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FOUR YEARS OF ENGLISH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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One aspect of the college-entrance requirements in English has been perhaps unduly neglected. There have been controversies innumerable as to whether such requirements should be set at all, and battles royal have raged over the quality or character of the books assigned for use. But granted that such requirements exist and must be satisfied, and granted that certain books must be read, there remains this point: How much credit at entrance shall be given for the work done?

Under the existing system three points' credit are allowed. That is, the work that meets the requirements can be done in three years. Here and there throughout the country a considerable number of colleges, to be sure, allow four credits; one or two require four years' work; some urge it, and state frankly that although only three points of credit are allowed, four years of preparation are expected. In Latin, on the contrary, four points of credit are allowed for four years' work.

What is the effect in many communities, however, of allowing only three points' credit and apparently expecting only three years of preparation? It may be remarked, in the first place, that such effect as exists is felt elsewhere than upon strictly college-preparatory students. Many students go into college-preparatory courses who never go to college—many, indeed, enter such courses merely because of the social glamor supposed to attach to them under the circumstances. But the effect is also upon administrators who argue that if such pundits as set the college-entrance requirements deem three years of English sufficient, three years is enough for anybody. Recently, for example, there has been a tendency to reduce the amount of English in so-called technical or mechanical or industrial courses. In one city in this state students in such a course take no English in the fourth year, although all

other students take it. In another city in this state such students take only half a year of English in the fourth year.

It is, of course, well known to all who have had the opportunity of comparing students in technical courses with students in other courses that these technical students do not, as a rule, do as good work in English as the rest. I made an investigation some months ago, and found that one-third more technical students were failing in English than was the case with students in general, commercial, household-arts, college-preparatory, and other courses. In other words, the principle of administration seems to have been this: Technical students are very poor in English; therefore, give them less of it.

As it happens, in at least one of these cities part of the responsibility for cutting down the English in the technical course lies at the door of the college-entrance requirements. For some of the students in this course go to engineering schools, and since these give only three points' credit for English (under the general arrangement applying to all colleges), all technical students are subjected to the same decrease in the amount of English given them in the secondary school.

Slowly but surely the temptation to amputate the English in other courses will be yielded to. "Standardization" is the battle cry of our modern and practical world. Soon, I am very much afraid, English will be given only in three years of the high-school course. Everywhere the so-called useful or informational subjects will displace English, both in time and in esteem. There is, moreover, the newest tendency in secondary education to be considered—the tendency to create schools not high schools to which students go on graduation from the elementary school. These are somewhat sardonically called vocational schools, as if all our high schools were not in the best sense of the word vocational. In this latest type of school the majority of the teachers are not likely to be academically trained, and English as a part of the curriculum will be regarded as of a great deal less importance than forging or mechanical drawing or stenography.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize here the necessity and value of English. It is, however, perhaps worth while to point out one

element in the situation that is not always perceived. The one outstanding characteristic of contemporary life is, unquestionably, the multifarious, the multitudinous interests of people today. Our vocations are specialized, our pleasures innumerable, varied, our reading potentially world-wide in scope. Rarely do our lives touch or interweave in more than a few details. Yet, for the sake of a right-working democracy, it is of immense importance that somewhere, somehow we be likeminded. Here, I think, English can perform a great service. It is the one subject in the curriculum that all students everywhere must take. It provides in our secondary education the sole nucleus of common ideas and impressions and of common culture. It performs a service of unification, of Americanization, if you will. This service, in view of the pull and tug of other interests, is best performed if it is rendered every day in the week during every year of the course.

It is well to know that English teachers by no means stand alone in insisting on the supreme importance of the mother-tongue. Some months ago Mr. William Wiener, principal of the Central High School in Newark, New Jersey, decided to investigate the state of public opinion in this matter of four years of English. He addressed a letter on the subject to a number of persons both of local reputation and of national prominence. The letters he received in response show public opinion, among laymen and educators alike, overwhelmingly in favor of four years of English in the secondary school. The five commissioners of the city of Newark, for example, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce indorse the idea strongly. Here are a few excerpts:

President J. G. Schurman of Cornell said:

There is no question about the wisdom of requiring the English language and English and American literature, including practical work in composition, throughout the four years of the high-school course, provided the instruction in this subject is as good as the instruction in, for example, mathematics or ancient languages.

President Robert J. Aley of Maine (now of Butler College), former president of the N.E.A., stated:

I believe that this study (English) should extend through the entire high school course. . . . Colleges should allow four units' credit if the work extends through four full years.

Professor J. G. Hart, Chairman of the Committee on Admission, Harvard University, said:

I entirely agree with your reason for the importance of English, and the necessity of teaching it in every year of the high-school course.

Dr. P. P. Claxton, U.S. Commissioner of Education, remarked:

I feel that the position (taken) in urging that the full four years be prescribed is wise.

Vice-President Marshall wrote:

Wherever in the future . . . students are to pursue a cultural education, I should be in favor of English, the best English all the time. If this works to the detriment of the student in college entrance requirements, as a trustee of my alma mater, Wabash College, I shall vote for a change in the necessary entrance qualifications. . . .

President A. T. Hadley of Yale said:

I believe in a four years' course in English. . . . The fact that the colleges only give three points' credit for English should not, I think, influence the conduct of the schools. . . . Most of the boys are not going to college; and those boys need the English more than they do the trigonometry or advanced algebra. . . . It is therefore a mistake to base school curricula too exclusively on college requirements. . . .

President N. M. Butler of Columbia University advised:

My judgment is that the high-school course should contain prescribed work in English through each of its four years. The high school should not be influenced in this matter by the fact that colleges allow only three points of credit for English. . . .

Professor E. R. Groves, Dean of New Hampshire College, said:

The attitude of the colleges in giving English only three points for entrance credit seems to me to be without defense.

Mr. F. F. Dryden, President of the Prudential Life Insurance Company, wrote:

Too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the importance of a thorough training in English. . . . Without regard . . . to the credit . . . which may be given to English in college entrance examinations, it would seem to be highly important to legislate in such a manner as to produce the greatest good to the greatest number.

May I say in conclusion that it is, in my view, an important duty of all English teachers to be missionaries in behalf of the necessity of the study of the mother-tongue by all students in all the years of all courses? It is also advisable that the College Entrance Examination Board, or its constituent elements, be persuaded to allow four points of credit for English in view of the influence exerted by its decision.