

College marriages— their difficulties and problems

By MARY SHELDON

College marriages are a relatively recent phenomena. Prior to the end of World War II marriage and college were considered completely incompatible. The reader may recall the ending of *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis. George Babbitt had always planned for his son to go to college. But when it is discovered that the son is married, college is considered simply out of the question (even though the young wife's father is a Ph.D. economist and money is no problem.)

The veterans of World War II, having had to postpone their education of necessity, established the practice of going to college while married. This constituted a sharp break with tradition. This break was accepted because the men were veterans and because the GI bill paid them to go to college. Veterans and the GI bill are rapidly fading from the scene, but it looks as if college marriages are here to stay. But such a sharp break with tradition always produces unresolved cultural conflicts. The traditional

role of the husband and father conflicts with the new role of the student husband and father.

These conflicting conceptions of the role of the husband lead to misunderstandings between parents and college-age children. Considering college marriages from the standpoint of the college student's wife, there are several problems involved. This conclusion is based on observations by students and wives of students.

First, there is the most obvious problem of finances. For many student families, the continued education of the husband means financial hardship for a few years. For many, this hardship is severe and requires going into debt. For others, financial limitations mean simply doing without many of the conveniences and luxuries modern Americans have come to accept as their "right." Now most couples can face this problem good-naturedly for a short time. But if the husband remains in school for more than a couple of years, the financial situation may produce strains. These tensions are increased by the examples of friends who are now in well-paying jobs. Then, too, many parents fail to understand the need nowadays for more and more education, and the length of time such education takes. Their well-meaning comments may be quite disheartening.

When the husband's education requires a period of several years, and three to eight years are not uncommon these days, increasingly irritations, anxieties, and hostilities often impair the marriage relationship. Unplanned children increase expenses. At the same time, income decreases if the wife quits working to care for the children. Many newly married couples do not plan on having children while they are in school. However, one study of married students in a midwestern university indicated that one-third of first-born children were not planned. The birth of children should be considered a good possibility by couples considering college marriage. Their arrival creates many new problems, but so also may a prolonged delay in beginning one's family.

A related problem may arise if the wife works, especially when there are children. The traditional role of the husband and father has been that of the provider. In the college situation, the wife is

continued on page 14



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Student, wife, and mother of two children, Mary Sheldon graduated With Distinction from the University in 1958 and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She earned a master's degree in Sociology in January and is now working toward her doctorate. Last year, as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, she interviewed 150 student wives for her thesis, and this article is based on that study. Her husband, William R. Sheldon (B.S. '50, M.S. '56), expects to receive a Ph.D. in Physics here in June. The Sheldons have been married nine years; he spent four years in the service and they have been in college together nine years. They have two sons, whose ages are seven and four.

Dean Vernon E. Wilson continued from page 4

faculty and students. If you have good people, you'll be successful; if you haven't, nothing will save your program."

As a high school graduate in his native Iowa, Dr. Wilson planned to study for a medical career, but a series of developments imposed a fourteen-year delay. The Illinois college he entered closed its doors while he was in his freshman year. Family responsibilities and the depression prevented his schooling elsewhere, then he served three years with the Navy during the war. He finally got back to books and laboratory, attending the University of Illinois College of Medicine and its College of Pharmacy, where he earned B.S., M.S. (in Pharmacology) and M.D. degrees.

His administrative duties at the University of Kansas included service on numerous committees as well as personal supervision of the rural preceptorship program. He was associate editor of the *State Medical Journal* and held other positions in state medical groups. He is a member of the planning committee for the Teaching Institute of the Association of American Medical Colleges, and the first member of the

American Academy of General Practice to be named a medical school dean.

When Dean Wilson's appointment to Missouri was announced, President Elmer Ellis said: "I am confident that Dr. Wilson will enlarge the services of our Medical Center to make it of still greater value and assistance to the people of Missouri." In the short time that he has been dean, Dr. Wilson has indeed given the Medical Center a big lift. Between 70 and 80 additional hospital beds have been opened. The flow of highly promising men to the staff has been stepped up sharply and is continuing. Research grants have more than doubled, and are now at the half million dollar mark. New or expanded services on several fronts are being developed, including an open ward unit in psychiatry some time next summer.

In a matter of a few months Missouri's flying dean is justifying the enthusiasm of former associates and proving their merit as sound prophets. In a demanding and highly important position, he gives every evidence of establishing himself firmly as the man for the job.

College Marriages continued from page 11

often the sole or major provider at the same time that she is mother and homemaker. Even though the wife rationally realizes that her husband's education will eventually benefit the family, emotionally she often resents the fact that her husband is not fulfilling his "real" role. In this respect the educational demands of our society have changed faster than have our values and attitudes. It may take some time to adjust to this new type family.

Most wives, upon reflection, would nevertheless agree that their major problems are not material ones, but problems of a social-psychological nature. These social-psychological problems may be summed up by saying that the wife often loses a sense of value, of worth. What causes this depreciation of the self?

First, the wife of a student can become very lonely. The husband, of necessity, is away from home studying and/or working a good deal of the time. The conception of modern marriage assumes that the husband and wife will be companions, but this aspect of marriage must often be reduced for the student couple. While children and friends may help fill the void left by the absent husband, the woman's conception of herself as a woman depends on frequent validation by her husband. The too-busy student husband may not be able to give the wife the attention she needs to give her a continued sense of value.

A further difficulty arises for women who have completed only a high school education, or who have had only a brief college career. Marriage often frees the man from the social and sexual problems

he had prior to marriage. After marriage his interests may expand enormously—to his occupation, politics, literature, etc. This happens at the same time that the young wife, especially with children, finds her contacts narrower than ever before in her life. The result may be an increasing feeling of distance between husband and wife, an increasing lack of common interests, particularly when the woman has not completed her education to her satisfaction. She may develop feelings of intellectual inferiority to her husband. Numerous women who did not complete their education because of marriage express their regret. In some cases this regret may lead to resentment of their husbands.

Obviously, many college marriages work out well. For the emotionally mature couple, college may even facilitate adjustment, especially if the time necessary to complete the husband's education is not excessive. Many couples, though, are not mature enough to overcome the problems of college marriage without creating tensions that impair the relationship between husband and wife. Young couples considering college marriage should consider carefully whether or not they are capable of living together harmoniously under conditions of considerable stress.

Editor's note: The *Alumnus* will be surprised (and disappointed) if this issue's articles on college marriages fail to produce reaction upholding this new cultural pattern on the campus. Such comment is welcome, especially any discussions of Dr. Margaret Mead's article starting on page 8. The magazine looks forward to presenting a round-up of views on college marriages in an early issue, probably in May.