

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

### The Proposed Shortening of the College Course at Cambridge

Harvard College has inaugurated most of the steps toward better educational methods which have been taken in this country and therefore whatever is done at Cambridge is important in all educational centers and concerns all people interested in educational matters.

For a long time the growth of the graduate department and the lengthening of the course of study in the professional schools has so prolonged the time required for the liberal training offered by Harvard University that the question has been agitated of more properly adjusting the length of the academical course.

The Dean of the college said in his report for the year 1890 that the traditional college system did not fit the new state of things and that to lavish on a four years course in the under graduate department the instruction now allowed to that department seemed like a waste of time, and he claims that the standard of the bachelor's degree was pushed too high at a time when longer post graduate courses were not contemplated, and that the requirements for the baccalaureate are so great now as to be a hindrance to the proper development of the professional courses and the other post graduate departments.

The question of reducing the college course was brought before the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which is the new name for the College Faculty by a vote of the Academic Council of December 6th 1887 which was as follows

“Voted, that with a view to lower the average age at which Bachelors of Arts of Harvard College can enter the professional schools and the graduate department, the College Faculty be requested to consider the expediency of a reduction of the college course.” During the year 1888 the faculty took no action in the premises but devoted much time to the discussion of the subject during the year 1889 and in March 1890 communicated to the President and Fellows four proposals looking toward the accomplishment of the object in question, three of which were passed by strong majorities but the fourth, which directly propose the reduction of the College course was hotly discussed and finally passed only by a vote of 34 to 32 – many of the leading members of the Faculty voting in the negative. The three resolutions which were adopted without important opposition propose, in substance, that a student may be Recommended for the degree of A.B. in the middle as well as at the end of the academic year and that when he enters college there shall be placed to his credit towards satisfying the requirements for the degree any “advanced studies” on which he has passed in his admission examination, beyond the number required for admission and also any other college studies which he has anticipated, thus giving any ambitious student an opportunity to take his degree in less than four years, but without reducing the requirements for the Baccalaureate degree. Among those voting in the affirmative were the President of course, the Dean, and

Professors Lane, Morten, Greenough, Payne, J. W. White and Peabody.

Professors at Dunbar and James Mills Peirce were in Europe, but would have voted in the affirmative. The requirements for the degree at the time the vote was taken, stated in courses was 18 4/10 and the proposal was to reduce it to 16 courses.

I have received from the Secretary of the College a pamphlet setting forth the arguments pro and con on this question and from these I learned that the majority claimed that the average [age] of students on entering Harvard College is and has been for thirty years past thought to be undesirably high. They show for eleven years past the average age at entrance has been about nineteen and twenty years; that between 1880 and 1890 inclusive 148 freshman entered between nineteen and twenty years of age, and that during this period 314 freshman entered college between twenty and twenty one.

The whole number entering during that time being 3205. While urging primary and secondary schools to prepare their pupils so that they may be admitted by the time they are eighteen, the majority of the Faculty said that they see no reason for believing that the average at entrance will fall far below eighteen, and that eighteen is young enough, consequently if any time is to be gained before the whole course of study is completed, it must be gained during the academic years.

They urge that before the training that half of the students who entered College and go into the post graduate departments, can be completed, the majority of them must be 26 years of age, which age is in the opinion of the majority of the Faculty, too great, and since they cannot recommend any abridgment of the post graduate studies, they are compelled to recommend a reduction of the college course.

They said at the age of 26 for completing professional education is burdensome to parents and injurious to the state because it tends to confine the benefits of University education to the children of people more than ordinarily prosperous, and then an earlier age of graduation is desirable for that large number, consisting of from one fifth to one third of Harvard graduates who go into business.

They further said that the increased importance of the Post graduate school and the greater use of the higher degrees which it bestows, has made necessary the adherence to the present high standard for the degree of A.B., They say that the common American college with its inflexible four years course has become an anomaly and that the practice of holding back young man until twenty three years of age before they begin their professional studies has no warrant in the educational method of older nations; they said that in Oxford and Cambridge professional studies may be counted to a large extent for the bachelor's degree and that the common period of residence for this degree is three years, and that in the German universities the student who leaves the Gymnasium at from 19 to 20 years is at once free to begin in the University his preparation for his chosen profession and that in France professional study is begun even earlier.

Moreover the majority of the Faculty urge that their proposal to reduce the College

course does not make it compulsory upon the student to take the shorter course, but leaves it entirely optional so that those who wish to take the old and longer course and prolong their period of study for four years are free to do so, but they believe that the reduction of the time required for obtaining the Bachelor's degree will call to the College many young men who are unable to spend the time and money which the present length of the course requires.

The majority of the Faculty on this question includes Professors J D Whiting, F. J. Child, Josiah P. Cooke, W. W. Goodwin, C. J. [ ] Nash, Everette, A. S. and H. B. Hill, Shaller, Jackson, Byerly, and Emerton, who submit as their strongest objection to the plan proposed, their fear that it will lower the standard of education at Harvard College and degrade the degree of A.B. They say "The present Senior year may fairly be said to represent the net gain in scholarship which Harvard College has made since 1860 and if this year is lost we must begin again at the foot of the long and toilsome hill which we have slowly climbed."

They point out that the plan of the majority would lead to many difficulties if it should be adopted, for it can hardly be expected that many would avail themselves of the privilege of graduating in the middle of the Senior year, and it would hence divide students into two sets, and those who would try to compress three and a half year's work into three years and those who would spread three and a half years work over four years and as both sets would be taught in the same classes, there could be no accommodation of the severity of the courses to either set.

Hence the majority agree that the proposed reduction in the requirements for the degree of A.B. must be considered merely as tentative and an entering wedge to aid the [in]accomplishment of that greater reduction which must follow, if the plan of the reduction in the college course is to be made practicable.

The minority show clearly that the fact that the growth of American Colleges has not kept pace with the increase in the population of the country, does not concern Harvard College because the number of students there, has trebled since 1860 while the population of the United States has only doubled. Consequently Harvard's higher requirements have not repelled students as the majority suggest, but on the contrary seem to have attracted them.

The minority insist that if the age at which the advanced degrees can be taken has become too great, boys should be fitted for entering college earlier and they quote an address of President Eliot's delivered in 1888 in which he expressed the same view, saying, "Not merely one year but two years at least are worse than wasted in our elementary schools."

Referring to the example of Oxford & Cambridge cited by the advocates of the reduction, the minority show that this citation was apparently ill advised for it seems from their figures that less than one percent of those who were graduated from Oxford in 1889 took their degrees after only three years residence. And in Cambridge where an old statute still limits the time of residence for the degree to three years, it has become the practice, for all who expected to gain credit as scholars or to graduate with honors, to prolong their

residence to four years or take an additional year in preparation and the minority seem to have shown that the "English universities have thus practically abandoned the policy upon which it is now proposed that Harvard College shall enter as an experiment." In closing their dissenting opinion the minority said: "we feel indeed that the consequences of the proposed step would be so momentous to the welfare of this and other Colleges and to the whole community that it ought not to be taken without the hearty and almost unanimous concurrence of all the boards which have the faith [of] Harvard College in their hands."

Without attempting to weigh or discuss the arguments which are advanced by either party in the Faculty I would suggest some considerations which incline me to disagree with them both. It does not seem wise to attempt to lower the age of admission. The years in which boys are fitting for College are those in which they are growing rapidly and if they are to establish good health which can stand the strain of their later years, they must establish it while they are under twenty years. During those years their enjoyment of plenty of exercise and fresh air and the acquisition of sound bodies, should not be hindered by any crowding upon them of their preparatory studies. Also it is during those years that they should acquire their accomplishments. If they are to learn anything of music and the modern languages, to dance, ride, box or fence, they should have their instruction in these things before they enter college.

Moreover it is my experience that most young men under nineteen are incapable of properly using the advantages which the present curriculum of Harvard College offers to them. At an earlier age they can not wisely select their electives, because their plans for after life, with reference to which these studies must be chosen, have not been formed. Also my observation has been that the man who yield to the evil temptations of the college life and worse than waste their time in college are the young man. In my class and in the other classes in college with me, the men who more fully availed themselves of their opportunities while in college were generally the older men. And the record of these men in after life, has shown that as compared with those who had the advantage of them by two or three or even more years of youth, at graduation, they, by more rapid progress in their professions soon gained the time which they seemed to have lost. As to reducing the length of time spent in college I confess that I am moved by the sentimental considerations which are urged by the minority.

Moreover in my opinion most young men do not derive all the benefits of a residence at Harvard or at any other of our best Colleges, solely from the studies they there pursue. To many, the acquisition of knowledge from books is not so important or useful as that which they get by absorption, a process akin to that which the botanists call endosmosis which is a slow process. The habits, manners, associations and friendships which are formed at college are quite as valuable to many, as the learning which is gathered from the books. To cut off by one fourth, the time in which these advantages may be gained by that large number of students who do not go into the post graduate schools, would, by that proportion, diminish the value of the college course to them.

It seems to me that for those who intend to enter one of the post graduate schools and

wish to shorten their College course, a three years course would be provided with a sort of brevet degree at the end of it.

The Bachelor's degree may not be particularly prized by those who are in haste to seek in one of the post graduate schools the A.M., Ph D, S.D., M.D., or L.L.B., while for those who intend to take it and no other the degree of Bachelor of Arts should be retained in all its integrity. I believe in the good old A.B., worth one hundred cents on the dollar and no free coinage of a debased degree which shall be stamped A.B. but is not worth it.

For students who are in a hurry to get out into the world, what objection can there be to giving at their option a three year A.B. course, which, to distinguish it from the genuine article, might be written in old English letters or with the B. smaller than the A.? The possessor of this degree would soon have his higher degree to write after it, the Bachelor's degree only marking a stage of his progress toward the higher. I see no reason why, because some students may want a three years A.B degree, the Faculty should lower all the A.B's to this standard. It would surely drive all of those of the full value out of circulation.

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