

SHOULD THE STUDENT SELECT HIS OWN STUDIES?

President Jordan, of Leland Stanford University, Gives His Views.

FREE SHOULD THE SCHOLAR BE.

Some of the Chief Deficiencies of the Elective System, and Some of Its Advantages.

In a recent issue of the Leland Stanford Sequoia President Jordan writes a very interesting article on the elective system which is now becoming very popular in American colleges. He says:

From the second to the third stage in its evolution, the curriculum of the American College is now passing. The elective system is now succeeding the patch-work system, just as the latter some twenty years ago gradually took the place of the single prescribed course in the ancient classics and mathematics the traditional course which the colleges of America inherited from those of England. In the elective system, there are no favored students, but all subjects taught in the college course are placed on one equality so far as the college degree is concerned.

No two students require exactly the same drill to bring their powers to the best development. The college student must be the best judge of his own needs. At least he can arrange his own work for himself better than it can be done before hand by any consensus of educational philosophers. The student may make mistakes in this, as he may elsewhere in much more important things in life; but here, as elsewhere, he must bear the responsibility of these mistakes. The development of this sense of responsibility is one of the most effective agencies the college has to promote the moral culture of the student. It is better for the student himself that he should sometimes make mistakes than that he should throughout his work be arbitrarily directed by others. Freedom is as essential to scholarship as to manhood. In Emerson's words, "Free should the scholar be, free and brave." Not long since I met a young German scholar, a graduate of a Prussian gymnasium, who has enrolled himself as a student of English in an American college. To him the free air of the American school was its one good thing. It develops a self-reliant manhood in the youth at an age at which the student of the gymnasium is yet in leading strings. In furnishing the best of mental training in certain fixed and narrow lines, the German student is deprived of that strength which comes from self-help and individual responsibility. It is no mere accident that the need of severe college discipline to guard against the various forms of traditional college mischief has steadily declined with the advent of freedom of choice in study.

The elective system, too, enables the student to bring himself into contact with the best teachers—a matter vastly more important than that he should select the best studies. And this system, therefore involves a not unhealthy competition among the instructors themselves. Incompetent, superficial, or fossilized men will be crowded out or frozen out, and the law of the survival of the fittest will rule in the college faculties as elsewhere in nature.

The elective system has been adopted in greater or less degree by most of our leading colleges; while there are now very few schools large or small, which do not make some provision for elective studies. That some degree of freedom of choice in higher education is desirable, no one now questions. The main differences of opinion relate to the proportion which these elective studies ought to bear to those which are absolutely required and to the age or degree of advancement at which election is safe; for no one advocates freedom of choice from infancy. There is no such thing as a perfect curriculum and all college courses must represent in some degree a compromise among varying influences, or else an adaptation to the needs of a certain class of students to the exclusion of others. All systems are liable to abuse; and as there have been many students who made a farce of the classical course, or who made it a mere excuse for four years spent in boating or billiards or in social pleasures, so in the same way can a farce be made of the freedom allowed under the elective system.

Some of the chief deficiencies of the elective system may be summed up under the following heads:

1. There are some students who from

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pure laziness select only the easiest studies, and go through college with the very easiest work which is possible. But this is no new thing, and it is not for such students the colleges exist. The college should not obstruct the work of its earnest men to keep its idlers and sneaks from wasting their useless time. As Dr. Angell has said: "No plan will make the college career of lazy men brilliant."

The work of the colleges should be organized to meet the needs of the earnest and aspiring students rather than the infirmities and defects of the indolent. That most students as a matter of fact do select the easiest studies is not true, as statistics certainly show. It is, in fact, simple nonsense to call any study easy, if pursued in a serious manner for a serious purpose. If any subject draws to itself idlers solely because it is easy, the fault lies with the teacher. The success of the elective system, as of any system, demands the removal of inefficient teachers. The elective system can never wholly succeed unless each teacher has the power and will to enforce good work, to remove from his classes all idle or inefficient students.

2. It is again objected that students having freedom of choice are likely to select erratic courses in accordance with temporary whims, rather than with any theory of educational development. This again is true; but it is likewise true that the course apparently the most erratic may be the one which brings the student in contact with the strongest men. If a Harvard student of a few years ago could have made his college course exclusively of Botany, Embryology, Greek, Anatomy and Early English it would seem a singular combination. It would sound differently if it were said that his teachers in college were chiefly Asa Gray, Goodwin, Holmes, Lowell, and Agassiz. It is also true, I think, that the average course as chosen by the students themselves is as capable of serious defence as the average established course, evolved from the pulling and hauling and patching and fitting of the average college Faculty.

3. Another criticism is that the elective system offers special temptation to undue or premature specialization. This is true; and premature specialization, like other forms of precocious virtue, is much to be deprecated. But experience does not lead me to think that the danger of "undue specialization" is at all a serious one. The current, in college and out, is all setting the other way. The fact that any man dares to specialize at all, shows that he has a certain independence of character, for the odds are against it. Specialization implies thoroughness, and I believe that thorough knowledge of something is the backbone of culture. Special knowledge of any sort gives to each man the base line by which other attainments may be measured; and this unit of measurement in scholarship can be acquired in no other way. There can be, I think, no scholarship worthy of the name, without some form of special knowledge or special training as its central axis. The self-respect of the scholar comes from thorough work. The man who feels sure that he can know or that he can do something is assured at once from the danger of turgid conceit as from that of limp humility. He can hold up his head among men with a certainty as to his proper place among them.

I have often heard college graduates complain, "Oh if I had only studied something in particular!" "Oh, if I had only learned how to study!" "Oh, if the time I have wasted in something else had been spent in Latin!" There are few college men of the present generation who would not be better scholars to-day if half their curriculum had been omitted (not much matter what half) and the time had been spent on the remaining subjects. But you may say, "Would you let a man graduate ignorant of Chemistry, of Latin, of Logic, of Botany?" Well, yes, if superficiality in everything is the alternative. It is well for a scholar to know something of each of these and of each of the subjects in the most extended curriculum. But he purchases this knowledge too dearly if he buys it at the expense of thoroughness in some line of study in which a real interest has been awakened.

Then again, with certain men in college the alternative is either a close specialization or no college life at all. Sometimes a man may wish in college to devote his entire time to a single subject, as Physics or History, making himself an authority on that subject, but without any effort for broad culture at all. This is not often a wise course; but wise or not no one will deny that a college career spent in this way is better than none at all, and in after years such men are rarely a source of shame to their Alma Mater. There is a certain well-known naturalist whom I could name, who was some ten years ago excluded from the Indiana University, not because he was idle or vicious or weak, but because he wanted to spend most of his time in the study of Natural History. The college has been no place for such a man as that, though the same college is proud of him now. It had then no use for bird knowledge though it came out strong on irregular birds. Who is to say that it was better for him to leave college than that he should be allowed to follow his own bent? No knowledge comes amiss to an investigator, but no investigator can afford to sacrifice his specialty for the sake of breadth of culture. Thoroughness is the main point, after all, and should take precedence over versatility. I do not mean to be understood as advocating narrowness of culture of any sort. The broadest education is none too broad for him who aspires to lead in any part of the world of thought. But the forces of the mind, to continue the figure, should not be scattered in guerilla-bands, but marshalled toward leadership.

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4. Still another criticism of the elective system is just the reverse of this. The elective system permits undue scattering. It allows the student to flit from one subject to another, thus acquiring versatility without real training. This seems to me a more serious fault than any of the others. It can be remedied in part by a system of major and minor studies, or a division of the work into specialties which must be pursued for a considerable length of time, and electives which may be dropped after a simple mastery of their elements. Some such arrangement as this seems to me a desirable check upon the elective plan, as it tends to insure persistence in something, while retaining most of the flexibility of the latter system.

An advantage of the elective system which has been too often overlooked is its reflex influence on the teacher. If a good teacher is the essential element in a good school, then anything which helps to make his work better, more thorough or more inspiring is of the greatest value to the student. The great teachers of the world for the most part, have not been and could not be will-masters. The man who works with realities cannot become a martinet. In the elective system the teacher deals with students who have chosen their courses for the love of the work or for love of him. Contact with these classes is a constant stimulus and a constant inspiration. No teacher can ever do his best on required work or prescribed courses, and the best that is in his teacher is the student's right to receive.

There is still much to be said in favor of the college in which discipline pure and simple is made the chief aim of all the work. In such a school those subjects—Languages, Sciences and Philosophy—which serve the ends of training best should be taught and such subjects only. Whether anything more suitable for this purpose than the Ancient Classics and Mathematics has yet been found, I shall not try to say; but the aims of such a course should be the same in kind as that in classical curriculum. It may perhaps be possible to teach better things and in a better way than was done in the classical schools; but all attempts at combining in a prescribed curriculum mental discipline and a wide range in subjects must result in failure, so far as training the mind is concerned. You cannot teach everything to every student. Either the student or the college must choose.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS.

The election of officers of the Medical Society took place in the Gerrard Street building Friday evening. After the first ballot was polled, President Lindsay called order, and the concert in honor of the affair opened with a violin solo by the incomparable "Wag." Mr. Wagner '99, showed natural ability combined with severe and thorough training and bids fair to be one of the leading violinists of the province. It is superfluous to say that he was encored.

Then was given a treat to the audience or, as "Stubbs" Smith says, "congregation," in the shape of an amateur minstrel performance. One may have been to the Fiji Islands, to the North Pole and to the South—to the Klondike and to South Africa—may! One may even have been in Hamilton—and yet never seen anything in the line of shows, concerts, vaudevilles or circuses, that could compare with this minstrel performance. One could not say of this "there are others!" It was simply "out of sight." Even Don MacGillivray said it beat anything he ever saw, and Rollie Webb became hysterical.

Mr. Colin Begg played "Massa," and occupied an elevated chair in the centre of a semicircle of coons. To his right were Billie Robinson, Freddie Young, and Doodles McDougall. To his left were Hutch Hutchison, Jack Chisholm ('00), "Stubbs" Smith, and Doc Carder, pianist. The "Ya-as Sah's" were all in dress clothes powdered hair, with high collars and "loud" ties. Besides, "Stubbs" Smith had the chapel window of a cathedral glued to his shirt front.

Negro monologue, dialogue, and sawlogue were the order of the performance, interspersed with song, music and dance. Many witty sayings were given forth and some quite original "hits" brought down the house.

The fancy dancing of Freddie Young, Hutchison's solos, and the "Horn" band were leading features.

It could not fairly be said that anyone excelled the other. Mr. Begg acted coolly and collectedly. "Billie" Robinson gave an excellent rendering of "The girl on the same street with me." Smithie's whole acting was superb, and Doodles was at his best; and those who know him can tell what that means.

Much credit is due Mr. Hutchison, for most of the topical songs given by him were of his own composing. Both he and the other gentlemen from the second year (Messrs. Chisholm and Carder) gave up a

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good deal of their time to bring about the success of the concert. Mr. McDougall and Mr. Young spared no time or trouble in arranging the performance, and it is well known Billy Robinson is a worker. All are to be congratulated. An affair of this kind will bear good fruit. The students will begin to recognize the fact that it is a good thing to attend the meetings of the Medical Society.

The result of the election (first ballot) was read out. For vice-president, Mr. Dunnington was elected. For assistant reas., Mr. Smith ('01), and for treasurer, Mr. Peters. Mr. Robertson was elected curator. On the second ballot Mr. C. W. Holmes was elected president, having a slight majority over Mr. McLeah. Mr. Jack Chisholm '99, was elected secretary, and Messrs. Warren and Campbell first year councillors.

While the second ballot was being counted, the entertainment went on.

Messrs. Smith and Leader sang a duet in good style. Messrs. Smith, Telfer, Williams and Billy O'Brien also took part and acquitted themselves admirably.

All went home feeling excellently, and every one in future will attend these meetings.

NOTES OF THE EVENING.

Dr. Maybury from the General Hospital was present, and Drs. Webb and MacGillivray also looked in upon the students.

During the performance of the Minstrel, a joke had to be repeated until Mr. Radcliffe "tumbled."

There must be an attraction down at the photographer's. It is said Jimmy Gow sat for his photo on four different occasions recently.