

Liberty in education - historical analysis



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Introduction

The curriculum in American higher education has always been under debate and reform since the beginning. Prescribed curriculum in which the students had to study certain pre-defined courses was the basis of colonial colleges for many years. Later, the emergence of elective system proposed by Charles Eliot became a creative educational development in higher education in the U. S, and broadly substituted the old prescribed curriculum. *Liberty in Education* written by Eliot, in defense of elective system, is one of the most important historical documents in the history of American higher education. This report provides a brief analysis of the document by focusing on different aspects and putting it in its historical context to get to a better understanding of its significance.

Date, origin and the author of the document

Liberty in Education is a historical document originally written by Charles William Eliot in 1885. Eliot was a highly successful leader in the field of higher education. He was the president of Harvard University for forty years (1869-1909). His significant talents and experience both as a teacher and administrator as well as his observations of European universities provided him with insights toward proposing an effective elective system instead of a classical curriculum. He originally outlined the idea of elective system in an 1885 speech. In fact, it was a debate with McCosh, president of Princeton, on the topic of curriculum. Later, he published it in a book named *Educational reform: Essays and addresses* (Eliot , 1898) . However, the copy that we

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have at hand is a reprint of the primary source in a book which collected a series of primaries; *The History of Higher Education: second edition*, edited by Lester Goodchild and Harold Wechsler (1997).

Summary of the document

Charles Eliot proposed the concept of elective system and found it an inevitable step in transforming a college into a university. In colonial colleges, a uniform prescribed curriculum was offered which finally gave the same degree to all of the students. Eliot argued against this classical curriculum as providing superficial and elementary knowledge and maintained that three things should be added to a college to make it a successful university in which the students can flourish the most:

1. Election of studies: Due to the natural differences in human minds and bodies, each student should have the freedom to choose his own courses of studies based on his individual interests, natural inclinations and intellectual capacities. According to Eliot's observations and experience, the best age to start giving the students liberty in education is eighteen.
2. Academic distinction in special lines of studies: The university must provide the students with opportunities to win distinction in special subjects and also offer honors through an effective elective system. This can lead to advanced instruction and creates enthusiasm both in instructors and students.

3. Promote a sense of self-governing instead of imposing strict prohibitive disciplines on the students: A university's moral purpose should be to teach students to self-control through a sense of personal freedom.

Context

Eliot took office at Harvard University in 1869, which was a favorable time to transformation and reform as the Civil War was a real catastrophe in American life. On the other hand, the cumulative industrialization in the United States after the Civil War required the American college to solve the problem of preparing students to become engineers, physicians, businessmen, chemists, and administrators. Many insightful Americans realized that the old-style American college required basic modernization with a quite different curriculum. Consequently, Eliot responded to the needs of the people and the demands of the society and introduced elective system to the higher education.

The immediate and the historical significance

During the time of Eliot's presidency, Harvard became one of the greatest universities of the world under the elective system and it finally surpassed well-known universities such as Johns Hopkins in the field of graduate work. The elective principle helped transform the American college into university and moved the student-professor relationship from an adversarial to a collaborative learning one (Rudolph, 1962). A major historical impact of the elective system was the formation of new curricular expansions in the twentieth century. It inspired the innovation of majors, tutorials, honors, independent study, general education, field studies and comprehensive

exams. Furthermore, it resulted in a considerable amount of knowledge advancement as it established opportunities for both students and professors to delve in their interests in greater depth.

Language and tone

The document is a kind of argumentative writing and the author has a defensive and persuasive attitude toward the work as he tries to defend the advantages of the elective system over a classical curriculum and aims to convince the audience to believe in that. It is written in a language that is clear enough to comprehend. Eliot avoided using complicated specialized words which need to be defined. He proposed the principle in a totally confident and purposeful tone by providing reasons for his claims.

Publisher or sponsor and alterations

The document does not seem to reflect any publisher or sponsor's point of view as it only reflects Eliot's point of view regarding the necessity to shift toward an elective system. The current document does not contain any alterations or editions since it is a reprint of the original source.

Missing information and triangulation

The document does not include any information regarding regulations for the freedom in choices of studies. Here is a list of some other resources which can help the reader make a more comprehensive sense of the existing document:

Carpenter, H. C. (1951). *Emerson, Eliot, and the elective system*. New England Quarterly, 13-34.

Denham, T. J. (2002). *A Historical Review of Curriculum in American Higher Education : 1636-1900*.

Denham, T. J. (2002). *The Elective System or Prescribed Curriculum: The Controversy in American Higher Education* .

Eliot, C. W. (1898). Liberty in education. *Educational reform: Essays and addresses* , 125-48.

Eliot, C. W. (1907). *Academic freedom* . Science, 1-12.

Phillips, D. E. (1901). *The elective system in American education* . The Pedagogical Seminary, 8(2), 206-230.

Conclusion

The development of elective system has been such an important event in the history of American higher education that facilitated the transformation of the college into university. It shaped a new form of studies to the students and attracted a lot of attention in the past and even in today's educational world. The analysis of the document and the historical research about that reveal a true significance made by Eliot's elective system. However, there still exist debates and discussions over the supremacy of prescribed curriculum or elective system which continue to create new horizons.

References

Eliot, C. W. (1898). Liberty in education. *Educational reform: Essays and addresses* , 125-48.

Goodchild, L. F., & Wechsler, H. S. (1997). *The History of Higher Education. ASHE Reader Series* . Pearson Custom Publishing, 200 Old Tappan Rd., Old Tappan, NJ 07675.

Rudolph, F. (1962). *The American college and university: A history* . University of Georgia Press.