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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page 1709, *Science*, 29 December 1967. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

Broadening the Participation of the Colleges

What can the colleges and universities do to improve their public image and their public support?

One thing they can do is to participate more fully and continuously as citizens and neighbors in community and political life. The public that supports us as teachers needs to see that we are not strange and doubtful creatures living in another world, but friends with mutual concerns. Yet how many of us take part regularly in neighborhood or club activities outside of our college in-group? How many of us have taken on a neighbor's son, or daughter, as an intellectual protégé, sharing with him our interesting books and models and intellectual excitements? Adult teachers and scientists from 25 to 75 far outnumber the youngsters between 8 and 18 who might follow in their footsteps. Each one teach one. It would be a chain reaction.

And how many staff members and students work with local political organizations between elections, or run for city council or the board of education, or are even careful not to lose their vote because of moving? Many students who will become alumni and contributors might find they have a considerable long-run interest in college-community problems.

In fact, the political importance of the colleges and universities is just beginning to be realized. There are now 2400 of them, and they constitute the major industry of a thousand cities and towns. Their millions of students have been shown to be the key factors in our rapid technological and economic growth, and the income of the colleges is now beginning to surpass net farm income, although it is only a small fraction of their addition to the gross national product. Since 1954, over half of our high school graduates have been going on to college, and in any given year some 10 million voting adults are helping to support children in college. Most of these families spend voluntarily on education more than they spend on cars or on defense taxes—even though they have no full-color magazine ads or TV shows to dramatize their investment. In the colleges themselves, there are now some 2 million students over 21 who could vote, and another 2 million or so voters on the faculty and supporting staffs, with their families, probably adding up, again, to a population larger than the dwindling farm population.

These college communities, of course, are not unanimous about anything, even education—and no one would want them to be. Nevertheless, they represent our most concentrated sources of knowledge in every field, as well as a commitment to an open-minded search for new knowledge and new solutions. Today their search for new ways of dealing with our crisis problems may be the only thing that can save us. And politicians are now finding that they need to listen to the college groups, with their pressure for better solutions, just as they listen, say, to the farm lobby or the military-industrial lobby. If the voices of education ever begin to have as much influence on state and national government, and on policy decisions, as the other voices, it will be a new day. Perhaps it is not as far off as we have thought.—JOHN R. PLATT, *University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*