What Happens To Sophimers?

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A long time ago, so long ago that no one now living remembers it, a Sophomore was not a
wise fool (sophos “wise” plus moron “moron”), as he is now. A sophimer was a second-year student, one engaged in the study of dialectic. Dialectic was called sophism (or sophim, or sophom, or sophum), and one who engaged in it was a soph-

ismer (or sophimer . . .).

There has been a great deal of progress since then. Nowadays it is the first-year students who engage in dialectic. Second-year undergraduates are disengaged.

EVERY YEAR hundreds of eager Freshmen arrive all full of zeal and ready to meet head-on the challenge of higher education. They question everything. They do assignments. They argue. They object to shoddy teaching (shoddy: an inferior wollen yarn made from fibers taken from used fabrics; anything of less worth or quality than it appears or is claimed to have) and slipshod logic and mickey-mouse busy work. (They have read books, and they remember what was in the books, and they try to make what they remember fit with what they are learning in college.)

By September of the following year, when those same people come back, you wouldn’t recognize them. They file into the room, open their notebooks, poise their ball-points, and sit docilely waiting for the lecture to begin.

WHEN IT BEGINS, they write it down, even if they already know what is being said. They never question anything in the lectures: if the professor says that Aristotle’s supposed writings are a joyous hoax by an insane Oxford don, down it goes in the notes; come exam time, that same remark goes word for word into the blue book.

Sophomores do not do assignments; they punch them. Sophomores argue about grade points, but not about anything else. Shoddy teaching is just what they want. Slipshod logic is the only kind they ever use. If they have read any books they have forgotten all about it.

This phenomenon has been called the Sophomore Slump. Naming it, though! (despite a common assumption), does not explain it.

IT WOULD BE easy to say that someone in the home towns—the Jaycees, maybe, or the Klan—gets to them between

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spring and fall and infects them. But the Jayees and the Klan were there all those earlier years; and besides, Houston Sophomores slump too. It is not to be believed that what the faculty did during the Freshman year could make Sophomores come out like that.

If the slump is not caused by home-town influences or by the faculty, it must be caused by the Sophomores. There are no statistics or documentary evidence, and therefore my conclusions are unchallengeable. Here they are:

The Sophomore slump results when Sophomores, meditating during their first summer vacation from college, develop the Ted Williams Syndrome.

THE TED WILLIAMS Syndrome (TWS) is so called because it was first described by a scientist who had studied a sports-page interview with Williams. The sports reporter, recalling that Williams had had one of the lowest fielding averages in the league, asked, "Dosen't it worry you that your fielding average is so low? Do you practice fielding to bring this average up?" Williams' only reported response to this was, "They don't pay off on fielding."

(Mr. Ty Cobb, no scientist, was unable to look objectively on this interview. He snorted and remarked that in his day ball-players were ball-players, and that they practiced all phases of the game, and that when one of them fell off in the fielding averages you could find him on the practice diamond, shagging grounders and charging on flies.)

IN THE FIRST (Sophomore) year of the TWS the patient is at a loss: he has found out what they pay off on, but he is not practiced in that. The Sophomore year is the year during which young people re-orient themselves. They know by now that they have to make grades; learning does not show on the permanent record. ("They don't pay off on learning.")

But they don't know, yet, how to make sure of getting the grades. Some even feel a little guilty because they are not learning, and because they are not entirely free of the notion that they ought to be learning things, too.

By the end of the year most Sophomores settle down to strict grade-getting. They have learned that their only task in college is to find out what the professor will give a high grade for, and do it. From there to graduation, and on through graduate school, is clear sailing.

THAT IS THE one piece of learning which infallibly carries over into the Hard Cruel World Outside. Those who learn it well in college can make the transfer, so that in business they are quick to find out what the boss will give a raise for, and they are quick to do it.

Thus, in this Sick world, the sick are more likely to succeed than the others. (If "they" paid off on rapid fluctuation of body-temperature, the success-assuring disease would be malaria.)

My fellow-pathologists will be pleased to know that about one in fifty of this un-named disease, identifiable by the specific set of symptoms which I have called the TWS, recovers from it—some of them before they graduate. If they do recover, of course, they are likely not to graduate at all. But at least they are well.