

## Leaping and Lurching into the 21st Century: A Review of Réal Fillion's *The Elective Mind* Fillion, R. (2021). *The elective mind: Philosophy and the undergraduate degree*

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Article abstract

Real Fillion asks what the place of electives, particularly philosophy, are in the contemporary Canadian university. In light of current priorities placed on career training and preparation, is there such a thing as learning for its own sake? This book review overviews Fillion's argument that the development of the elective mind is crucial to the both the individual and to society and must be maintained. The authors analyze gaps in his appraisal of the current situation according to developments in the university in the twentieth century and provides a recommendation for additional scholarship to complete his assessment.

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**Leaping and Lurching into the 21st Century: A Review of Réal  
Fillion's *The Elective Mind*  
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What purpose does the contemporary university serve in cultivating undergraduate students? Universities may have originated as a community of teachers and scholars seeking to learn together about the world, but they have become relentlessly driven by the expectation to “capacitate people to occupy the necessary positions in the workforces of today and tomorrow” (Mairal, 2022, p. 2). In recent years, this implacable tension has been expressed in the prescribed programs of specialization and lists of courses students are expected to complete to earn their admittance to career success. Fillion wonders whatever happened to universities as a place for individual self-formation and the ideals of citizenship as embodied in a truly liberal education.

Réal Fillion has taught philosophy for almost 30 years and is a well-respected professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sudbury. *The Elective Mind* captures his reflections on the purpose of teaching undergraduate philosophy in the contemporary university. He believes fervently that elective undergraduate philosophy courses are an essential counter-alternative to those required courses revolving around techniques and tools in a sprawling Canadian multi-versity.

In *The Elective Mind*, Fillion (2021) provides a historically phased view of the pertinence of elective philosophy courses within the undergraduate curriculum—of what it can mean in the current age to study for its own sake. The elective university classroom is crucial, Fillion believes, because electives are chosen out of personal interest and enthusiasm rather than being predetermined exclusively by disciplinary objectives. Electives engage the student’s mind directly and freely. The elective *system* counters the excessively specialized recipe favoured by the contemporary university featuring the commodification of its degrees and an overemphasis on training instead of educating.

Fillion’s (2021) thesis of the existence of an elective mind is evident in his central claim:

But, I will claim, if one does not privilege the self-identity of the contemporary university with its focus on specialization and its problematic claim to being a necessary passage to preferred employment within the broader economy (that sphere of activity where we are called on to make a living for ourselves), but rather focuses on the elective stream with one’s undergraduate studies, then one can find place to ask and ponder those more fundamental questions the more specialized inquiries presuppose. (p. 16)

The elective mind as conceived by Fillion stands in contrast to the specialized mind and is focused on aspects of study which include questioning, self-cultivation, and self-formation. The elective mind is best developed in classes with a philosophical mode of inquiry, Fillion argues, and which are chosen by the student outside of the prescribed requirements for a degree. Fillion draws on distinctions put forward by Raymond Williams (1980) between a dominant culture of commercialized research and/or marketable degrees and an alternative oppositional culture. The dominant culture itself is focused on the completion of the degree toward the pursuit of professionalization and economic reward. The elective stream is treated as alternative and oppositional to the dominant culture—in Fillion’s interpretation—as a place where free thinkers and *self-driven* individuals can escape the disciplinary demands of mandatory courses.

The significance of the university lies in its potential to integrate these distinct cultural perspectives of the dominant versus alternative discourses. The dominant culture represents the external economic imperative for university study and is contrasted with the alternative and oppositional culture built around internal self-examination and self-determination. Williams (2013) witnessed this cultural clash early in Cambridge education in the late 1930s: his isolation by students of privileged social classes drove him to seek the companionship of other, more accepting alternative groups. This formation of his identity based on this pre-war experience no doubt served as a footing for the very personal expression of dominant and alternative discourses.

Fillion’s conception of the elective mind is derived from his understanding of Williams’ (1980) description of the residual elements of “practices, meaning, and values” (p. 38) that are not typically part of the dominant culture. The development of the elective mind best occurs in the classroom which integrates the common interest and shared enthusiasm of the three elements of student, text, and professor. Fillion explores the meeting of students, texts, and professors by discussing the significance of each of these three elements through a European history of philosophy: the classroom and students through the life and death of Socrates, texts through the origins of the university in medieval scholasticism, and the professor in the Humboldtian reform of the university at the beginning of the 19th century in Berlin.

Socrates is the historical figure used to demonstrate the first of these elements of the self-examining student in the elective classroom. The Socratic classroom is founded on the dialectical model and questioning. Students are challenged to initially examine their beliefs to see which other beliefs these might be connected to and then only accept those beliefs that are agreeable with each other. The second element of the elective mind is the mediating role of text between students and the professor. The elective classroom is where the examined life developed through “proper understanding, interpretation, and ‘reconciliation’” (Fillion, 2021, p. 66) of text is developed with others. The residual significance of the mastery of text(s) in relation to one another is central to moral inquiry and examination of beliefs. Reconciling texts in this way provides authority for engagement with and even subversion of the discourses of the dominant culture. The third element is the professor’s engagement in the moral inquiry being conducted by the student. This “vocational commitment” (Fillion, 2021, p. 94) and the interest and enthusiasm of the professor are first seen in choosing and providing texts to shape interactions in the classroom. The professor in the elective classroom embodies the Humboldtian conception of the university as a place of both self-formation or *Bildung* and the totality of subject-matter knowledge or *Wissenschaft*.

Beyond these historical and cultural underpinnings of the contemporary university, a missing consideration is the student credit hour system which sits at the heart of both high school and postsecondary programs and academic *standards* in Canada (Shedd, 2003). Where Fillion’s work could be strengthened is not by ignoring the development of this system in the late 19th and 20th centuries altogether but by looking at how the elective system and student credit hours were introduced in Canadian and American universities (Denham, 2002; Harris, 2002).

In high school and university programs, required and elective courses revolve around the student credit system. The credit system in North American higher education can be traced to two developments in the late 19th century. The first was the break from the classical curriculum, beginning at Harvard in 1869 where a variety of courses were introduced, which gave the curriculum greater breadth and flexibility and provide an opportunity for individual choice (Elliott & Paton, 2018; Huntington, 2021). The second, and more Canadian development, was a move toward standardization of high school curricula through Ministries of Education and their improved articulation with college and university programs. In both, the massive expansion of public education played a significant role.

But such a change also marked the need for quantification of the educational process so student progress could be assessed and measured. The first units of measurement were the courses themselves. By 1877, the University of Michigan catalogue indicated that a student was required to complete either 24 or 26 full courses to be awarded a bachelor's degree, with a full course equalling five sessions per week per semester. Thus, the measurement of achievement across varied course offerings was based on a common time unit; the accumulation of the proper courses and time units was assumed to constitute a complete bachelor's level education. Related to the growth of the elective system was the spread of mass secondary education (Foster, 1905). Public opinion called for a wider variety of university courses that were general, practical, and professionally more appropriate to the diverse interests of high school graduates.

Such demands, as well as institutional desire to be more attractive to a broader public, led to the proliferation of courses and an increased need for quantitative measures of the educational process. By 1900, a well-defined structure of degrees, examinations, and course time units expressed in semester credit hour terms had developed. Concurrently, secondary American educators were pressed to develop national standards for high school programs. Such standards would lead to a *common currency*, which would facilitate the transition from high school to college.

The final refinement and firm entrenchment of the credit system came in 1901, by way of the Carnegie Fund for the Advancement of Teaching (Heffernan, 1973). To be eligible for the Fund's pension program for professors, colleges had to use admissions criteria acceptable to the guidelines of the Carnegie Board. (In turn, high schools had to adjust their curricula if their students were to attend fund-approved colleges.) The Carnegie Board defined a range of required pre-college subjects; achievement was measured in terms of credit for time spent in the classroom. What became known as the Carnegie Unit required five hourly periods per week per term; courses were evaluated in fractions of units, depending upon contact hours required in a subject area. By the early 20th century, our present notions of gauging both educational and administrative functions in terms of the credit system were widespread.

This was a pivotal moment for the student credit system and solidification of the North American education system for three reasons. First, it established—in practice if not reality—that an education was comprised of discrete educational units that could be collected, transferred, and, ultimately, redeemed. As one commentator derisively described it, one could now talk of “purchasing a diploma on the installment plan” (Harris, 2002, p. 4). Second, the upshot of this view of education was the new obligation it placed on high schools and, especially, colleges to be the recorders and preservers of records of student achievement. Because, as the same commentator observed, “Once a credit was earned, it was as safe as anything in the world. It would be deposited and indelibly recorded in the registrar's savings bank” (Harris, 2002, p. 4).

Second, the criteria used in all analyses of instructional programs were derived from the credit hour. The credit hour system provided a means of measuring professor output and the units of educational status taken on by the student. Credit system units are maintained in higher education because they are widely used, easily understood, and are considered meaningfully related to other measurements. Credits serve as the coin of the realm not only because they are all we have but also because they are commonly regarded as central to the activities of each participant in the educational *enterprise*. The credit system provides an up-to-date record of progress toward a degree, and a *map* of a student's entire educational experience (Hutt, 2016). Credit accumulation is now central to professional certification for teachers, doctors, and lawyers.

Third, the credit system permits educational flexibility: changes in majors, programs, and institutions are fostered through the transferability of credit units. The credit system serves as a proxy for professors' instructional workload. For example, a nine-credit hour *load* may involve three courses, or nine clock hours in class per week. Assuming a substantial function of the university professor is instruction, an accounting of course credit hour productivity provides an indicator of a professor's contribution to the instructional output of their department. These measures of instructional workload are also useful in determining compliance with and violation of collective agreements.

Yet, perhaps the most succinct critique of the system was voiced by an irascible Thorstein Veblen in 1918. He saw the “‘credits equal learning’ equation encouraging ‘genteel students whose need of an honorable discharge is greater than their love of knowledge’; ... ‘scholastic interests centering on unearned credits’ and the ‘sterilization of academic intellect’” (Veblen, 1918, as cited in Heffernan, 1973, p. 67). Veblen (1918, as cited in Heffernan, 1973) decried “the pervasive way in which the system of academic

grading and credit resistlessly bends more and more of current instruction to its mechanical tests and progressively sterilizes all personal initiative and ambition that comes within its sweep” (p. 67).

So, is there a verifiable undergraduate elective mind that can be characterized in either historical, cultural, or philosophical terms? Fillion (2021) relies on European philosophers like Socrates, Humboldt, Foucault, and Williams to characterize the system surrounding the individual. Yet to truly understand the elective system now in place in Canada and the United States, one must turn to North American thinkers such as Charles Elliott, Henry Pritchett, Andrew Carnegie, and Robert Falconer (Lang, 2022a, 2022b). Fillion has chosen instead to rely on European, rather than Canadian or American, history, upholding philosophical over administrative reality and avoiding important components of a liberal education such as languages and history, sociology and psychology, anthropology, and yes, economics.

In short, Fillion is overlooking a central feature in *The Elective Mind*. To provide a complete understanding of the elective system, he must include a chapter that describes the evolution of the student credit hour and the elective system in North American secondary and postsecondary education. Without this chapter on how required and optional courses came about in the late 19th and 20th centuries, his book leaps into the 21st century from the mid-1800s and ignores a basic, underlying administrative structure over the past century. T. S. Eliot (1965) proposed in the mid-20th century that education is in an age which prioritizes construction more than growth and that this is “a development which needs to be accepted” (p. 96). Fillion ought to offer a more thorough recognition of these foundational administrative realities to entirely portray the role of the elective system in the contemporary university setting.

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