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## U.S. higher education reform: Origins and impact of student curricular choice



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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**

Electives  
Curriculum reform  
Charles william eliot

### ABSTRACT

Charles W. Eliot's revision of curriculum through the elective system has had significant influence on U.S. higher education. Contemporary concerns about constrained resources and "efficiency" efforts have called into question the value of investments in diverse course and degree offerings. This summary of Eliot's elective system and its impact on U.S. higher education curricula offers a historical perspective to inform contemporary discourse in a time of reform. Eliot's inaugural speech and introduction of the elective system are examined, including the context for its introduction, the challenges incurred during implementation, and the benefits it has yielded for U.S. higher education and society.

## 1. U.S. higher education reform: Origins and impact of student curricular choice

In the current milieu of constrained resources and "efficiency" discourse that pervade higher education in the United States, investments in diverse course and degree offerings have been questioned by external observers, administrators, faculty, and students. From a historical perspective, this paper focuses on the elective system and its importance in the U.S. undergraduate curriculum, beginning with the 19th century forward. Created to combat the crises of severely declining enrollment numbers as well as declining student academic achievement, the system of providing undergraduate electives to fulfill degree requirements provided a timely solution when it was proposed in the mid-1800's. Despite resistance from several colleagues at other colleges and universities, Harvard's Charles William Eliot faced the daunting task of defending the introduction of the elective system while assuring opponents it would improve the quality of the curriculum and student learning. Ultimately, Eliot's leadership in revising Harvard's curriculum would alter the nature of U.S. higher education curriculum and the elective system permeates present day U.S. undergraduate requirements.

## 2. Origins of the elective idea

The following discussion of Eliot's elective system offers a historical context for the current discussions about the value of diverse curricular offerings. This analysis revealed the introduction of the elective system

into higher education was one of the most monumental transformations in higher education in the U.S. (James, 1930; Wagner, 1950; Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2011). The elective system was not a new concept to colleges when Eliot took office in 1869: George Ticknor, Eliot's uncle, had introduced the idea of electives in 1825 (Gaff et al., 1997; Hawkins, 1966; Kuehnemann, 1909). Ralph Waldo Emerson, also a major supporter of the elective system, "directed his criticism at the rigidity of the curriculum" (Carpenter, 1951, p. 15) and condemned "our scholastic devotion to the dead languages" (Emerson, 1844, pp. 258–259). Inspired by Ticknor and Emerson, Eliot determined to introduce a more thorough reform of the earlier elective system, giving students the freedom to choose courses, while affording students opportunities to achieve academic distinction and the opportunity to be responsible, self-governing individuals (Eliot, 1885). With the support of Daniel C. Gilman, president of Johns Hopkins University, who shared his views on the elective system, Eliot (1869) set the wheels in motion in his inaugural address:

The civilization of a people may be inferred from the variety of its tools. There are thousands of years between the stone hatchet and the machine-shop. As tools multiply, each is more ingeniously adapted to its own exclusive purpose. So with the men that make the State. For the individual, concentration, and the highest development of his own peculiar faculty, is the only prudence. But for the State, it is variety, not uniformity, of intellectual product, which is needful. These principles are the justification of the system of elective studies which has been gradually developed in this College during the past twenty years... (p.40)

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The elective system fosters scholarship, because it gives free play to natural preferences and inborn aptitudes, makes possible enthusiasm for a chosen work, relieves the professor and the ardent disciple of the presence of a body of students who are compelled to an unwelcome task, and enlarges instruction by substituting many and various lessons given to small, lively classes, for a few lessons many times repeated to different sections of a numerous class. The College therefore proposes to persevere in its efforts to establish, improve, and extend the elective system... (p.41-42).

### 3. Dealing with adversity and mixed views

Although Eliot's expansion of Harvard's elective system encountered opposition from denominations, presidents and faculty and was slow to evolve, it had a lasting impact on higher education in the U.S. and is present in today's colleges and universities. President of Harvard from 1869 to 1909, he and a handful of colleagues advocated for a system of offering choices of electives through state legislation, not realizing the significant and sweeping effects on the system of higher education that later occurred (Hawkins, 1966). Not only did his expanded form of the elective curriculum serve to combat the substantial decline in retention and enrollments during the decades following the Civil War, it ultimately improved many other aspects of college and university operations (Bastedo, 2016).

Although the introduction of the elective system was not found to be exclusively responsible for the renewed success of universities, it contributed to the reform of colleges into universities, the creation of colleges as subordinate units within universities, and the increasing the number and types of courses offered. It fostered a diversity of disciplines, faculty, and scholarship; generated impetus for the development of graduate studies; and established practical and vocational learning for populations of diverse students (Committee for Economic Development, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The latter outcome aligned with the ideals of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln regarding access and educational opportunities for an increased portion of the U.S. population (Rudolph, 1990). In its entirety, it reshaped institutions of higher education, moving them from the strict prescription of classical curriculum in private colleges to allowing more curricular diversity and student empowerment in search of new truth, and enabling higher education to flourish (Eliot, 1891; Bastedo, 2016).

Eliot's (1869) inaugural address indicates two foci for the elective system, the individual and the State: "For the individual, concentration, and the highest development of his own peculiar faculty, is the only prudence. But for the State, it is variety, not uniformity, of intellectual product, which is needful" (p. 40). Hawkins (1964) notes that Eliot's primary focus was on student development for future contributions to society, and a secondary outcome was that the elective system had immeasurable impact on institutions. While the United States was in search of defining the "American university," Eliot set his sights on "the American environment as a shaping force in the growth of institutions" (p. 191). Universities, such as Yale, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins, were struggling to pattern themselves after German models, while maintaining their denominational culture, creating significant conflict in their missions and identity (Eliot, 1923; Hawkins, 1964; Rudolph, 1990).

Despite losses of funding from denominational affiliations, many smaller Midwestern and Northeast colleges held strongly to the denominational foci of classical curriculum as they weathered sweeping changes throughout the nation during the reconstruction era. More specifically, the United States was struggling to establish a new identity and direction for our nation as a primarily industrialized society of factories, machines, and railroads, hoping to survive the storm of change, and the elective system would later provide the curricular flexibility to help move America through that struggle (Thelin, 2011).

Eliot and several other insightful professors forecasted the inevitable need for change in higher education and began making

changes of their own. Retention of faculty and students was a pressing problem after the Civil War, forcing many colleges to close. As the nation's economy recovered and examples of self-made men abounded, the perceived need for higher education diminished. Wealthy families who still valued and could afford higher education sent their sons to study science in Europe, as it was not widely offered in the United States. Therefore, after the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 and prior to Eliot's inaugural speech at Harvard, there was affirmation of a need for higher education to respond to the need for more competitive and practical curricula (Rudolph, 1990).

With greater influence over curricular choices, students were offered the opportunity for greater decision making in their selection of new course offerings. Eliot (1885) states their preferences moved away from Greek or Latin to more specialized training, such as "French, German, chemistry, physics, and biology" and "logic, ethics, history, political economy, and the use of English in argumentative writing and speaking" (p. 7). These offerings did not replace or detract from other requirements, but were added as options to fulfill degree requirements and were designed for "conscientious and ambitious students, or for those who have a strong taste for certain studies" (p. 7). And thus, the elective system provided a mechanism for higher education curricula to adapt to the changing interests of students, and the changing workforce needs of the nation.

However, the elective system required expanded investment in increasingly diverse course offerings. Eliot (1908) argued, "It is obvious that a university that undertakes thus to deal with all subjects of knowledge must offer a very large total of different courses, and... therefore, the choice of the individual student has a large range..." (p. 133). At first, students could take whatever courses they wanted in whatever sequence they chose, which led to restrictions on their use (Gaff et al., 1997). Regardless of the changes made to the elective system, the elective system has dominated undergraduate curricula and can be observed in general education distributed options, majors, and minors (Bastedo, 2016; Gaff et al., 1997). Skeptics of the elective system, many of whom were top-ranking presidents, debated intensely in public forums about the many aspects related to the revised curriculum as a perceived lowering of academic standards (Bastedo, 2016). Other outspoken critics were faculty members. These critics further questioned the value these elective courses would have to the students and the public. Because of the ongoing criticism, Thelin (2011) states:

Eliot emphasized Harvard's contributions to public service, making clear what was wanted and why it was needed. As a sign of his emphasis on public service through the elective system, gifts flowed in with the result that endowment funds tripled between 1869 and 1878 and tripled again in the next twenty years (p. 126).

From 1869 to 1909, as an apparent indicator of the success of Eliot's arguments that the elective system would produce beneficial societal impacts, Harvard's gifts increased 300-fold (Thelin). This emphasis on the impact of education was an early indication of the need for university leaders to ensure that donors and external entities understood the relationship between an educated citizenry and positive benefits to society.

While the public service focus helped stave off much controversy, it did not resolve all contention among critics. As Bastedo alludes, many critics began to see the value of the new curriculum as the need for knowledge emerged in specialized fields of study. However, dissension among critics like University of Chicago President, Robert Hutchins, Princeton University President, James McCosh, and Yale University President, Noah Porter, continued to emphasize the need for students to receive a prescribed, rigorous, and common liberal arts education to benefit themselves and society (Denham, 2002). Eventually, these perspectives influenced the development of a general education curriculum positively to broaden students' minds (Bastedo).

Although originally developed for an elite student population, the elective system has had a beneficial impact as the student population became more diverse. The introduction of female and African American

students in the 19th century prompted widespread changes in college curriculum. As a whole, colleges made many attempts to avoid the issue of coeducation until mounting pressures forced them to offer compromises. For example, Harvard accepted female students “in 1874, in response to increasing pressure from women’s groups like the Women’s Education Association of Boston,” whereby the “Harvard Corporation offered examinations to women, graded by Harvard professors” (Solomon, 1985, p. 54). As Solomon (1985) reinforces, “Between 1870 and 1915, at various schools, both monumental and incremental changes were made in the college curriculum...” and “electives became the means by which colleges accommodated the students’ diverse academic needs, some of which related to their level of preparation, others to their future expectations” (p. 79).

According to Solomon (1985), “the female proportion of the total college population rose from 21.0 percent in 1870 to 39.6 percent in 1910 and 47.3 percent in 1920” (p. 62). With this rapid change in student demographics, the elective system provided a means for institutions to adapt curricula in response to new diverse student populations.

Gaff et al., 1997 reference one of many debates surrounding the “conception of unitary knowledge,” where “they argued that because knowledge exhibits unitary characteristics, all students must have prescribed coursework, shared knowledge, in that specific area of knowledge” (pp. 109–110). However, Bastedo (2016) points to the need to answer the long-debated question: “What do college students need to learn to be educated members of society?” The introduction of the elective system provided students with a limited degree of choice regarding courses that best suited their educational and career interest.

#### 4. Current and future impacts on higher education and society

More than 150 years after Eliot proposed the full development of the elective system, legislators, administrators, and public interest groups at state, regional, and federal levels continue to re-visit the “efficiency” of the curriculum and electives in the context of liberal arts education requirements, time to degree completion, and student retention and transfer rates (Bastedo, 2016; Committee for Economic Development, 2012). From a perspective rooted in the industrial era, models gauging output of graduates and limiting course offerings have been the subject of national discourse on higher education reform in the current decade, and pressure has increased to reduce the number of programs and courses offered (Committee for Economic Development, 2012; Department of Education, 2006, 2014). This continues to be a pressing topic of discussion.

Today, international calls for higher education reform demand a flexible curriculum for colleges and universities to respond quickly to the everchanging workforce requirements. While some may argue that offering diverse courses and areas of study is costly, elective courses continue to provide students and their advisors a certain degree of flexibility and curricular choice that enhance students’ ability to adapt to the demands of the workforce after graduation (Bergeron, 2009; Committee for Economic Development, 2012; Council on Higher Education, 2013; Education Commission of the States, 2010). In current undergraduate curricula, elective courses are considered essential to enable students and their advisors to craft the most efficient path to completing their education (Bergeron, 2009). From Eliot’s first assertion of the public service purpose in preparing students for emerging workforces to Bergeron’s conclusion that the elective system is now essential to the undergraduate experience, the elective system continues to play a critical role in creating adaptive and responsive undergraduate educational experiences to meet the changing needs of society.

As the world continues to move along paths of increased specialization and globalization, increases in the flexibility of students’ educational experiences must also continue. Denham (2002) reinforces this with one example by stating: “Put simply, graduates will be unprepared

to meet the demands of the 21st century workplaces without electives in international relations, finance, policy, and sociology” (p. 15) as current economic, financial, and political trends move towards globalization and internationalization (Committee for Economic Development, 2012; Education Commission of the States, 2010; Hamilton, 2017; Department of Education, 2006, 2014). An internet search shows evidence of elective requirements in numerous undergraduate and graduate programs both nationally and internationally, indicating the widespread adoption of the elective curriculum and adaptation of curricula to include these 21st century skills (Council on Higher Education, 2013; President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014; Zhou and Zhu, 2007).

In order to be meaningful, undergraduate curricula should continue to evolve to respond to global and regional societal needs, which preserving a body of knowledge and skills that are deemed essential for a democratic society. As an example, at Yale University, the use of *directed studies* courses represents a form of elective choice for “a challenging curriculum and a common [liberal arts] experience” (Zarembay, 2017, p. 2). While not labeled as elective courses, they provide structure but also student choice for undergraduate education. In a further example, “Brown students are challenged to create their own ‘core,’ guided by advisors and by a set of principles, or ideals, of liberal learning, [and] can also create their own courses through an unusual independent study program overseen by the College” (Bergeron, 2009, p. 2). She continues that students’ perceptions were that the courses in this one-year free elective program had a more profound impact on them.

Furthermore, with the emergence of “personalized learning,” there will be a continued dialogue about the merits of elective curricula and required degree components. Denham (2002) asserts that the elective curriculum will remain an integral component in education programs globally while continuing to spark controversial dialogues at all levels (Denham, 2002). This tension between the student-, faculty- and societally-driven components of curricula has the potential to provoke ongoing and valuable curricular responsiveness and improvement.

#### 5. Conclusion

This review of the elective system reveals the scope and magnitude that it has had on transforming the curricular offerings in U.S. higher education over the past 150 years. The elective system has evolved significantly from Eliot’s vision. However, the vision of a relevant and adaptive curricula, continues to be a force that influences the inclusion of student choice and elective curricula. Those who call for a return to highly prescriptive curricula in the pursuit of “efficiency,” “may find a far less relevant and adaptive undergraduate experience that fails to prepare students for contributions to and leadership in the 21st century.

Although Eliot’s uncle, George Ticknor, initially introduced the elective ideal in 1825, Eliot was responsible for fully expanding the elective system into a workable plan (Kuehnemann, 1909; Palmer, 1885; Hawkins, 1966). From a pragmatic perspective, his insights fostered practical education through scientific inquiry, created a curriculum that was more responsive to student interest, and fueled enrollment growth, all of which can still be seen to date.

As with most curricular evolution throughout the history of U.S. higher education, Eliot’s elective system met with considerable resistance and took decades to re-shape higher education curricula. However, it has had a lasting impact on redefining the system of higher education in the U.S. and is evident today. Ultimately, the elective system transformed colleges into universities, created diversity of course offerings, provided a mechanism for student determination and workforce responsiveness, and increased scholarship opportunities. Furthermore, it attracted an increasing number of professors by fostering graduate programs, and it contributed to the creation of vocational training for students from diverse backgrounds contributing to the equal access of education to all students. In retrospect, the elective

system redefined postsecondary institutions to meet the current and future demands of the United States, moving them from the strictly proscribed curricula of a few private colleges to providing students with the option of inquiry through their choice of elective courses in search of new knowledge and truth in state- and federally-funded universities (Hawkins, 1966).

This review provides a historical context for the current discourse on creating greater “efficiencies” in U.S. higher education. Eliot’s elective system generated diversity in curricular offerings that may be lost due to perceptions that fewer course offerings with larger enrollments and constrained curricular choices yield a higher value in exchange for state and federal investment in higher education. However, during a similar period of significant national and fiscal uncertainty that institutions continue to face today, Eliot (1869) asserted: “but for the State, it is variety, not uniformity, of intellectual product, which is needful....” (p. 40). Given the current context of rapid global change and financial uncertainty, Eliot’s assertion is relevant in the national discourse on essential questions concerning the purpose of U.S. higher education. From this review, it is clear the elective system is an essential element of the success of U.S. higher education as an essential component of generating an educated citizenry throughout the 21st century and beyond. Continued curricular improvement and adaptation, similar to the elective system, should be the focus of healthy debates and fruitful dialogues among students, faculty, administrators, and policymakers nationally and internationally to maintain higher education as a flexible and efficient academic pathway for students and their societies.

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