

The Elective System in Education.

[A summary of an address delivered by President J. S. Schurman of Cornell University before the University Convocation at Albany in July.]

President Schurman said in part:—There would never have been a question of choice of studies if human knowledge had not advanced in many new directions, and in all directions, old as well as new, got beyond the power of any single human mind to compass it. It was perhaps still possible in the eighteenth century for an encyclopaedic mind to absorb all that was known by the civilized world; and, in an address to students, I once heard Mr. Gladstone say that Leibnitz was probably the last great man who achieved such a task. But even Leibnitz, were he to spend his lifetime in study, would remain ignorant of by far the greater number of subjects represented in the curriculum of a great modern university. In the presence of such an inexhaustible programme of studies, what is the average student to do?

First of all, he may ignore everything but Latin. Greek, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, and natural philosophy. These were the staple subjects of the old-fashioned college curriculum; and a thorough training in them has potency to enlarge and cultivate the intellect, especially in its powers of analysis and deduction, and in some measure to develop and chasten the aesthetic emotion. But the student who deliberately closes his eyes to all other knowledge—to the English language and literature, history, economics, politics, modern languages, and literature, and to all the wealth of the physical, chemical and biological sciences—while he may be acting wisely, is certainly exercising a choice quite as arbitrary as that of his more radical “chum” who elects English, German, French, mathematics, psychology, and some of the sciences of nature, inorganic or organic. There has been a kind of tacit assumption in certain quarters that a student who walked in the old ways was not choosing his studies, while a student who departed from them and expatiated in the newer realm of knowledge was making such a choice; but in either case there is no escaping the task of selecting among many possible disciplines, and if the boy himself does not make the selection, his teacher or his college does.

Or, secondly, the student may ignore the traditions of the schools and elect such studies as tend to qualify him for his subsequent profession; chemistry, mathematics, and physics, if he is to be an engineer; botany, chemistry, physiology, anatomy, histology, and bacteriology, if he is to be a physician; history, political science, and constitutional law, if he is to be a lawyer; Greek, Hebrew, metaphysics, and ethics, if he is to be a clergyman; and whatever specialty he affects, if he is