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THE HARVARD GROUP-ELECTIVE SYSTEM.

W. W. MCLAREN.

The primary object of this paper is to relate some of the aims and methods of higher education, by calling attention to certain far-reaching changes, which have been inaugurated at Harvard College. The adoption of the new system of *group-electives* in the place of the *free-elective* system, so long in vogue, is the outcome of an investigation into the results of the old system, set on foot by President Lowell immediately after his installation in 1909. The new system went into effect with the class which entered the College in September 1910. For many years Harvard has been working upon the basis of permitting the undergraduates to choose freely their subjects of study during their college course, the authorities imposing only one compulsory subject, viz: an elementary course in English Composition, and for the rest, contenting themselves with formulating certain minimum standards with regard to quantity and quality of the work which the student must attain before being granted the degree of A. B. This system was freedom itself, and though some serious

defects were apparent in its results, President Eliot considered complete freedom in the choice of studies as the best policy for the majority of the undergraduates, and he steadily refused to modify the system.

Having thus instituted the system of *free-electives*, President Eliot turned from the College, and devoted his great abilities to the building up of the University. So completely successful was he in this undertaking, that in the present academic year, there were 4019 students enrolled, half in the College, and the other half in the graduate professional schools of Divinity, Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Business Administration, Practical Science, and Arts and Sciences. The University, consisting of Harvard College and the professional schools, stands to-day as a monument of the ability and energy of the President Emeritus, Charles William Eliot.

I.

In Harvard College the system so long in vogue has worked out in practice somewhat differently from what was expected. In theory it offers to all undergraduates an opportunity to choose those subjects of study for which they have most liking, or most talent. Working upon

9 congenial subjects, the student was expected to put his whole heart into his studies, and thus achieve a high grade of scholarship. In actual practice, the system has been found to work excellently for the class of serious students, but for a considerable body of students, who found no subjects specially congenial, it resulted in merely a hunt for the "easy" courses. Among such lazy students, it is very doubtful whether any system of education could be devised, which would yield good results.

However, the *free-elective* system not only permitted the lazy to be lazy still, but it permitted earnest students to be led by their own curiosity or by the example of friends or the advice of parents into such an arrangement of their courses as resulted disastrously for the quality of their education. While the majority of the undergraduate body had sufficient common sense to obtain a well rounded education, a large number went to the extremes, and used their freedom either to specialize too much in one field of knowledge, or to scatter their time over too many subjects. In the case of those who concentrated too much, especially if the subject chosen happened to be Greek or Metaphysics or Mathematics, they graduated from college into a world of which they knew little or nothing, with minds trained to think only in the language of antiquity or in purely abstract processes.

They missed largely that training which enables the mind to think clearly to wise human judgments. Even if these overspecialized students happened to choose such fields of study as economics, politics, history or sociology, their ignorance of literature, natural sciences, philosophy and fine arts deprived them of that culture which is so essential to a well rounded education. In the case of these students who specialized too little, who graduated without a working knowledge of any subject, there was even a more total lack of sound mental training. An elementary knowledge of a dozen different subjects can be acquired without the use of any faculty except the memory, but a university education is not designed to be a mere memory drill; it must take the student deep enough into some subjects to compel him to think and reason and judge for himself. The aim of higher education is the development of the *thinking* powers, and the enlargement of the sympathies and the vision of the student. To miss that aim, whether from over or under specialization, is to fall short of the end of a college course.

It is the business of every college to so arrange its curriculum as to encourage, to compel, if necessary, the undergraduates to go deeply enough into some one subject to get beyond the

preliminary stages, to a plane where the analytical, critical, and synthetic powers are called into being, and at the same time to become familiar with other fields of knowledge, for the purpose of humanising the mind and broadening the outlook upon life. The system of *free-electives* at Harvard permitted some, but did not compel all, of its undergraduates to realise such an ideal of a college education.

Added to this first charge brought against the old system is a second viz: the almost complete disintegration of undergraduate training which is involved in any elective system. The members of any one year never meet in a body in any course of instruction, and thus that spirit of competition among the members of a class which is so necessary for the attainment of high scholarship is entirely lacking. It is true that a considerable number of lower classmen compete with each other in some elementary courses. Thus in 1909 there were 241 members of the Sophomore class in Economics I, and 211 members of the Freshman class in Government I. Such competition as exists in these elementary courses entirely disappears among the upper classmen. Thus the members of the Senior Year in 1910, about 350 in number, were found scattered into every corner of the instruction offered, in

358 different courses, in small groups averaging from 3 to 5 men. Under such circumstances no competition among upper class men is possible, and the grade of scholarship suffers in consequence. The student knows that the time will never come when he will be graded with his classmates according to merit; he also knows that he will obtain his degree by keeping a little above the minimum required by the authorities.

II.

With these two main defects of the *free-elective* system plainly in mind, the President of Harvard set about to find a remedy or remedies. It was decided after much investigation that the first great defect was due to the *complete* freedom of electives, and that the natural remedy was to be found in placing restrictions upon that freedom. It was also found that the second defect was inherent in any system of electives, whether free or restricted, and that one remedy was to give up the elective system altogether. However, to return to a system of *prescribed studies* was impossible and undesirable at Harvard, and was not thought of seriously. In order to stimulate scholarship and to arrest the disintegration of undergraduate training, the authorities decided to adopt a different

20 course, as we shall see later. In the meantime we turn to consider the modification of the *free elective* system which has been adopted.

In the new regime all the courses of instruction offered in the College are grouped under four main headings, as follows:—

1. Language, Literature, Fine Arts and Music.
 - a) Ancient Languages and Literatures.
 - b) Modern Languages and Literatures.
 - c) Fine Arts, Music.
2. Natural Sciences.
 - a) Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy and Engineering.
 - b) Biology, Physiology, Geology and Mining.
3. History, Political and Social Sciences.
 - a) History.
 - b) Politics, Economics, Sociology, Education, and Anthropology.
4. Philosophy and Mathematics.
 - a) Philosophy.
 - b) Mathematics.

Every undergraduate is required to choose some one of these four groups, as the field in which to do his main work, i.e., as his *major*. In this *major* he is required to take at least six courses, only two of which may be elementary. This rule compels the student to concentrate to a certain extent, and thus the requirements of specialization are to be met. Another six courses must be taken in the other three main groups, not less than three courses in any two groups; by this rule the requirements of distribution are to be met. There remain four courses, which the student may use for purposes of further concentration upon his *major*, or for broadening the basis of his education, or for both purposes.

In order to illustrate the working of this *group-elective* system, we draw up a plan of study, such as a student might comply with during his college course.

21 Group 4. a) Philosophy is the Major.

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|---|-----------------------|----------|
| 1. History of Modern Philosophy. | } Elementary courses. | |
| 2. Psychology. | | |
| 3. Advanced Psychology. | | |
| 4. Psychological Laboratory. | | |
| 5. Ethics. | | |
| 6. Metaphysics. | | |
| 7. English Philosophy from Locke to Hume. | } Additional courses. | |
| 8. The Kantian Philosophy. | | |
| 9. History of Ancient Art. | | Group 1. |
| 10. The Fine Arts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. | | " 1. |
| 11. History and Development of English Literature. | " 1. | |
| 12. Shakespeare. | " 1. | |
| 13. Modern European History. | " 3. | |
| 14. Principles of Economics. | " 3. | |

- 15. American History. " 3.
- 16. Descriptive Inorganic Chemistry. " 2.
- 17. English Composition (Compulsory).

In this plan the student has selected Group 4.—a) as his main field of study, and has taken eight courses in that field. He may reasonably be supposed at graduation to have a fair knowledge of philosophical subjects. In Group 1 he has taken four courses, in Group 3, three courses, and in Group 2, one course, and by that distribution has broadened his outlook and developed his sympathies by the study of fine arts, English literature, history, economics and chemistry. These sixteen courses, along with English Composition, make up the full tale of work required for the degree of A.B. at Harvard.

The machinery by which the new system is to be put into execution has been provided by the authorities. The clerical work of course falls upon the offices of the Dean and the Recorder, the rest of the work upon the Advisors, and the students. Every member of the Freshman class is required to submit to an Advisor a plan of his whole college course. This plan must be drawn up in

24 outline before the end of his Freshman year, for by that time the student has had an opportunity of becoming somewhat familiar with his own preferences in the matter of fields of study, and with the ways of the College. Of course this plan does not include the names of the actual courses to be taken in the next three years, for those chosen might not be given in two or three years' time. The advantage of the student's planning his education as a whole is obvious, for by that exercise he is compelled to think of the purpose of his education and to consider seriously how best to accomplish that purpose. Again the student knows that when he has once submitted his plan, and it has been accepted by the Dean, it must be followed in its main outlines at least. Each Advisor has only three or four students under his supervision, and he is supposed to study carefully the peculiarities and circumstances of each of his wards. His first duty is to interpret correctly the rules for the benefit of the student; his second to study the student, taking into account capacity, application, intellectual preferences and future career, and with these things in mind to assist each of his charges in deciding upon his plan. As the Advisors vary in their personal qualities, so will their usefulness to the students vary through many degrees, but the hope is that they will perform a real

service to the men over whom they have supervision.

When the plan is finally approved by the Dean, the student must carry it through, unless he can convince the authorities that certain changes in it would result in giving him a better education. It is at this point that the element of compulsion enters, but even here compulsion is not absolute, nor is it intended to work any hardship to any student. However, if the new system is to have any real value its rules must be followed, besides, the rules will furnish the necessary stiffening in the student's academic career. There remains freedom enough, the plan is freely constructed, the Advisor's help does not amount to compulsion, and under the new system the undergraduate still retains his power in the ordering of his education, within certain broad rules laid down by the authorities. In no sense does the *group-elective* approach a system of prescribed studies: such a course is impossible at Harvard.

Whether the new system will accomplish all that is expected of it, time alone can tell. Already, prominent educationalists in America have generously applauded the changes. The

25 President of Western Reserve University pointed out that Harvard, with every prospect of success, is

attempting to strike a line between the two extremes of education, too much and too little specialization. The President * of the University of California says that Harvard has entered upon a new stage in the development of University education; the characteristic features of which are freedom for the undergraduate to choose from among four fields of study, combined with freedom to choose from among many courses of instruction offered in each field. The President of the College of the City of New York draws attention to the fact that Harvard, without destroying the *elective system*, has modified it so as to remove its chief defects.

In concluding this section, mention must be made of the method by which Harvard hopes to improve the quality of undergraduate scholarship. The *elective system*, free or group, permits the disintegration of undergraduate training and makes impossible competition among the men of a class for the first places in the merit list. But in spite of that fact the *elective system* has been retained, and the authorities have turned their eyes in another direction to seek a stimulus to high scholarship. The "honors" system of Oxford and Cambridge was canvassed but rejected, mainly

* North American Review, April 1910.

because the introduction of that system would create the necessity of an honors degree, whereas the President of Harvard wished to retain the present practice of having but one degree, viz., A.B. for all undergraduates. Harvard has therefore determined to make use of a system, already in existence within her walls, of "degrees with distinction," as an inducement for undergraduates to improve the quality of their scholarship. Till the present the great body of the students have scouted the "degree with distinction" because they saw in it a mark of the "grind". It is this despised "distinction" which the President hopes to transform into an honor coveted by the undergraduate, for which even the best men will compete. Here again, only time can tell whether the Harvard A.B., coupled with *cum laude* or *magna cum laude*, will come to have the same significance in America as the Oxford or Cambridge *honors* degree has in England.

The method of granting a degree "with distinction" is not to be different materially from what it has been in the past. There are to be three grades of honors, *cum laude* "with distinction", *magna cum laude*, "with high distinction", *summa cum laude* "with highest distinction". The *cum laude* will be granted mainly upon the basis of the rank obtained in regular examinations; the

magna cum laude partly upon rank in regular examinations and partly as the result of an oral examination taken in the senior year upon the student's "major"; the *summa cum laude* is not to be conferred except in very rare cases, and then only for altogether exceptional ability.

From this brief description of the group-elective system, and discussion of its origin, aims and possible results, it is hoped that some idea of what is going on at Harvard may be apparent. For a much fuller description the reader is referred to the *Report of the President for 1908-09*.

To apply this new system and the ideas upon which it is based to the curriculum of Keio, the writer hopes to have the privilege of printing a second paper in some subsequent number of this magazine.

支那の君主及び國體

橋本 増吉

現代の支那帝國が君主國體にして專制政體なる事は、明白なる事實として世人の疑はざる所なり。然れども其君主國體の實質に就て之を考ふるに、其國體たるや、之を吾が國體に於て見るが如き、比較的純粹なる族父的君主國體に比するに、其趣き大に異なるものあり。而かも更に之を以て其他の獨裁的君主國體若しくは民主國體に比するも、亦頗る其意義を異にするものあり。而して支那國體の真相を知らんと欲せば、先づ其古代に溯ぼりて、其國家成立の由て來る所を窮めざるべからず。然れども余輩の淺學なるもとより、未だ此難問を解し得たりと信ずるにあらず。今は唯だ其一端を推考し、以て先輩諸賢の叱正を仰がんと欲するのみ。從來支那の國體に關して論せられたる諸賢に就ては、余輩の寡聞淺學なる、未だ多くを知らずと雖も、今其二三に就て之を觀るに、皆支那に於ては其家族的精神甚だ盛にして、家族制度が其國家の根底たり、治國の基礎たるに至りし事を認めらる