

Table 2
 Frequency of Types of Positive Turning-point
 Experiences

Nature of turning-point experience	Frequency
Illness or death of relative	20
Moving to different city or state	16
Engagement or marriage	14
Influence of significant other	14
Educational experience	14
Climax of introspection	11
Personal injury or illness	10
Religious experience	9
Travel to different state or country	8
Vocational experience	6
Divorce or separation	4
Non-religious inspiration	4
Success experience	4
Change in parent's marital status	3
Military service	3
Miscellaneous	13

N = 153

Just prior to WWII I left a teaching job in the North and moved to the South to take a job directly connected with military operations. It was not the job change that was important so much as it was the experience of meeting and getting to know people who were different from those I had known previously. Slowly this changed me. I have continued to move about and travel in connection with my work, both in the USA and abroad, and I continue to seek opportunities to visit foreign lands or different sections of our country. These experiences which began many years ago changed me so that I feel much more open-minded about people and also I feel that I am enjoying life more. My whole personality has changed.

Love or marriage turning-point experiences also occurred frequently. One subject reports:

Without question the so-called "turning-point" in my life was my marriage. I seemed to have a totally new outlook on life. I was constantly admired by my wife and this seemed to change my entire outlook. Previous to this experience, I had done very poorly in school. I knew I had the brains to finish and obtain a degree, but I was beginning to have doubts -- very serious doubts. I wondered if I was just fooling myself with my idealistic thinking. My wife changed all this however. She made me feel competent, worthwhile, and this faith she had in me restored my own psychological equilibrium. I was sexually inexperienced when I married, and the relief of frustration was very significant. I was not so concerned with being aggressive with the opposite sex, rather my interest turned inward at improving myself. Immediately I enjoyed the sense of responsibility of having to care for my wife. In about two years we had our first child and this sense of responsibility has increased greatly, and I enjoy it. My grades are now excellent and my one-time "dream-goals" are only a matter of time.

It was observed that although the triggering stimulus of several of the reported positive turning-point experiences was initially perceived as unpleasant or negative, the after-effects were perceived by subjects as beneficial or positive. Two subjects report initial unpleasant reaction and shock when failing grades are received at school; the final effect however is beneficial, for it made them more determined to succeed and they changed for the better. Other subjects report losing a parent through death, but after the initial grief, they report changing into more responsible and dependable individuals. It would appear that after the initial shock, such subjects perceive the situation as a challenge and face it realistically. Their reaction is quite different from the reaction of those subjects who re-

port negative turning-point experiences. For the latter, a negative or unpleasant stimulus proved to be the triggering stimulus for an unhappy or negative experience. Three of the latter subjects, for example, report unpleasant school experiences as turning-point experiences, but instead of challenging subjects as they did in the cases referred to above, the experiences had a negative effect and there was regression rather than growth. One cannot help wondering whether a counselor or a significant other might tip the scale favorably if he were able to reach that person who was faced with a potential turning-point experience because of the loss of a relative through death. If a negative stimulus can produce either a positive or negative turning-point experience, an appropriate relationship with a counselor might be critically important for the outcome.

There are other questions, too, that are raised. Why does a particular experience serve as a positive experience for one individual, a negative experience for another? Can the outcome be predicted if a particular individual is to be exposed to a particular situation that will be a crucial one for him? These aspects appear to be worthy of further exploration and study.

Negative turning-point experiences were studied also for Part 3, and data were obtained from three groups: white male prisoners (N=22), Negro delinquent girls (N=24), and university counseling center clients (N=9). Because of institutional situations, it was necessary to obtain data from one group by questionnaire, from two groups by interview.

Classification of negative turning-point experiences was undertaken for Part 3, and the classification of these experiences together with frequency by group is shown in Table 3.

The most common type of negative turning-point experience was one which seemed to be triggered by an unhappy home situation. A 26-year-old prisoner reports:

A great turning point in my life was when my parents broke up when I was at the age of eleven years. From that day on my life was one calamity after another. I was in reform school in less than a year after their breakup. Throughout my teens I was in and out of trouble (mostly in). I went from one juvenile home to the other, and after that from one jail to the other. Then thunder really struck, I started drinking. I would beg, borrow, lie, cheat, steal, and even murder if I had to, in order to get a drink. I finally landed in Florida State Prison for strong-armed robbery.

Table 3

Frequency of Types of Negative Turning-point
Experiences Among Three Groups

Nature of turning-point experiences	Group 12	Group 13	Group 14	All groups
Unhappy home situation	4	3		7
Unplanned involvement with delinquents	2	3		5
Unhappy marriage	2		1	3
Unpleasant school experience		1	2	3
Sexual difficulties	1	1		2
Drinking	2			2
Ill-treatment by officials	1			1
Imprisonment		1		1
Loss of religious faith	1			1
Deafness	1			1
Undesirable work situation	1			1
Car accident			1	1
First date			1	1
Total	15	9	5	29

Group 12: Twenty-two white male prisoners, ages 22-52

Group 13: Twenty-four Negro girls, confined for delinquency, ages 14-17

Group 14: Nine clients at a university counseling center, ages 18-27.

The next most frequently reported negative turning-point experience was one in which the subject points to unplanned involvement with delinquents. A 14-year-old delinquent girl reports:

My turning-point was when I got in with the wrong crowd. They led me astray. When I got with them I started cutting classes and quit going to school at all. I wanted to be a part of the gang and live it up. Now up here I have learned to be friendly. I want to get out and go home and finish school and become a cook. I don't want to get in with that crowd again and do bad things.

Another type of negative turning-point experience reported was one that appeared to stem from an unhappy marriage. A 38-year-old prisoner writes:

Upon receipt and reading of this paper I did a lot of thinking and I must admit that, although I have heard it said by quite a few people, it is hard for me to actually pinpoint a moment in my life that could be considered the turning-point. I suppose, after looking back over the 38 years, the most likely event that would fall into this category was my second marriage. I met and lived with this girl for several months before I married her and although she wasn't pregnant I married her simply because I thought it was the gentlemanly thing to do. As time passed I found that this was a drastic mistake. Marriage without love simply does not work. Over a period of time I found that when I wasn't home (which, because of my form of livelihood, was often), she took to stepping out with other men. This, needless to say, led to some very disagreeable moments between us, ultimately arriving at the hideous moment that I took her life, for which I am presently confined. Until that moment my record was unblemished and my future actually looked very good; but since my marriage things have gotten less rosy all the time, and life for me will never be as it could have been.

As a result of classifying negative turning-point experiences, it becomes immediately apparent how important unsuccessful interpersonal relationships are in such experiences. Most of the negative turning-point experiences listed clearly suggest unsuccessful relationships with other persons. The greatest number of negative turning-point experiences was described as beginning with an unhappy home situation of some sort; next in order was unplanned involvement with delinquents or criminals. Only four out of the 29 negative turning-point experiences described had no obvious correlation with unsuccessful interpersonal relationships.

It should be remembered that the sample on which these classifications of positive and negative turning-point experiences were based was small and may not have included all categories of such experiences. Nor should one generalize about frequency of various types of turning-point experiences, either positive or negative. A much broader sample is necessary before such observations can be validly made.

Attention in Part 3 was also given to exploration of whether turning-point experiences were anticipated or were unexpected. Members of four groups (N=86) were asked whether they perceived their turning-point experiences as one that occurred after a period of prior thinking (anticipated) or whether they perceived it as a sudden impulsive kind of experience (unexpected). Subjects perceived more turning-point experiences as anticipated experiences than as unexpected experiences, but the difference in frequency was not significant. The judge who had been asked to evaluate the reported turning-point experiences perceived more such experiences as being unexpected rather than as anticipated, but again the difference was not significant. No conclusions could be made, therefore, about relative frequency of anticipated as contrasted with unexpected turning-point experiences.

Another aspect explored for Part 3 was whether or not turning-point experiences were perceived as occurring because of external factors or because of internal factors, or because of both. Members of four groups (N=86) were asked whether they perceived their turning-point experience coming as a result of internal factors or as a result of external factors, or both. Fourteen per cent of the subjects said internal, 32% said external, 49% reported both internal and external, and 5% could not say. Subjects perceived external factors as a cause of turning-point experiences significantly more often than internal factors, and they perceived external and internal factors together as a cause of turning-point experiences significantly more often than internal factors alone (for the former, $p .05$; for the latter, $p .001$).

Another area of exploration for Part 3 was frequency of turning-point experiences. Subjects of four groups (N=86) were asked to indicate how many turning-point experiences they had had. Seventy-two per cent of the subjects reported having fewer than five turning-point experiences; this frequency was significantly greater than the frequency for any other intervals ($p .001$). It was concluded that turning-point experiences are a relatively infrequent occurrence and that most persons probably have fewer than five such experiences.

In the final section of Part 3, there was an attempt at exploration of negative turning-point experiences. Subjects were asked to describe their turning-point experience, but no instructions were given as to whether the experience was to be a positive or negative one; this was left to the subject. It was assumed that members of these groups, who were prisoners, delinquents, and counseling center clients, were the types of subjects who would probably provide information about negative turning-point experiences.

Subjects reported both positive and negative turning-point experiences -- 26 positive and 29 negative. It seems reasonable to conclude that both positive and negative experiences may be perceived as turning-point experiences by subjects in groups whose psychological growth has suffered setbacks (such individuals as prisoners, delinquents, and counseling center clients). Turning-point experiences of subjects in such groups are not necessarily negative experiences.

It was pointed out earlier that for Part 3, effort was made to classify turning-point experiences, and it was possible to group them into a number of categories. As a rule these experiences appear logically related to changes that follow the experience, changes that one might foresee. A subject perceives marriage as a turning-point experience; changes follow marriage, gradual changes, and one can foresee reasonably well what some of these changes will be and perhaps why they will occur. Such turning-point experiences might, in fact, be thought of as turning-period experiences.

Some experiences, however, are followed by changes that are much more abrupt; there may even be no apparent relationship between the experience and changes that follow. Consider, for example, this turning-point experience related by a 50-year-old man:

When I was about twelve years old I began stealing. I would steal from stores and other places, and I did it for excitement usually. For example, once I stole candy from a school locker even though my father owned a candy shop. One day when I was thirteen, I stole a box of four-ten shotgun shells, and that afternoon I went dove hunting. I came to a tree and sitting there as a perfect target was a dove. I fired and he still sat there. I fired again and missed again. Then I fired the third time, and the dove calmly flew off, unruffled by a single pellet. I rarely would miss birds on the wing and to miss an easy sitting target like that was unbelievable. I felt very strange and began to

cry. I took the remaining shells and threw them as far as I could, and still crying, I ran home and went to my room and stayed there the rest of the day. I don't know what happened to me or why it affected me that way. I have never stolen another thing since then. Something in me changed.

One might infer for this experience that stolen shotgun shells unconsciously affected the subject because he had been troubled for some time by the stealing he had been doing, and missing the dove was really a way of giving up proceeds obtained unlawfully. Since subject was basically honest, he unconsciously rebelled at wrongdoing and this came to a head during the hunting experience.

Turning-point experiences of this type are point experiences rather than period experiences and can be termed acute turning-point experiences. An acute turning-point experience is an unforeseen turning-point experience in which there is not necessarily an obvious relationship between the triggering stimulus or circumstances and changes that follow. An acute turning-point experience can be defined as an experience that is triggered by an external stimulus and is followed by abrupt and sudden changes in a person's way of living.

The distinguishing characteristic of an acute turning-point experience is not the obscurity of the relationship between experiences and changes that follow as much as it is in the sharpness or abruptness of the change. One can see a rather logical relationship between the experience and changes that follow in the acute turning-point experience described by a 53-year-old man, although the change in subject's way of living was abrupt or acute.

The turning-point experience of my life -- the only one in my life--came when I was a young man. I had a grandfather who was astute and admirable in many ways and I enjoyed visiting him. I had entered the teaching profession, and, although not a particularly thrilling sort of life, I felt as if I were fairly well settled for the rest of my life. I could see the pattern my life would take. One day when we were talking he asked me why I had not become an engineer since I had always been so good in math. He spoke about the opportunity in the engineering field as he saw it in years ahead. His words seemed to be made especially for me, for everything he said struck home. Less than three days later I had resigned for my teaching job and entered engineering school. From then on my life was very different from what it would have been. For one thing I have moved about the country (and world) quite a bit instead of staying in one area. Also I found a more exciting and satisfying career. I feel I am a better person, more sophisticated perhaps, and certainly more satisfied with my work.

Acute turning-point experiences might be considered one extreme on a continuum of turning-point experiences (the other end being, perhaps, gradual turning-point experiences). It is believed that these extremes of experiencing are worth further investigation. One wonders, for example, why an acute turning-point experience occurs at a particular time, why a particular situation triggers an acute turning-point experience, and whether a therapist or counselor might serve as catalytic agent, encouraging desirable acute turning-point experiences to occur among his clients. It might also be interesting and productive to explore inner changes -- what Gendlin (1962) would call changes in experiencing -- that occur during such acute experiences.

Turning-point experiences appear to be a kind of positive experience worthy of serious investigation. This study has been directed at making a beginning contribution toward the understanding of these experiences. Much remains to be studied and clarified, however, before turning-point experiences are fully understood.

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SUMMER-ON-TRIAL, 1965: A ONE-YEAR
FOLLOW-UP STUDY

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In the summer of 1965, eighty-four students attended South Georgia College (SGC) on a trial basis. All of these students had marginal academic potential, as measured by their high school average and or Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. Sixty-four (76%) of the on-trial students performed well enough in the summer program to be admitted to the 1965 Fall Quarter at S.G.C., and fifty-five of these students actually attended during the Fall Quarter.

This is the report of a study which was made to determine how well these fifty-five students did during their freshman year at SGC. It was also hoped that this research would provide a better understanding of the efficacy of SGC's summer-on-trial policies.

Findings

Academic Performance

It was found that only fifteen (27.2%) of the fifty-five students persisted through their freshman year at SGC. Of the remaining forty, twenty-seven failed out and thirteen withdrew voluntarily.

In order to get a more accurate picture of the academic performance of these students during their freshman year, a check was made of their grade point averages (GPA's). The mean GPA's and standard deviations of: (a) the students who persisted through their freshman year, (b) those who withdrew voluntarily, (c) those who failed out and (d) all students combined are presented on Table 1. These GPA's were calculated on a four-point scale: A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1.

It can be seen that none of the three groups had a mean GPA of C or better. The fifteen students who persisted through their freshman year had only a D+ average, while both the voluntary dropouts and the students who failed out barely reached a D- GPA.