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THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION.

By PROFESSOR D. E. PHILLIPS, University of Denver.

I. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

That the elective system presents the most important and far-reaching problem in American education will hardly be questioned. It is of vital concern to college presidents, superintendents, principals, teachers, pupils, parents,—in a word, to all interested in education. It touches alike, private and public institutions, co-educational and non-co-educational; it involves the relation between colleges and secondary schools, between institutions for general culture and those of strictly professional aims; it involves the relation of society and the individual, the question whether one age shall set the standard for another, whether it is the business of education to build on what Nature furnishes or to remedy the defects of Nature. In short, it involves the very aims and ends of education.

Some fifty years ago Spencer's essay on "What Knowledge is of Most Worth?" appeared in the "Westminster Review." A little later the appearance of his essays in book form lifted the question of electives from the bare practical consideration, as urged before that by Jefferson, into a broader plane of scientific discussion; and, as a result, the last few years have been marked by a rapid and marvellous, if not disastrous, spread of the Elective System both in colleges and secondary schools.

The Educational Council of Colorado selected this as a problem for investigation. It fell to my lot to ascertain as far as possible the extent and success or failure of the system as now practiced, whether it has passed the experimental stage, is a misnomer, etc. After much work and correspondence a body of information that will doubtless have much interest for both the professional and general reader has been collected. To accomplish this result two circulars of inquiry were prepared, one for secondary schools, and one for colleges. More than three hundred were mailed to the heads of secondary schools, and one hundred thirty to college presidents. Some one hundred seventy replies have been received from the former, and ninety-seven from the latter. Everywhere great interest seems to be manifested in this question; and, as a rule, the replies are frank and complete. A large number of personal letters

expressing a desire to know the net results have accompanied the formal replies. Some suggestions have led to further correspondence; and I now take the opportunity of expressing my obligation to all who have assisted in making this investigation possible and the results valuable. It is upon this material, and the examination of more than one hundred catalogues and almost as many courses of study in secondary schools that this article is based.

The questions sent to college presidents are here given in order that the reader may better understand the nature of the investigation.

1. To what extent are electives offered in your college?
2. How long has the system been in use?
3. Was it a sudden change or a gradual growth?
4. Can you give something near the order in which the elective list developed?
5. Do you consider it still in the experimental stage?
6. Is it workable? If not, what are the chief difficulties?
7. From the standpoint of your experience, and that of others, is the system entitled to general recognition in the educational world?
8. In your judgment, what is the chief factor that leads to the election of studies: natural adaptability on the part of the pupil, preference for particular teachers, or the effort to secure easy work?
9. What influence has previous acquaintance with the subject in keeping up election in that line?
10. How much may students shorten the course in the professional schools by first taking the Liberal Arts course?
11. How much may students shorten Liberal Arts course by first taking the professional?
12. In your entrance requirements, do you allow any substitution for the ancient languages?
13. Would you extend the Elective System to the preparatory and high school?

In no other country is the Elective idea carried to such an extent as in America. In Germany a choice is offered between different kinds of schools. Within each *Gymnasium*, *Real-Gymnasium*, and *Real-Schule* the courses are rigidly prescribed, but all work in the universities is entirely free. It must, however, be remembered that the place of the German university is paralleled in our educational system only by our graduate departments and one or two strictly graduate institutions. In France, practically the same conditions prevail as in Germany. In England there is more opportunity for choice of studies by individual pupils than in either Germany or France, but probably the Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden, have made the most extensive application of the principle to be found in Europe.

Inasmuch as Harvard has strongly brought the subject to the front, and was one of the earliest to open the way, the origin of our Elective System is usually attributed to this institution. How-

ever, one or two writers refer its origin to the University of Virginia; but, according to the best information I can obtain, it was born about fifty years earlier than the founding of that university, and is the child of Jefferson's fertile and practical brain.

The College of William and Mary was chartered in 1693. Ex-President Tyler was a student here five years, Jefferson two, and Monroe one. Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Tyler, Monroe, and John Marshall, all had official connection with the institution in its earlier days. I now have documents and personal letters containing quotations from the Faculty Books between 1729 and 1784.

At first the college contained three courses and the student passed from one to the other in a fixed order. It was a duplication of the old Oxford curriculum. The schools were: the Grammar School in which were taught Latin and Greek; the School of Philosophy consisting of the School of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy, and the School of Moral Philosophy; and the Divinity Schools of which there were two. In May, 1770, the Board of Visitors passed an order "Letting all such youths whether resident in or out of the college who have acquired a competent knowledge of common or vulgar arithmetic, and whose parents or guardians may desire it, be received into the Mathematical School." Against this the Faculty recorded a vigorous protest. They considered it an attack upon the college system "hitherto approved of in the most famous universities as well as in the statutes of William and Mary College." In 1779 Mr. Jefferson became a member of the Board and carried his innovating spirit into the whole of the curriculum. December 4, 1779, he abolished the Latin and Greek requirements in the Grammar School, substituted chairs of Law, Medicine, Modern Languages, etc., and permitted a student to choose his studies. In 1821, Mr. Jefferson wrote to Francis Eppes that "at William and Mary students are allowed to attend the school of their choice, and those branches of science which will be useful to them in the line of life they propose." The institution has constantly adhered to what it considers the "wise policy" of Jefferson. Practically the only requirement is that a student shall elect at least sixteen hours a week for four years.

Later, it was Jefferson's influence that dominated the organization of the University of Virginia, and in 1825 it opened on the basis of one degree with an "elective system of studies, by which each student was permitted to elect freely the one or more departments in which he would do his work; his free choice made under the advice of those older and wiser, and from an appreciation of his own needs."¹

¹The quotations in this connection are from an address delivered at the University of Virginia, 1897, by W. R. Abbot.

At the close of the year 1824, George Ticknor, later Professor of Modern Languages in Harvard College, who had for several years corresponded with Mr. Jefferson on educational subjects and methods, visited him in order to see the new University "fairly opened." "To use his own words, he 'found the system more practical than he had feared;' he found an 'experiment worth trying.'" Upon his return to Cambridge he urged upon the governing body of Harvard "the introduction of sweeping reform." He succeeded in a very limited degree. This was the beginning of the system at Harvard, but it made little advance until 1867. In his report for 1883-84, President Eliot says, "Professor Ticknor who had so effectually promoted the legislation of 1825, was a reformer fifty years in advance of his time."

Some years later Ex-President Quincy, of Harvard, undertook a visit to the University of Virginia, but was stopped by the report of a fever epidemic. Mr. Abbot further points out that in 1850, Dr. Wayland, then President of Brown University, visited the University of Virginia and "explored every nook and cranny of the University," that he later "published a report to the overseers of his University," advocating with "great ability" the system.

In 1830 the University of the City of New York partially recognized the elective system. President Nott, of Union College, was among its earliest champions. The University of Michigan recognized the general principle about 1852 by placing the scientific studies in equal rank with the classical.

The replies to the circular above mentioned represent all parts of the country and practically all the important institutions of higher learning. Before attempting to estimate the extent of the elective system in colleges it is necessary to note the different forms under which it occurs and the various efforts to solve the problem.

When it was found advisable and necessary to teach more than any student could possibly take in four years, the first effort to solve the difficulty generally was to multiply courses, and, in order to maintain the dignity of the original course, to offer degrees intended to bear the stamp of the supposed inferior work. This is characteristic of the smaller and weaker colleges, especially those of the West and South. The new demands have usually been met in these localities by an increase of courses, ranging from two to five. But institutions conferring several degrees are found in all sections, and the system prevails in some very good colleges.

The course system, however, must inevitably disappear in the near future. Signs of its decay are everywhere evident. The fact that nearly all of the better class of institutions, save

those for special scientific work in special schools, such as the Harvard Lawrence Scientific School and Schools of Engineering, are conferring but one degree for all work, makes the idea of cheap degrees, or even of distinction between degrees aiming at general culture, wholly inoperative. Ignoring in five cases the B. S. degree conferred only for such work as above mentioned, we have the following remarkable list of colleges conferring only one degree, namely, A. B.: Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Leland Stanford, Williams College, University of Virginia, University of Indiana, University of Nebraska, University of Denver, Vassar, Bryn Mawr. These and several other institutions make no distinction as to courses in the College of Liberal Arts. On the whole the tendency of the best colleges is toward reduction, rather than multiplication, of degrees.

An internal evidence of such a downfall is found in the fact that in most cases a certain amount of election within each course, frequent substitution from other courses, and even change of courses, are granted. In all, except a small number of very conservative institutions, at least the junior and senior years are partly elective within these courses.

The Major and Minor System is rapidly being offered as a form of the elective system, although it differs somewhat in its application in different institutions. Under this system a student chooses, generally by the beginning of the junior year, some department or group of studies in which he takes a Major and one in which he takes a Minor. The Major includes at least two years of daily recitation in some one line, but more generally three, while the Minor includes about two-thirds as much work in some different line. A few require only a Major, while two require a Major and two Minors. As a rule the student is free to choose his Major and Minor either from groups of subjects or from any branch in which sufficient instruction is offered, except that in many cases his Minor must receive the approval of the department in which he takes his Major. Smith College, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, De Pauw, Johns Hopkins, University of Denver, Cornell, University of Nebraska, University of Colorado, Bryn Mawr, University of California, and thirteen others are operating under this system. There are doubtless other modifications, such as the Harvard and Yale method of encouraging proficiency in some definite line, or that of Washington and Lee, requiring "proficiency" in at least one department. The University of Michigan offers a choice between what is known as the "Credit System" and the "University System." The first demands a certain number of credits, the other depends essentially upon a Major and two Minors.

Closely allied to the Major and Minor System is the requirement of a thesis on some special topic for graduation. Twelve institutions demand of undergraduates a thesis. The most important ones are Columbia, Cornell (thesis now optional), University of Texas, University of West Virginia, Washington and Lee, State University of Washington, University of Wisconsin. Johns Hopkins demands that one or more essays in the candidates own handwriting shall be filed with the registrar not later than the first of May preceding graduation.

Other colleges have adopted the *group system*, such as is in use at Johns Hopkins, University of Pennsylvania, and Bryn Mawr. Students are required to take a certain amount within some one or more groups, or to select some group as their leading line. Although the groups frequently contain only a few subjects, this is a certain form of election, and usually as free as it could be in small institutions if all were elective. In twenty institutions the group system is a definite feature, and in many others it appears in the form of option between two or more subjects. In De Pauw, a student must take one of five languages. The general tendency is to state requirements in terms of "science," "language," etc., instead of designating branches. This is election within limits.

The most complete form of the Group System is found in the University of Pennsylvania. In the first two years there are four groups, which are divided into fifteen in the junior and senior years. New York University offers nine groups after the freshman year. Bryn Mawr has eight from the beginning, and Johns Hopkins seven. In some cases certain subjects are common to all the groups. But even the chasm between these groups is not in many cases impassible. In Johns Hopkins a student may substitute, with the approval of his advisor, other studies for two, in some cases three, of his chosen group. On entering Chicago, the student is offered five groups of which he must take two. Besides all these forms of election there is what is known as the *free elective list*, which, as we shall see later, varies in extent all the way from a part of the senior year to absolute freedom of all work offered in college.

The variety of forms that the so-called Elective System has assumed and, consequently, that its extent can only approximately be measured, might be demonstrated to a much greater extent. Some institutions whose ultimate results amount to a fairly free elective system almost wholly repudiate it as practiced in Cornell and elsewhere. We should no longer speak of the *Elective System*, but of *Elective Systems*.

In the following estimates all of these forms of electives are considered, with the exception, however, that choice between courses leading to different degrees plays no part. The fre-

quent indefinite reply as to the extent of electives makes any average of general result only approximate. However, an estimate of ninety-seven replies gave an average of about sixty-four per cent. of all work as elective, while a wholly independent examination of eighty-seven catalogues gave an average of about sixty-two per cent. The close agreement of these two results shows that the estimates cannot be far wrong. Whatever inaccuracies may still exist, I hope are not serious enough to do any great injustice to any section or institution.

There are seven colleges in which all work may be said to be elective; namely, Cornell, University of Cincinnati, Leland Stanford, University of Missouri, William and Mary College, University of Virginia, and University of West Virginia. Harvard, Columbia, and the State University of Washington make the whole work practically elective; Johns Hopkins's specific requirements are quite limited; the University of Kansas has for six years been almost on a purely elective system; the University of Indiana requires only one year of English, one of mathematics, one of science, and two of some language.

The University of Cincinnati and the State University of Missouri have just adopted the Elective System in its complete form; the University of West Virginia inaugurated it June, 1899; and this is Cornell's fourth year. Twenty-three have adopted some form of the system within the last five years. Tufts College has lately increased its requirements from 48 to 60 hours. This is the only regressive movement found in colleges.

Thirty-four institutions have 70% or more of their work elective; twelve have at least 50% and less than 70%; fifty-one have less than 50%. Princeton and Brown universities are the most striking examples of the better class that have remained largely conservative, only about 50% of their courses being elective.

Although a proper historic account will place the origin of the system in Virginia, and show that Jefferson and the University of Virginia inspired the early reformers, it is undoubtedly true that the lowest ebb of the elective system is now found in the South, both in colleges and in secondary schools. Excepting the three institutions in which all is elective, one may select at least ten of their average institutions in which not more than an average of twenty-five per cent. is elective. This is usually a part of the junior and senior years. But several of their colleges are lately giving the principle a "trial."

In sixty-seven cases the system now in use has been a gradual growth, and in twenty-eight, a sudden change or inaugurated at the opening of the institution. Thirteen college presidents think it still in the experimental stage, while sixty-nine con-

sider the principle established by its practical workings. In answering the question, "Is it workable?" I understand each to refer to the system in use in his institution. Only five speak disparagingly of their undertaking. The president of an institution that has lately inaugurated the system, in answering the question whether it is entitled to general recognition, says, "No, but it means peace among professors."

As already stated, the question, "Is it still in the experimental stage?" received but thirteen affirmative answers as against sixty-nine negative. Inasmuch as questions 5, 6, 7, and 8, involving personal opinions, have been answered with varying degrees of emphasis and certain limitations, a few quotations will be of value. President Droppers, University of South Dakota, emphatically considers it in the experimental stage. President Kingsbury, University of Utah, where about 80% has been elective for four years, says:

"We are not yet fully convinced that it is the best system." President Wheeler: "There is no disposition toward radical change." President Strong, University of Oregon: "In principle, no; in detail, yes." President Craig, University of Montana: "We will never go back to the old class plan." President Pollock, Mercer University, Ga.: "This is our first experience with the system, our feeling is strong that it will be satisfactory." President Hosmer, Southern University: "This is the first year of electives, but we are pleased, and feel sure that we will continue the system." President Schurman: "Yes, technically, until one class has graduated under it; it is, however, satisfactory." President Taylor, Vassar: "Changes are made from time to time in the direction of greater freedom of election." President Davis, Alfred University: "No, it is a positive improvement." President Faunce: "Yes, we are now devising safeguards; a student cannot graduate without some course in philosophy; so in history, so in science."

Such are the typical replies from college presidents where the system is in use to a fair degree.

The replies to the questions "Is it workable? If not what are its chief difficulties?" and "From the standpoint of your experience and that of others, is the system entitled to general recognition in the educational world?" are closely related, and the most characteristic ones are given:

"For last college years and graduate work no difficulties to be met;" "practically none;" "expense" (mentioned fifteen times); "to provide teachers;" "too much latitude;" "no special ones;" "requires careful watching;" "lack of proper advisory committee without prejudices in favor of particular departments;" "absence of class spirit;" "schedule;" "electives are an absolute necessity;" "principle is correct, detail must be adjusted."

President Andrews writes: "This is our first year of electives. If there are any difficulties it is a tendency to combine easy subjects. I believe the system entitled to trial."

President Stephens: "Care should be taken not to multiply courses

beyond the ability of the teaching force, and not to advance students to courses until thoroughly prepared. This done, the way is clear."

President Droppers: "It is workable, only it is in the transition stage. It is a compromise, and compromises are seldom based upon any principle. I do not favor a complete elective system."

President Wheeler: "It is necessary to guard the student against unequal or narrow department prescriptions. The student's records must be more carefully watched than would be the case in a system of greater freedom of election."

President Fulton, University of Mississippi: "Neither students nor instructors would go back to the former conditions."

Dean Buchanan, Cumberland University: "Junior and senior years are elective. The elective system provides for the graduation of the lazy and those of inferior ability, which is of no advantage to them or the cause of education. The *old-fashioned college course* develops the man as no other can, and until developed he is not competent to elect."

Acting Dean of Barnard College: "The elective system is the outcome of the advancement of science, not simply an educational experiment."

President Schurman: "No difficulties have come up. In an institution where studies go because of fashion it might lead to shirking, but we have no such tendency here."

President Angell: "It is wise to have a committee of the faculty to advise new comers."

President Ayres, University of Cincinnati: "All work is elective. It is thoroughly workable, and the only arrangement that gives as good results for university work."

A suggestion comes from Wellesley College and two or three others that now and then a department is somewhat smaller than was anticipated and there is no real need for all the teaching force. One president writes, "Chief difficulty is expense. Professor of physics just now has one student, salary, \$1,800, and does no other teaching." Such quotations might be extended to a much greater length, but these are sufficient to show the general status of opinion, especially outside the pioneer and champion institutions of this educational movement.

That the system is generally endorsed, that it is rapidly being adopted and extended more and more, is overwhelmingly evident. It may be argued that such men are simply prejudiced in favor of their own child. But if men who have been educated under the "old-fashioned college course," who, as presidents, have tried both the old and the new, who see both the theory and the practice, cannot approximate the truth, how can we expect it from the speculative theorizer, equally blinded by his prejudices and wedded to his system?

The main theoretical arguments against electives have centered about the classics and mathematics as the supreme and universal medicine for the "sin sick soul," at least for all souls of a high quality; the second chief point of attack has been the inability of the college student to prescribe for himself, and the low motives likely to prompt his choice. On the first contention I have nothing to say here, but on the last have some

suggestions to offer. The question concerning the chief factor that leads to the selection of studies was answered by eighty-eight and commented upon by many. The question may be raised whether a college president, or any one but the student, can tell whether he chooses according to his "natural adaptability." There can be no doubt that continued observation by teachers and heads of institutions fathoms to a large degree both the natural powers of students and their motives of choice. No experienced teacher can operate long under an elective system without forming rather definite and approximately correct ideas on these points. Again, presidents have ample opportunity to obtain a consensus of opinion from the faculty. Some of my communications definitely refer to such as their source of information. Professor Hanus, of Harvard, is working this particular phase of the subject from the standpoint of the student.

As a rule several factors are mentioned and in the order of their influence, though it is not always clear that the writer intends to place one above another. Quite a number of the communications add two factors not mentioned in the circular—"future need or professional aim" and "special advice." However, taking the factors that influence choice in the order in which they are stated, it is found that those mentioned first are as follows: Natural adaptability, 50 times; future needs, 19; special advice, 9; easy work, 6; preference for particular teacher, 4. The motives mentioned second are: Preference for particular teachers, 36; special advice, 20; natural adaptability, 7; future needs, 5. Fourteen give "easy work" as the third factor; 9, preference for teachers; 8, special advice; and 6, future needs. Thirty-six emphasize the importance of previous acquaintance in keeping up election.

The above results speak for themselves, but a few of the common phrases are here added:

"Students should consult wiser heads, and as a rule are glad to do it."
 "In general, natural adaptability, but some other elements will enter into the choice." "Preference for certain studies and a conviction of their value for the most part—but other factors influence."
 "A little of each, but the last (easy work) is not conspicuous. Perhaps the second is more powerful." "Utility in earning money."
 "All three, but chiefly adaptability." "The last two (preference for teachers and easy work) enter somewhat in the beginning but are soon supplanted by the first." "The last very small. When a course comes to be known and elected as a 'snap' the instructor, spontaneously or otherwise, stiffens it up." "Natural adaptability in almost all cases." "Preference for particular subjects more influential than any of these." "Easy work counteracted by proper advice."
 "Natural adaptability when not checked by circumstances." "Easy work dominant" (by six). "In our experience adaptability has been the chief factor." "The few students that seek for easy work would do poor work under any system." "Advice should never be lost sight of and should be substituted for force." "Training and environment."
 "Adaptability fixes the department."

The data from 176 secondary schools largely corroborate the above opinions as to the motive underlying the student's choice. The theory of "snaps" and "easy work" as a dominant motive in the election of studies is no longer tenable if we are in any degree to rely upon the opinion of those best qualified to judge. The fact is there was never anything inherent in elective studies that made them easy. A teacher may make any subject about as difficult as he desires. Cannot the study of Milton's "Paradise Lost" be made as difficult as Cæsar? Only the student and the teacher make a subject "easy" and "elementary." When we realize this we shall cease to crowd all the beginning courses into the secondary schools, and they in turn into the grades. We shall follow the example set by Columbia, of permitting a student to take and count beginning Latin in the college. Not as teachers, but only as specialists, can we justify this crowding of all the supposed elementary work out of college. The teacher of literature complains that there is not time to teach pupils the history they lack; the biologist and psychologist make the same complaint concerning ignorance of physiology; the teacher of modern languages goes on using and demanding fine distinctions in English without deeming it necessary to inquire whether the pupils understand what is talked about. So it goes the whole round. Why should any teacher be as narrow and sharp as a needle? Why should we not, in some degree, supplement each other's work? Why any longer wrap ourselves up in a false dignity, assume that we have the subject, and refuse to dwell elsewhere save in the third heaven of the same?

The teacher's personality and honest advice which pupils generally seek and gladly receive is a powerful element in determining their course. So much is this true that some advocates of the old system have taken courage and affirmed that there is no such a thing as "free election." But they fail to see that by the same process it may be shown that the whole of life is "prescribed."

Since the professional schools and the colleges proper include a number of the same subjects and the number is continually increasing as the courses widen, the elective system naturally involves their consideration. My question concerning their relation did not apply to all the colleges. In 9 cases, however, professional courses cannot be shortened by first taking the Liberal Arts course, while in 43 cases they can be shortened one year, and in a few cases one year or more.

The number taking a professional course and later applying for a college course is not very great, but such is no longer uncommon. We have had two cases during the past year. In such cases is a three or four years professional course in theol-

ogy or medicine worth nothing for a college course? Touching this point, 20 say that the Liberal Arts course cannot be shortened by first taking the professional; 15 say that it may be shortened one year; others reply that they have not had to deal with such conditions. This problem will become more and more serious as knowledge widens and the relation and inter-dependence of the sciences become more and more evident.

Entrance requirements are becoming quite complicated. As the elective list enlarges the entrance requirements become more and more elastic. The tendency seems to be to offer groups and to require a certain number of studies in one or more of these groups, to allow substitution of modern for ancient languages, or to require only one ancient language. Harvard has just inaugurated a complete system of entrance credits that allows full substitution. Twenty-seven colleges allow some substitution for the ancient languages; 15 others allow substitution for Greek.

The attitude of college presidents toward electives in secondary schools is a strange phenomenon. To the question, "Would you extend it to the secondary schools?" 36 answer "no," often repeated and underscored for emphasis; and 43 say "to a limited extent." This is strange in the face of the fact that the colleges have made electives in some form an absolute necessity in the secondary schools; first, by multiplying courses and setting special standards for admission to each; and second, by crowding into secondary schools the so-called elementary part of each department and branch of knowledge. Unless college presidents expect high schools to break all possible connection with colleges, they must consider election between courses a sufficient solution of the problem in secondary schools. But this is simply the most indefensible form of the elective system, especially when forced upon boys and girls of 12 or 14.

Life is full of contradictions, and prejudice is the great mantle of night in which they are lost from view. From the conservative element two exactly opposite arguments against electives are presented. The one most frequently met is the danger of specialization which they see in the elective system. But was there no specialization under the strictly required system which once extended from the bottom of the secondary schools to the last year of college, and is still held to in a weaker form by those who oppose the elective system? If six or seven years in a special language is not specialization, pray, what is it?

The opposite argument appears in some of the papers, and is expressed by saying that the elective system is likely to lead to "scattered" and "scrappy" courses. I have no doubt that

the Major and Minor System owes its existence and spread to an effort to meet this charge and possible danger, as well as to an effort to extend electives. In some colleges there is a counter movement setting a limit to the number of hours that may be taken in any one department.

The elective system is a fixture so far as our colleges are concerned. The tendency is more and more toward free election. There is no indication as to whether colleges will ever settle upon a small but central core of subjects for all students. Certainly there must be a "golden mean" somewhere between the prescribed four years of classics and mathematics and four years elective laboratory courses, shop work, dentistry, drawing, music, etc. But perhaps we are unnecessarily alarmed. The theoretical educational world will be saved a great deal of needless waste of energy and false alarm when it realizes that logical extremes and practical life are absolute contradictions.

Spencer's contention that knowledge must be valued according to its relation to the fundamental activities of life receives great reinforcement from the enormous "push" and "rush" for a place in the practical world with which the nation is almost intoxicated. Our type of education is more Roman than Greek. Are the most necessary and fundamental activities of life also the highest? Whether education be prescribed or elective matters but little while low ethical ideas dominate. It is easy to say that "education is preparation for complete living." But what is complete living? All people and every age have asked this question, and still there is no agreement. But never was any nation under such an imperative obligation to answer this question as the American people.

II. IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

It was not feared until the last few years that Electives in Secondary Schools would be pushed so far as to become a serious and even an alarming problem; but it is safe to say that seldom has any innovation involving such great consequences ever spread more rapidly than the elective system has in the past few years. The fact that there are now in progress some six or seven serious investigations of the problem alone proves that it has become the central theme. The consequences and aspects of electives in secondary schools become so important, as compared with its operation in colleges, as to demand separate consideration. Educational thinkers are fairly settled concerning the latter, but so unsettled concerning the former that it would produce no small amount of confusion to discuss the two as one movement however closely they may be allied in principle.

The student in the secondary school is separated from the college student by four years at the most formative period of his

life as regards his intellectual tastes and calling; he is entering the adolescent period with a multiplicity of varying impulses; he has ambitions to be statesman, poet, scientist, philosopher, musician; he barely settles upon one interest before he is swayed by another; he is ignorant of most branches of knowledge save the rudiments of a few; he is yet largely under the control of parents who think that they know what to make of their child. As Plato says, the young are easily blinded by the false pleasures of ambition, position, flattery of the populace, wealth, power; the higher ideas of duty, true service, and the perfection of life as a real end in itself are so weak in the youth of fourteen that he is most likely to seek immediate and agreeable results. Such are some of the problems to be met by any elective or prescribed system in secondary schools.

Again, what will be the ultimate outcome of this movement? Will the same spirit that has been handed down from the colleges to the secondary schools in turn affect the elementary schools? Will the secondary schools begin to crowd the "elementary" part of their departments into the grades? Indeed, has not the elective system already a hold upon the last two years of the grades? Will the movement end in an unlimited application of the "Doctrine of Interest," so strongly manifested in modern pedagogy? The danger of American education undoubtedly lies in our tendency to swing to enormous extremes, to exalt some one method of instruction, principle, or innovation, as the panacea for all our ills. More than once have we suffered by such foolhardiness. We shall never have a system of education based upon any one principle, doctrine, or method, that may be safely applied without limitation as far as the logical inferences indicate. The ultimate outcome must be a proper limitation and application of different principles and factors.

What attitude do the secondary schools show signs of assuming toward the momentous problems above stated? I sent out the following circular of questions to 320 secondary schools:

1. To what extent are electives offered in your school?
2. How long has the system been in use?
3. Was it a sudden change or a gradual growth?
4. Can you give something near the order in which the elective list developed?
5. Do you consider it still in the experimental stage?
6. Is it workable? If not, what are the chief difficulties?
7. From the standpoint of your experience, and that of others, is the system entitled to general recognition in the educational world?
8. In your judgment, what is the chief factor that leads to the election of studies: natural adaptability on the part of the pupil, preference for particular teachers, or the effort to secure easy work?
9. What influence has previous acquaintance with the subject in keeping up election in that line?

Principals have responded with great freedom and interest.

One hundred seventy-six replies have been tabulated. Some cities having several high schools all under one system made but one report. Besides these formal replies, I have several personal letters and about ninety different courses of study. Every section of the country is fairly well represented, and all the chief cities except New Orleans. The distribution, according to sections, is as follows: South, 24; New England, 28; Middle States, 38; Middle West, including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, 41; West, 45.

An examination of the material from each section taken as a whole impresses one that each is characterized by tendencies not dominant in others, which in some cases may be definitely, in others only inadequately, expressed. The South is still pervaded by a strong conservative spirit, has few free electives, emphasizes the old standard of mathematics and the classics, and often presents vigorous protests, apparently without deeming argument necessary. The dominant feature in the West is an effort to meet the difficulty by multiplying courses with slight election within courses and some substitution from other courses. Election to meet the demands of some particular college is a prominent feature in this section. In New England the attitude of the universities furnishes one of the perplexing problems, and some protests are offered against their dominance. Especially does it appear that private secondary schools are realizing how completely they are under the control of colleges, and must supply their demand. In New England and the Middle States, one most frequently finds schools having no electives in name, but almost free election on application to the principal. Instead of having no election in name, but liberally granted by permit, in some sections they prefer to solve the problem by exactly the opposite procedure, allowing election in name, but practically determining the pupil's course by *advice*. Papers from the Middle States indicate a wonderful spread of the system in the last three years. Nine out of the thirty-eight schools have recognized electives to some extent within this brief period. The most extensive use of the elective system in secondary schools is found in what is herein designated as the Middle West. In all parts of this section sweeping changes are taking place. They seem about to assert their independence of universities and to displace the *course system* by a small "core" of subjects required of all with everything else elective.

The various systems and modifications in use are manifold, but the most important ones may be summed up under six headings. They are given in the order of their extent as indicated in the replies.

1. The *Course System* is the oldest and most dominant, and

prevails to the greatest extent in the South and West. Eighty-six designate courses as the sum total or principal part of their elective system. But such election of courses before entering school does not belong to the elective system proper. So far as the number of courses can be determined the average in 83 schools is 4.5. Seattle has 5; Kansas City, 4; St. Louis, 9; Milwaukee, 5; Salt Lake, 5; Cleveland, 6; Janesville, Wis., 7.

Strange as it may seem to the educational thinker the most conservative have acquiesced in this unjustifiable form of election. But this only portrays the general condition of life. Customs and institutions are not the products of logic; they simply "grow," and ere we are aware they are wrought into the very fiber of our being. Then all logic, theories of life, morals, religion—everything is made flexible enough to sustain conditions; one inconsistency is only buried beneath another. Defenders of the course system offer animated arguments against any other form of election. But think of a boy or girl of fourteen arriving at one of our preparatory or secondary schools, a stranger to the authorities, perhaps from an uncultured home; the child registers, and is offered four or more courses from which a choice *must* be made. Two or three years later, think of the same child being refused the privilege of taking French instead of German on the ground that "children do not know what is good for them." It may be said that either parents, or friends, or teachers control the original choice of courses; but on what principle are these courses proportioned out, or rather pupils allotted to courses? It is no exaggeration to say that under present conditions chance is usually the determining factor.

2. Finally the *course system* is extended until it breaks down of its own weight. What high school can maintain nine or ten, even five, courses with any marked distinction between them? Again, these courses, like the old original college courses, must in some way or other stamp their graduates with different degrees of proficiency. If all pass into the world as equally educated and cultured, the original idea of courses has, in part at least, failed.

So long as we do not aim to produce specialists, but aim at general culture, courses can be maintained only on the grounds of difference in excellency. To admit, as many now seem obliged to do, that their excellency depends on the individual and not on something inherent in the subjects, gives the whole matter away and admits the fundamental contention of the advocates of the elective system. Under the stress of these and many other difficulties, the course system seems destined to give way to a general *elective system with a "core" of subjects required of all students.*

Bay City and East Saginaw require only English; Erie and Alleghany, three years of English, two of mathematics, and one of history; Hartford, only English and algebra the first year, English and geometry the second; Springfield, Ill., has all elective save English, algebra, geometry, history, and physics; Canton, Ill., requires two years of mathematics, two of science, one and one-half of English, and one of history; Kansas City, Mo., requires four years of English, two and one-half of mathematics, three of science, one of history. In the Indianapolis high schools all foreign languages are elective. Three years of English, one and one-half of algebra, one of geometry, one of history, and one of physics are required. The Chicago high schools during the past year have had an elective system with a required group of two years in English, two of some foreign language, or English continued, one of algebra, one of history, and one of science. The Boston schools have also increased their elective system. Most of the recent changes seem to be in this direction. The principal at Omaha writes: "We are planning a more general election, holding, however, to a list of required subjects as a core."

3. *Election within courses and substitution from other courses.* To this class belong, in some degree at least, forty per cent. of those mentioned in the first division. It also includes a few schools that defer choice of courses until the second or possibly the third year. For example, the Central High School, Springfield, Mass., allows choice of languages in the first year and choice of courses the second year. Some permit pupils to change their course, but require the full completion of the course then chosen. Thus Principal Twitmyer, of Seattle, writes: "When pupils find that they have not elected the most suitable course, they may change to another, but are given time, and are required to complete the whole course."

4. Still another form, by which another course is added to the already large number, has recently developed in several cities. This is designated as the *special elective course*. Toledo, Ithaca, Fresno, Seattle, South Division High School, Milwaukee, have such courses. Just the composition of this course is not in every case specified, although anything except free election from all the courses would be a contradiction. Again, if this be true, nothing, save a real or artificial depreciation of the diplomas, can save such schools from becoming purely elective.

5. No election in name, but *rather free election on application* is more common than supposed. Any one who has ever worked under a prescribed course in a high school or college knows that hundreds of reasonable requests to substitute come up, and that after much discussion about precedent and frequent unfair discrimination as to subjects, the majority are granted. Some

institutions compel the individual to pay a big price for his liberty. Of course no one would advocate that manual training should be substituted hour for hour for mathematics. But to discount Greek credits when offered as a substitute for German is the acme of inconsistency when participated in by those who have upheld the classics.

The permits definitely referred to here are not granted by a contentious faculty, but by power known to be invested in the principal. The Principal of South Division High School of Milwaukee writes: "We have no elective list. A student is required to choose one of five courses. Students may take a special course; for example, elect anything by obtaining a permit from the superintendent of schools. We are inclined to disapprove of the plan of allowing children to choose before they are wise enough to choose." In the Central High School, St. Paul, substitution can be authorized only by the principal, in writing, on the written request of parents. "Special written permission from the principal is requisite to take any study outside the pupil's grade or course, to change from one course to another." Some few state that they have very limited election in form, but probably nothing would be absolutely required regardless of any and all circumstances. The Cambridge English High School has four courses, each with a number of choices. Moreover the head master has complete power to permit changes. This, he says, makes the plan as flexible as can be desired. The principal at Beatrice, Neb., says: "Students made requests for changes ninety-nine per cent. of which were reasonable and had to be granted. We have three courses which on the surface appear to be ironclad, but in reality there are only a few constants and possibly nothing that would be absolutely required." This form of election is undoubtedly more extensive than the returns indicate.

6. The last form that it seems advisable to designate is the *group system*. The most marked example of this is found in the Lyons Township High School. The work is divided into ten groups, the majority of which require certain other courses as a prerequisite. It is only a modification of the group system as formerly noted in colleges. Its merits cannot greatly exceed the old course system.

It is very difficult to determine with any mathematical accuracy the extent of electives in secondary schools. Some give definite per cents for each year. The greater number simply specify subjects; others express it by "very little," "quite extensively," "freely." But, casting out those from which no fair approximation can be made, and combining the results of the remainder with the examination of a large number of courses of study, we arrive at some results which, it is hoped,

do no violence to the truth. All the different forms of electives except the election of courses before really entering school, are taken into account.

The New York Harlem Evening High School and the Galesburg High School are the only ones with absolute free election. The Galesburg system has been in operation since 1895 and is pronounced a success. As already noted, East Saginaw and Bay City require only English. Of the 110 included in these estimates the average amount of free election will probably exceed one year. Forty-five have 40% or more elective; 24 have 50% or more; 17 have 70% or more; the remainder have less than 40%.

Forty-eight have adopted some form of the system within the past three years. In fifty-eight cases it has been a gradual growth, in forty-two a sudden change. Fifty-two consider it still in the experimental stage, while seventy-six think the principle established so long as a certain "core" is required; but, as we shall see later, there is no definite indication as to what that "core" should be. Those using it most extensively are most emphatic in declaring it workable. One hundred four believe some form of the elective system entitled to general recognition in the educational world; twenty-four do not. Thirty-five schools have no election except between courses. Memphis forbids it; in the Pomfret School, Conn., "the school curriculum is absolute." The principal of Wilmington High School says: "There is none granted. Our school would be stronger if we had electives." The Atlanta Girls' High School had electives some seven or eight years ago, but has abolished them. This is the only regressive movement yet found in secondary schools.

That the personal equation unconsciously, if not consciously, enters into such judgments no careful student of human nature will deny. But to wholly ignore these opinions as worthless on such grounds is to reduce ourselves either to egotists or agnostics. What becomes of our own personal equation? Have we greater reason to expect truth from the "chronic" objector to all innovations, who, wrapped in theories and prejudices of the past, speaks from his throne of seclusion?

The vital question of the elective system is, without doubt, in regard to the motives and influences determining the election of this or that study and whether such motives result in the wisest choice for the pupil as an individual. The views as expressed in these brief replies must be regarded as only approximating the truth. Twelve do not answer this question; nine say all of them without specifying their relative importance. The remaining one hundred fifty-five specify one or more motives as dominant, and usually their relative import-

ance. The motives of "immediate future needs," "college entrance requirements," and "special advice" have been added to the three mentioned in the circular. The following is a summarized statement of these motives in the order of their influence:

First: natural adaptability, 73; special advice, 24; easy work, 21; college requirements, 15; immediate future needs, 11; preference for teacher, 9.

Second: preference for teacher, 26; easy work, 20; special advice, 17; college requirements, 12; natural adaptability, 12.

Third: easy work, 16; personality of teacher, 14; college requirements, 8.

Taking the total number of times any factor is at all designated, we have the following:

Natural adaptability, 89; easy work, 57; personality of teacher, 52; special advice, 47; college requirements, 35; immediate future needs, 17.

Fifty regard previous acquaintance with a subject as a powerful stimulus in keeping up election; twenty-two think its influence very limited.

Whatever we may wish to urge against electives in secondary schools these facts alone should forever eradicate the impression that it means chaos, haphazard chance, seeking lines of least resistance, a *laissez faire* policy on the part of those in authority. It does not leave out the aid and counsel of wiser heads whom the young are always eager to consult. On the contrary, it brings together parents, pupils, teachers, and principals in such a manner as to have a beneficial reaction upon all. The strongest papers in favor of electives are simply saturated with the idea of constant advice, consultation, and supervision. These are not the only misconceptions concerning the elective system. It is apparently taken for granted by the opinion that a student is to feel at perfect liberty to enter any class regardless of his qualifications or previous preparation; that order, sequence, and continuity are ignored. Such lawlessness is in nowise advocated, tolerated, or even expected on the part of students. Principal Bancroft expresses the average opinion when he says that students seek advice as to prerequisites and prefer continuous work instead of scattered. It must not be forgotten that there are certain natural as well as contemplated limitations to any elective system.

The influence attributed to the personality of the teacher, though great, is not shown in its real strength. Under the influence of an inspiring teacher students become absorbed in a study, and are largely unable to distinguish as to the source of their inspiration. Several communications both from colleges and high schools mention the fact that under the elective sys-

tem some departments lack pupils. Perhaps a proper investigation would reveal the fact that the trouble lies not in the subjects but in the teachers.

Among the clear discussions found in these papers and the several articles published on the subject, one is somewhat disappointed to find only hints as to how far electives are controlled by higher intellectual ideals, and how far by outside social conditions. Of course all motives are subjective, but some spring from the inner nature, others are thrust upon us by environment. In what proportion do these two forces operate? What is the proper balance? Does the stress of our business world exercise an undue pressure? Under this system will the ideals that govern the student's election tend more and more to be taken from the common populace? Is it the function of education to *form* or *conform to* ideals?

Some of the most characteristic quotations both for and against the system, as seen by principals, may be of interest.

Lewiston, Me.: "My experience in other places with the elective system is not altogether favorable. To me it has seemed that an effort to secure a study reported to be easy is the chief factor in determining the choice of most students."

Belmont, Cal.: "Choice of subject is likely to be made with reference to the easiest course. The other grounds of choice are almost certain to be what are called practical lines—a most irritating term. At secondary school age boys are not, I think, mature enough to choose wisely, and besides I am quite of the opinion that our secondary schools serve to discover a boy to himself."

Kansas City, Kan.: "Easy work and 'easy' teachers attract the 'easy' student, hence we have starved part of our programme."

Hughes High School, Cincinnati, O.: "If an elective system means anything, it means that boys and girls of fourteen or less are to choose what they will or will not study. The very statement of this proposition renders argument upon the subject unnecessary. I hope the teachers of the country have too much sense to be carried off their feet by any such absurdity."

Girls' High School, Louisville, Ky.: "I think this (easy work) is usually the reason. If the choice were lodged in the teacher or parent according to natural adaptability of student it might work advantageously."

Phillips Academy, Andover: "A student generally does not know his natural aptitude. He frequently finds that what he supposed to be such, is not aptitude at all."

Fort Wayne, Ind.: "Elastic elective system is founded on sand, not on laws of mental activity nor on experience. Mixture of sentiment and moonshine."

The following, as well as a majority of the papers, give an entirely different opinion of the system:

Lafayette, Ind.: "It is quite evident that the desire to secure easy work has its influence, but we try to counteract it by methods of instruction. Our work in history is quite as difficult as that of mathematics, and a pupil soon finds that he must work if he wishes to receive credit."

Lynn, Mass.: "In a recent investigation of this question we find that only about four per cent. have chosen to avoid hard work; mostly from a pronounced preference, or to fit them for something in particular."

South Chicago High School: "At least ninety-five per cent. of our pupils wish to do the best thing."

Galesburg, Ill.: "Natural adaptability and what the pupil wishes to do in life. Other factors have some influence, but I consider them secondary."

The Peter Cooper High School, New York City: "Natural adaptability. In some way or other pupils generally find out what they are capable of doing, and make their election accordingly. Pupils are more apt to select too hard work than too easy work."

Male High School, Louisville: "All factors count in school very much as they do in life. With boys of strong character, as with men of strong character, the easiest path is not chosen. With boys of weak or undeveloped character, the easiest path or irrational preferences influence choice."

The Phillips Exeter Academy, N. H.: "We have no place in school where a boy can find a 'soft' elective."

Brighton High School, Boston: "The third is relatively of slight consequence."

North High School, Columbus: "In the main the choice is the result of pupil's individual preference. Pupil is likely to do best work with congenial surroundings. To my notion it matters little *what* the subject chosen is. Interest in the subject and the character of the work done *are what count*."

Hartford, Conn.: "I presume that all these influences have some weight, but I am inclined to think that the first mentioned—natural adaptability—has most to do with selection of studies."

West Denver: "The primary factor is the consideration of his own future good. Other, secondary, factors are: taste, preference for particular teachers, and effort to secure easy work. The last of these secondary factors, however, is prominent only with those who will not do much work under any system. The elective system stimulates work under the primary factor stated above."

North Denver: "We require a definite amount of certain subjects for graduation; in most cases the pupil does more in each of these subjects than is required. The prevailing opinion among those who have not tried the system is that pupils choose their courses at random. This is not true. The pupils are very free to consult with the principal and their teachers, and this they do. Instead of there being a tendency to secure easy work, we must make an effort to keep the pupil from doing too much."

None of the difficulties mentioned in connection with its application seems to be of a very serious nature. Twelve designate arrangement of schedule and rooms. Five mention the equivalent of the following quotation: "Difficulties not great, need a faculty of men all in earnest and competent to teach effectively enough to make boys work. Have no 'scrappy' or 'easy' courses." For some reason, which I confess I do not understand, expense is the chief difficulty mentioned. Thirty-two make this a specific objection. They must have in mind that a school that adopts the elective system is under obligation to teach all that is called for. Suppose a high school, already of-

fering three or four courses, should suddenly make everything elective, and simply require each student to elect from all the courses now offered eighteen hours a week for four years. What marked additions would be necessary? It is conceivable that a few classes might become too large, but in the main it would be "give and take." Free election does not mean that classes will be formed in any subject and at any time simply on demand. Many institutions limit the number for which a class will be formed to five, six, or ten.

From the material at hand and the general drift of educational progress and investigations we may conclude that not only has the elective system become a permanent thing in colleges, but that it has entered the secondary schools to stay. It may be modified and limited, but never eradicated. The forces behind it are absolutely irresistible, especially in a democratic country. We may as well no longer discuss whether we shall have electives in secondary schools, but at once busy ourselves in finding a possible and proper limitation somewhere short of the kindergarten.

The present tendency among most of the reformers undoubtedly favors a certain "core" of subjects to be required of all with other subjects elective. The immediate future will witness great changes in this direction. But will this "core" prove only a temporary stopping point? Of what and how many subjects shall it be composed? Already there are strong advocates who do not wish to stop short of absolute free election in secondary schools. "Humanity, individualism," they say, "is to be the paramount issue in education." Such representatives as Superintendent Nightingale declare that they have no objections to some constants "provided there are no hard and fast rules to which there can be no exception."

There will certainly be no disagreement about giving English the first place in this "core" of constants; but there is a difference of opinion as to how much English shall be required. My investigation in nowise sustains the statement made by Principal Harris: "Even the most extreme advocates of the elective system would make English a required subject throughout the four years" (Educational Review, May, 1900). However, the increasing importance laid upon English in almost every section is agreeably surprising. The next subject on which there are indications of general agreement is algebra. Should a third subject be added, history seems most likely to be selected. Probably the next choice would fall between one year of science and one of geometry. It would certainly be a great gain if some general understanding could be reached. But this is doubtful concerning either all the subjects above named or the time they should be pursued. It appears that about

three years of English, one and one-half of algebra, one of history, and one of science or geometry, is approximately the average extent of such constants. It seems certain from present indications that Latin will never belong to this number of required studies, nor any specified foreign language.

Some simplification of the aims of our secondary schools seems absolutely necessary. Notwithstanding the fact that only about ten per cent. of the public high school pupils ever enter college, these schools usually assume preparation for college to be one of their chief functions, and, consequently, they are overburdened by attempting to carry the so-called elementary work of various college departments. From one of the large high schools on the coast comes this statement, "We are owned body and soul by the University of California." A striking incident is found in the Cleveland High School. The student is furnished a printed circular, giving the entrance requirements of eighteen colleges, with the instruction that "pupils should decide by the end of the first year what college they will enter." The principal at Bridgeport, Conn., says, "We may be forced to change by the colleges." Principal Abercrombie, of Worcester Academy, writing Principal Ramsey, of Fall River, says: "Will you allow as a general observation the statement that the curriculum of a high school, whether private or public, which endeavors to meet the standard of Harvard, whether on the classical or scientific side, is overcrowded."

Again, the professional and technical schools have made their influence felt in the high school. But of late nothing has been more powerful than the pressure from the business and social demands of the age. With these and other real or imaginary ends to meet, our high schools have become dominated by various and often conflicting aims. Art, music, manual training, including cooking, sewing, millinery, etc., political and social life, commercialism—all demand recognition from them. As a rule the private schools have not yet been overcome by this tide, and are, therefore, free to supply the demands of the colleges.

In conclusion, I frankly confess that this examination has convinced me that the only remedy for the present chaos is a "core" of constants for all; and, unless dominated by colleges, I believe that such can be approximately determined without great difficulty. In determining these constants it must be remembered that we are in great danger of losing sight of high ideals. The nation needs to be baptized in Greek ethics, to lift aloft some ideal higher than ignorant commercialism. If we have not already fallen a prey to this siren we certainly stand in great danger of being swallowed up. During the past meeting

of the State Teachers' Association, of Colorado, the Council was overwhelmingly impressed by the fact that every educational problem was treated, either directly or indirectly, from the commercial standpoint. That the next programme should be devoted to reviving higher aims of life and of education, was deemed imperative. This spirit is not simply local; it is but the reflex of our national life mirrored in our education. Our ideas as to what constitutes a successful and happy life are wrong. Should we not revive the Greek view that the highest good consists in the perfection of man as a natural being, and hold before our young people active virtue as the supreme test of life and that which alone makes life worth living?