

The New York State Regents Scholarship Exam

As we were approaching our last semester at Stuyvesant High School in the spring of 1945, the New York State Board of Regents announced a new way of awarding the 300 scholarships that were given to the 300 smartest high school graduates in the State. The official name of the Board of Regents, I have subsequently learned, is the State Education Department of the University of the State of New York. At any rate, the scholarships had previously gone to those students who had the highest marks on their Regents Exams, the standardized tests which all college-bound students were required to take in the usual subjects: math, science, history, English, foreign language etc. It is the bane of all high school students. You took your courses, studied, did your homework, passed your class tests, but now, having completed the course, you had to take still another test. Fortunately, a company named Arco, published small paperback books containing past Regents Exams (with the answers) so it was a simple matter of reviewing the old tests as preparation.

The fact is, most of us at Stuyvesant really didn't worry about the Regents Exams. We went to one of the best schools in the city (which is therefore one of the best schools in the State) and usually got high scores. However, to make sure that all the Regents scholarships did not go to Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Hunter High School students, a fixed number was awarded to each Congressional District. But starting in June 1945, a single three-hour test covering all subjects was to be given, and the 300 students who received the highest marks in their Congressional Districts were to be awarded the scholarships. And what was the amount of the scholarship? It was \$50 a semester for eight semesters, for a total of \$400.

The truth is, in 1945, \$50 was nothing to sneeze at. Besides, think of the honor of winning a scholarship. The Stuyvesant administration took this change as a challenge, and called a special assembly of the senior class. They urged us to think seriously about this exam, and they committed their best faculty to conduct after-school "prep" classes. I saw it as an opportunity to review my three years of high school in three months. Each week we were given lectures, accompanied by hand-outs containing material that would be covered in the exam. One bit of trivia that I remember that they felt we should know were the books that were awarded the Pulitzer prize, from its inception. It wasn't necessary to have read them; just know their names and authors. I have always been intrigued by obscure information, and as a kid, my two favorite radio programs were Information Please, and the Quiz Kids. And so I started to cram. In addition, they gave us tips on taking multiple-choice exams which proved useful throughout college. I also liked hanging out with the smartest guys in my class.

When the day of the exam arrived, I felt prepared. In some respects, I thought of cramming as "legitimate cheating." I knew what I had to know for the exam, but promptly forgot it the next day. I have always been a lousy math and science student, but was able, for exams, to memorize whatever formulas were called for. I was always confident with regard to English and social studies. At the conclusion of the exam, I felt

I did well. Groups of students gathered outside the school to talk about the questions. I headed for home.

We were told that the names of the scholarship winners would appear in the N.Y. Times and the N.Y. Herald Tribune some time toward the end of August, after the winners were individually notified. By mid-August, I began looking for a letter from the State Education Department, but it never came. One day, I picked up the Times and there was the list of the names of the 300 scholarship winners. Mine was not among them. I recognized the names of several of the brightest of my classmates, but others, whom I expected to see, were not there.

Well, I gave it a shot. In September, I entered CCNY and put the excitement and anticipation raised by the scholarship exam out of my mind. I was now in college, I had started working part-time at Reich and Schrift stationers, and had even volunteered as assistant manager of the CCNY football team. I had become “Joe College.”

Then, out of the blue, in April 1946, came a letter from the University of the State of New York, State Education Department, awarding me “University Scholarship Number 317.” I was given a Certificate announcing “Jacob Schlitt having earned a scholarship certificate at Stuyvesant High School in June 1945 and having met all the requirements of law and of Department ordinances is hereby granted this University Scholarship which entitles him to receive the sum of fifty dollars each term for a period of 8 terms beginning September 1945, to aid him in the completion of his education at The City College.”

What happened? The scholarships are only awarded to students who attend college in New York State. If you foolishly go out of state to some college like Harvard or Princeton, you can not get the \$50 scholarship to help you with your tuition. Fortunately for me, there were 17 or more students who chose to go to out-of-state colleges. In September, unbeknownst to me, it was: “Close, but no cigar.” But then, in April, I got the cigar. Though I didn’t get my name in the paper, I did get the scholarship. And would you believe: two years later they increased the scholarship to \$125 a semester. Now I was really rich!

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