College Pressures by William Zinsser (originally published in 1978)

Dear Carlos: I desperately need a dean's excuse for my chem. midterm, which will begin in about one hour. All I can say is that I totally blew it this week. I've fallen incredibly, inconceivably behind.

Carlos: Help! I am anxious to hear from you. I'll be in my room and won't leave it until I hear from you. Tomorrow is the last day for…

Carlos: I left town because I started bugging out again. I stayed up all night to finish a take-home make-up exam and am typing it to hand in on the tenth. It was due on the fifth. PS: I'm going to the dentist. Pain is pretty bad.

Carlos: Probably by Friday I'll be able to get back to my studies. Right now, I'm going to take a long walk. This whole thing has taken a lot out of me.

Carlos: I'm really up the proverbial creek. The problem is I really bombed the history final. Since I need that course for my major I…

Carlos: Here follows a tale of woe. I went home this weekend, had to help my Mom, and caught a fever so didn't have much time to study. My professor…

Carlos: Aargh! Trouble. Nothing original but everything's piling up at once. To be brief, my job interview….

Hey Carlos, good news! I've got mononucleosis!

Who are these wretched supplicants, scribbling notes so laden with anxiety, seeking such miracles of postponement and balm? They are men and women who belong to Branford College, one of the twelve residential colleges at Yale University, and the messages are just a few of the hundreds they left for their dean, Carlos Hortas - often slipped under his door at 4 a.m. - last year.

But students like the ones who wrote those notes can also be found on campuses from coast to coast - especially in New England and many other private colleges across the country that have high academic standards and highly motivated students. Nobody could doubt that the notes are real. In their urgency and their gallows of humor they are authentic voices of a generation that is panicky to succeed.

My own connection with the message writers is that I am master of Branford College. I live in its Gothic quadrangle and know the students well. (We have 485 of them.) I am privy to their hopes and fears - and also their stereo music and their piercing cries in the dead of night ("Does anybody ca-a-are?"). If they went to Carlos to ask how to get through tomorrow, they come to me to ask how to get through the rest of their lives.

Mainly I try to remind them that the road ahead is a long one and that it will have more unexpected turns that they think. There will be plenty of time to change jobs, change careers, change whole attitudes and approaches. They do not want to hear such liberating news. They want a map - right now - that they can follow unswerving to career security, financial security, social security and, presumably, a prepaid grave.

What I wish for all students is some release from the clammy grip of the future. I wish them a chance to savor each segment of their education as an experience in itself and not as a grim preparation for the next step. I wish them the right to experiment, to trip and fall, to learn that defeat is as instructive as victory.

We are witnessing in America the creation of a brotherhood of paupers - colleges, parents and students, joined by the common bond of debt.

Today it is not unusual for a student, even if he worked part-time at college and full-time during the summer, to accrue $20,000 in loans after four years - loans that he must start to repay within one year after graduation. Exhorted at commencement to go forth into the world, he is already behind as he goes forth. How could he not feel under pressure throughout college to prepare for this day of reckoning? I have used 'he,' incidentally, only for brevity. Women at Yale are under no less pressure to justify their expensive education to themselves, their parents, and society. In fact, they are probably under more pressure. For although they leave college superbly equipped to bring fresh leadership to traditionally male jobs, society has not yet caught up with this fact.

Along with economic pressure goes parental pressure. Inevitably, the two are deeply intertwined.

I see many students taking pre-medical courses with joyless tenacity. They go off to their labs as if they were going to the dentist. It saddens me because I know them in other corners of their life as cheerful people.

"Do you want to go to medical school?" I ask them.

"I guess so," they say, without conviction, or "Not really."

"Then why are you going?"

"Well, my parents want me to be a doctor. They're paying all this money and..."

Poor students, poor parents. They are caught in one of the oldest webs of love and duty and guilt. The parents mean well; they are trying to steer their sons and daughters toward a secure future. But, the sons and daughters want to major in history or classics or philosophy - subjects with no 'practical' value. Where is the payoff on the humanities? It is not easy to persuade such loving parents that the humanities do, indeed, pay off. The intellectual faculties developed by studying subjects such as history and classics - and ability to synthesize and relate, to weigh the cause and effect, to see events in perspective - are just the faculties that make creative leaders in business or almost any general field. Still, many parents would rather put their money on courses that point toward a specific profession - courses that are pre-law, pre-med., pre-business, or as I sometimes heard it put, 'pre-rich'.

But, the pressure on students is severe. They are truly torn. One part of them feels obligated to fulfill their parents' expectations; after all, their parents are older and presumably wiser. Another part tells them that the expectations that are right for their parents are not right for them.

I know a student who wants to be an artist. She is very obviously an artist and will be a good one - she has already had several modest local exhibits. Meanwhile she is growing as a well-rounded person and taking humanistic subjects that will enrich the inner resources out of which her art will grow. But her father is strongly opposed. He thinks that an artist is a 'dumb' thing to be. The student vacillates and tries to please everybody. She keeps up with her art somewhat furtively and takes some of the 'dumb' courses her father wants her to take - at least that are dumb courses for her. She is a free spirit on a campus of tense students - no small achievement in itself - and she deserves to follow her muse.

Peer pressure and self-induced pressure are also intertwined, and they start almost at the beginning of freshman year.

"I had a freshman student I'll call Linda," one dean told me. "Who came in and said she was under terrible pressure because her roommate, Barbara, was much brighter and studied all the time. I couldn't tell her that Barbara had come in two hours earlier to say the same thing about Linda."

The story is almost funny - except that it is not. It is symptomatic of all the pressures put together. When every student thinks every other student is working harder and doing better, the only solution is to study harder still. I see students going off to the library every night after dinner and coming back when it closes at midnight. I wish they would sometimes forget about their peers and go to a movie. I hear the clack of typewriters in the hours before dawn. I see the tension in their eyes when exams are approaching and papers are due: "Will I get everything done?"

Probably they will not. They will get sick. They will get 'blocked'. They will sleep. They will oversleep. They still bug out. Hey Carlos, HELP!

Part of the problem is that they do more than they are expected to. A professor will assign a five-page paper. Several students will start writing ten page papers to impress him. Then more students will write ten page papers, and a few will raise the ante to fifteen. Pity the poor student who is still just doing the assignment.

"Once you have twenty of thirty percent of the student population deliberately overexerting," one dean points out, "It's bad for everybody. When a teacher gets more and more effort from his class, the student who is doing normal work can be perceived as not doing well. The tactic works, psychologically."

Why can't the professor just cut back and not accept longer paper? He can, and he probably will. But by then term will be half over and the damage done. Grade fever is highly contagious and not easily reversed. Besides, the professor's main concern is with his course. He knows his students only in relation to the course and does not know that they are also overexerting in their other courses. Not that it is really his business. He did not sign up for dealing with the students as a whole person and with all the emotional baggage the student brought along from home. That is what deans, masters chaplains, and psychiatrists are for.

To some extent this is nothing new: a certain number of professors have always been self-contained islands of scholarship and shyness, more comfortable with books than with people. But the new pauperism has widened the gap still further, for professors who actually like to spend time with students do not have as much time to spend. They are also overexerting. If they are young, they are busy trying to publish in order not to perish, hanging by their fingernails onto a shrinking profession. If they are old and tenured, they are buried under the duties of administering departments - as departmental chairmen or members of committees - which have been thinned out by the budgetary ax.

Ultimately, it will be the students' own business to break the circles in which they are trapped. They are too young to be prisoners of their parents' dreams and their classmates' fears. They must be jolted into believing in themselves as unique men and women who have the power to shape their own future.

"Violence is being done to the undergraduate experience," says Carlos Horta. "College should be open-ended; at the end it should open many, many roads. Instead, students are choosing their goal in advance, and their choices narrow as they go along."

It is almost as if they think that the country has been codified in the types of jobs that exist - that they have got to fit into certain slots. Therefore, fit into the best paying slots.

"They ought to take chances. Not taking chances will lead to a life of colorless mediocrity. They'll be comfortable. But something in the spirit will be missing."

I have painted too drab a portrait of today's students, making them seem a solemn lot. That is only half of their story: If they were so dreary, I would not so thoroughly enjoy their company. The other half is that they are easy to like. They are quick to laugh and offer friendship. They are not introverts. They are usually kind and are more considerate of one another that any student generation I have known.

Nor are they so obsessed with their studies that they avoid sports and extra-curricular activities. On the contrary, they juggle their crowded hours to play on a variety of teams, perform with musical and dramatic groups, and write for campus publications. But this in turn is one more cause of anxiety. There are too many choices. Academically, they have 1300 courses to select from: outside class they have to decide how much spare time they can spare and how to spend it.

This means that they engage in fewer extracurricular pursuits than their predecessors did. If they want to row on the crew and play in the symphony they will eliminate one, in the '60s they would have done both. They are tending to choose activities that are self-limiting. Drama, for instance, is flourishing in all twelve of Yale's residential colleges, as it never has before. Students hurl themselves into these productions - as actors, directors, carpenters, and technicians - with a dedication to create the best possible play, knowing the day will come when the run will end and they can get back to their studies.

They also cannot afford to be the willing slaves of organizations like the Yale Daily News. Last spring the one hundredth anniversary banquet of that paper, whose past chairs include such once and future kings as Potter Stewart, Kingman Brewster, and William F. Buckley, Jr. much was made of the fact that the editorial staff used to be small and totally committed and that 'newsies' routinely worked fifty hours a week. In effect, they belonged to a club; Newsies is how they defined themselves at Yale. Today's students will write one or two articles a week, when he or she can, and is defined as a student. I have never heard the word newsie except at the banquet.

If I have described the modern undergraduate primarily as a driven creature who is largely ignoring the blithe spirit inside who keeps trying to come out and play, it is because that is where the crunch is, not only at Yale, but throughout American education. It is why I think we should all be worried about the values that are nurturing a generation so fearful of risk and so goal-obsessed at such an early age.

I tell students that there is no one 'right' way to get ahead - that each of them is a different person, starting from a different point and bound for a different destination. I tell them that change is a tonic and that all the slots are not codified nor the frontiers closed. One of my ways of telling them is to invite men and women who have achieved success outside the academic world to come and talk informally with my students during the year. They are the heads of companies or ad agencies, editors of magazines, politicians, public officials, television magnates, labor leaders, business executives, Broadway producers, artists, writers, economists, photographers, scientists, historians - a mixed bag of achievers.

I ask them to say a few words about how they got started. The students assume that they started in their present profession and knew all along that it was what they wanted to do. Luckily for me, most of them got into their field by a circuitous route, to their surprise, after many detours. The students are startled. They can hardly conceive of a career that was not pre-planned. They can hardly imagine allowing the hand of God or chance to nudge them down some unforeseen trail.