

The Free Elective Curriculum

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I want to begin by thanking Piotr Wilczek for organizing this wonderful conference on the liberal arts, and for inviting me to take part in it. My talk today centers on the liberal arts curriculum at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where I serve as Dean of the College. For those of you who may not know, Brown, which was founded in 1764, is the seventh oldest institution of higher education in the United States, and the first college in the nation to accept students regardless of religious affiliation. The current undergraduate curriculum at Brown—what we still sometimes call the “New” Curriculum—was adopted two centuries *after* the founding of the college, in May of 1969, which means that it is celebrating its 40th birthday this month. When I became Dean almost three years ago, one of the first things I was asked to do was to convene a Task Force on Undergraduate Education that would examine the health of our now middle-aged curriculum, and to make a prognosis for the future. That process took about 18 months, and ended up teaching me a great deal not only about Brown, but about the history of higher education in America.

I titled my talk “The Free Elective Curriculum,” in part to signal the educational philosophy that has defined Brown (or at least one aspect of Brown) for the past 40 years: it is a philosophy that gives students to freedom to choose, the freedom to fail, and the

responsibility to direct their own education. I was amused but not surprised when Piotr informed me that my title is all but impossible to translate into Polish. I was not surprised because, even today, Brown's curriculum remains somewhat difficult to translate in the landscape of American higher education. The principle of free choice will always resist the more limiting—and more conventional—concept of curriculum as a specified or fixed course of study. And yet, as we all know, a modern liberal arts curriculum is never entirely fixed. The elective principle has informed liberal education in America for a very long time. Indeed, if we delve more deeply into the history of higher learning, we shall see that the introduction (or perhaps I could say, the “invention”) of the free elective system played a critical role in the development of the modern American university as we know it. In my remarks this morning I want to address Brown's open curriculum, then, from the perspective of this broader history.

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Let me begin by laying out what our curriculum *is*. Students who come to Brown today are expected to do essentially three things to earn the baccalaureate degree: they must pass a minimum of 30 courses (though they may take up to 40); they must successfully complete a concentration; and they must demonstrate competence in writing. How they fulfill these expectations remains largely in their hands. There is no core curriculum at Brown, but—I have to admit—I don't particularly like to put it that way. I prefer to say that Brown students are challenged to create their own “core,” guided by advisors and by a set of principles, or ideals, of liberal learning. Students can also create their own courses, through an unusual independent study program overseen by the College. And the same freedom extends to their choice of concentration. While a concentration of course

implies a more fixed set of requirements, students at Brown nonetheless have more than 80 programs to choose from, over half of which are interdisciplinary. Many pursue independent research; a handful even design their own concentrations, working out a unique academic plan with a faculty sponsor. All in all it is a fairly liberal approach to liberal education, one that depends on not just the creativity, but also the collaborative and entrepreneurial spirit of the students. And so we often refer to our students with a metaphor that suggests all these qualities: we call them “architects” of their education.

The liberal sentiment may suggest the legacy of the late 1960s, but the history runs deeper. In fact, one can find a very similar idea expressed in a text from a much earlier era. “Every man among us is the *architect of his own fortune*,” the text began, “hence, every man is desirous for himself . . . of that knowledge which is most essential to success in the field which is placed before him.” The author went on to point out that colleges in America were not yet equipped to deliver this sort of practical education, and that, in order to respond to the needs of the modern student, the basic curriculum would have to change. As it happens, the author I’m referring to was Francis Wayland, fourth President of Brown, and the text I’m quoting from was his *Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education*, which he delivered in March of 1850.ⁱ

It was a significant text in a number of respects. Wayland was challenging the utility of the old classical curriculum in an era when Jacksonian democracy had expanded voting rights to a larger segment of the American population, and when the concept of Manifest Destiny was encouraging westward expansion of the U.S. “What could Virgil and Horace and Homer and Demosthenes, with a little mathematics and natural

philosophy, do towards developing the untold resources of this continent?," he wondered.ⁱⁱ He noted the declining enrollments not just at Brown but at all the colleges and seminaries in the Northeast, and concluded that it was because these institutions were not supplying the kind of education desired by men who would devote themselves, as he put it, "to the productive professions." Wayland's solution was to make a collegiate education more relevant to "the agriculturalist, the manufacturer, the mechanic, and the merchant" by changing the content and the delivery of instruction. He argued for flexible terms of less than four years, a more extensive menu of degree options, and a vastly more flexible course of study, where students would be allowed to substitute other subjects for Greek, or Latin, or the higher mathematics. The overall approach suggested a new, more utilitarian understanding of the term *college*, where emphasis would now be placed, so to speak, on the *lego* of *collegium*: "I choose." In Wayland's famous formulation: "The various courses should be so arranged that, in so far as it is practicable, every student might study what he chose, all that he chose, and nothing but what he chose."ⁱⁱⁱ

President Wayland was by no means the only voice calling for a more inclusive system of higher education in the mid-nineteenth century. But even while the need for reform was widely acknowledged, a solution did not emerge for some time. Credit has traditionally been given to Charles William Eliot, the Harvard president who eventually made the new system work. It was during Eliot's remarkable 40-year term of office, between 1869 and 1909, that Harvard adopted the philosophy of free choice that Wayland had tried to introduce at Brown in 1850.

Eliot's motivations—I think it is fair to say—had less to do with his concerns for America's burgeoning middle class, than with his concerns for what Harvard itself should

become. He was focused on transforming the school from a provincial college into a University that would hold its own next to the most progressive European institutions. “A university must try to teach every subject . . . [with enough depth] to take the advanced student . . . and make him capable of original research,” he explained. And he saw the elective system of education—with its focus on specialized studies—as the means for transforming the work of both students *and* faculty: in Eliot’s words, it would bring about “advanced teaching, and a general raising of the level of instruction.”^{iv} His arguments were evidently convincing, and, by 1872, Harvard had abolished all subject requirements for seniors. Juniors were relieved of their requirements five years later, and sophomores in another five years. It would take a bit longer to liberate the freshman class, but by 1897, Eliot had managed to do that, too, and the effects on the institution were palpable. Over the course of his tenure, the size of the faculty, the number of courses, and the endowment at Harvard all grew dramatically.^v By promoting a curriculum based on personal freedom and choice, he had succeeded in turning the college into a modern university.

I could stop here and say “the rest is history,” but this is not quite the end of the story. It is true that, as other institutions adopted some version of the elective system, they grew as dramatically as Harvard did, and the old classical curriculum eventually died a natural death. As Derek Bok has pointed out, at the turn of the 20th century, the “curricula in more than one third of America’s colleges were at least 70 per cent elective.”^{vi} But the extreme freedom championed by Eliot would have trouble surviving the criticisms of its detractors, and (not surprisingly) the next Harvard president preached the path of moderation. The elective concept did not die, but it did give way to a more

orderly system of concentration and distribution—of specialized study tempered by general education—that still characterizes the American university today.

These outcomes are as relevant to the themes of our conference as they are to the later history of Brown. I'm in fact interested in what the critics of the free-elective system had to say, because their views inform the curriculum that was eventually adopted (or perhaps I should say *re-adopted*) at Brown in the 1960s. Take, for example, John Corbin, a writer and editor who critiqued the Harvard curriculum in 1902 based on his own experience as a student there in the previous decade. He pointed out that the system Eliot had introduced was not so "free," after all. Increasing the range of courses and disciplines had actually made choosing more difficult. It was not simply that there were now too many courses, or that classes were scheduled at the same time or had pre-requisites. Corbin's more significant complaint had to do with the change in the relationship between teacher and student. "The breakdown of the elective system," as he put it, lay "in the [modern] "machinery of instruction."

He was referring, above all, to the lecture method of teaching. This was the real innovation that had enabled the dramatic growth the modern American university. In the older, classical curriculum, a faculty was made up of a handful of generalists, a "course" was measured in years, and students learned by means of tutorials. In the modern system, the faculty was much larger and filled with specialists, a course was but a single unit, and students acquired knowledge by means of lectures. According to Corbin, the new arrangement turned instructors into disciplinarians, as attendance at lectures and exams became the only measure of a student's progress. "The tolling of the college bell," he wrote, "dooms hundreds of students to hear a necessarily hurried and inarticulate

statement of knowledge, [one that is already available, and better handled in print] and to which a tutor might refer the student in a few minutes' conference." The verdict was grim: "The boasted freedom in elective studies simmers down to this," he said, "that it enables the student to choose in what courses he will be made the unwilling ally of the [disciplinarian]."vii

The lecture method of teaching still has its opponents, of course. But the nature of Corbin's critique—especially his indictment of the "machinery of instruction"—almost foreshadows the resistance that would emerge a half-century later in the student movements of the 1960s. I'm remembering the famous lines uttered by the activist Mario Savio from the steps of the central administration building at Berkeley in 1964 (*and still in circulation today thanks to You Tube*): "There is a time when the operation of the machine," he said, "becomes so odious . . . that you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it . . . that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!" The student activists rejected the view, as Corbin had a half-century before, that they were mere cogs in a knowledge-producing machine, and they demanded that education be put back into their hands. The demand prompted all kinds of curricular innovations at universities and colleges across the country. At Brown, it resulted in the long-term experiment that I described at the beginning of my paper: the return to the same kind of elective freedom—the student's right to choose—that Wayland and Eliot had championed a whole century earlier.

But, in truth, it was not the same. Which is perhaps the most interesting thing to be learned from the long view of history. It should now be clear that the 19th-century proponents of the free-elective system had very different aims in mind. Wayland wanted

to create more useful courses; Eliot wanted to produce more advanced ones. In a way, the New Curriculum at Brown went on to meet both demands in the next century—articulating a course of study that was both more useful AND more demanding. But it did so only by redefining the terms, so that students, rather than knowledge, became the center of the university enterprise. From this perspective, in fact, one could say that the Brown curriculum enacted a kind of ironic reversal, for in enlarging the principle of free choice, it actually succeeded in restoring the very experience that a critic like Corbin had lamented: it led to a more personal, integrated, and engaged liberal education.

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In the time I have remaining, I want to say a bit more about that result. I want to consider, in particular, two effects of this student-centered enterprise, and the first has to do with teaching and learning. I hardly have to say that the activists who advocated for Brown's new curriculum in 1969 were as aware of the pitfalls of the lecture method as Corbin had been in the previous century. Their search for a more activist learning eventually led to a freer, more open form of university instruction. That was in 1966, when they organized a group of about 80 students and 15 faculty members to teach themselves about alternative models in higher education. What they learned ultimately became the starting point for the New Curriculum. But, just as important, that first collaborative course revealed the power of student-led teaching, and inspired a new program of Group Independent Study (and solo Independent Study) courses that remains strong today. In this program students work with faculty to identify an issue or problem for study, and then go on to produce a syllabus, a set of readings, some assignments, and even a method of assessment. In short, they create the whole course, which is then vetted

by the College's main governing body just like every other course in the curriculum. The process could be seen, in one sense, as a revival of the old tutorial method of teaching, where students worked through problems in the company of a generalist mentor. But because the Independent Study program requires students (like faculty) to organize their course materials in advance, they discover what it means to be an active participant not just in their own educations, but in the work of the university itself.

The same holds true for the student's area of concentration. At Brown we also allow our students, as I said, to create their own concentrations in consultation with a faculty mentor. They will begin, once again, by identifying a larger intellectual problem, often bringing together a range of disciplines to put that problem into context. The long-term plan is worked out with the mentor, and evaluated and approved by our curriculum council. Here again, the planning process brings the student into contact with the real work of the university. In some cases what started out as a unique intervention on the part of one student became a permanent addition to the curriculum, suggesting that our free and elective independent Study programs have had a more profound effect. As Charles Eliot might have predicted, they have actually served as a catalyst to "grow" Brown's curriculum.

Indeed, the 20 years between 1969 and 1989, the number of concentration options in the curriculum grew from about 45 to about 90. By contrast to Eliot's Harvard, however, where the growth of the disciplines came from without (*more faculty meant more subjects and more courses*), here the growth came from within. Prompted by student initiative, what Brown experienced was an unusual expansion of what one might call the "interdisciplines," the areas lying between conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Today more than half of the concentrations we offer lie between at least two departments. A few have no departmental home at all. And some of our strongest research areas as a university continue to reflect thinking at the boundaries of the disciplines. My point is that a flexible and open undergraduate curriculum helped, in part, to drive this internal expansion. The result suggests an interesting correction to the conventional view of the research university as the primary vehicle for developing new frontiers of knowledge, for at Brown, at least, some of those new fields have had their first incarnation as a creative intervention by undergraduates.

Which brings me to my final point. As the papers in this conference have already made clear, what we mean by “curriculum” will always be understood differently, depending on our vantage point. From an institutional perspective, curriculum is often conceived as a structure, or architecture, for learning. In a department, it suggests the particular content a discipline. For students, however, curriculum will always be more experiential than structural or factual. It might best be described as the path or pattern that emerges from working through a very wide array of educational choices, and the unique impression left by that path.

This is where the idea of the Brown curriculum begins, and where its focus has remained for the last four decades: on the experiential dimension of learning, and on what students will make of their education when we put it in their hands. Our curriculum is not, then, a negative proposition (NOT a “lack of requirements”) but rather a positive conviction about what it means to choose something freely, and the benefits of creative, independent work. The best evidence that our forty-year experiment in higher education is still a good idea lies not only in the fact that the curriculum continues to demonstrate a

capacity to respond to student creativity and initiative, but also, and more importantly, that it continues to nurture exactly the kind of student that we want for our best graduate schools: students who will always be on the creative frontiers of knowledge because they don't know there is another place to be.

NOTES

ⁱ *Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education*, Providence, George H. Whitney, 1850, 13.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 52. The reforms apparently had the desired effect. Enrollments at Brown rose by almost 30% in the next year, and by that same amount again two years later. But increased tuition revenues were not, in the end, sufficient to realize the considerable expansion in instruction that Wayland's new system required. Wayland stepped down in 1855, and his successor took a healthy step back.

^{iv} Charles William Eliot, "The Elective System" (1885).

^v According to Rudolph, the faculty size grew from 60 to 600, and the endowment increased from \$2 million to \$20 million. In another passage, however, Rudolph uses different figures, saying "in 1870 at Harvard 32 professors taught 73 courses; by 1910 the professors numbered 169, the courses 401. Somewhere between those professors and the courses in 1910 were twice as many instructors of less than professorial rank." Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 194 and 206.

^{vi} Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 16. Citing Rudolph, 196.

^{vii} Corbin, *An American in Oxford* (1902), 297.