

Charles William Eliot Biography

Charles William Eliot

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Biography

The American educator Charles William Eliot (1834-1926) was president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909 and transformed the college into a modern university.

Born in Boston on March 20, 1834, of a distinguished New England family, Charles W. Eliot graduated from Harvard in 1853. He taught mathematics and chemistry there (1854-1863). He toured Europe (1863-1865), studying chemistry and advanced methods of instruction, and returned to become a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1869, having attracted favorable attention by several articles on educational reform, he was chosen president of Harvard.

Eliot's 40-year tenure permitted him to press slowly but consistently for change. The effect of his innovations was revolutionary and thoroughly altered Harvard. He drew ideas from his European experience, and he later paid tribute to the stimulating effect of the innovations undertaken at Johns Hopkins University under Daniel Coit Gilman.

Eliot developed an organized 3-year program in the law school, using the case system of instruction based on studying actual court decisions rather than abstract principles. In the medical school he introduced laboratory work and written examinations in all subjects, and he gradually made available clinical instruction in Boston hospitals. In 1872 the university began to grant doctoral degrees, and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences was formally organized in 1890, taught by the same faculty that served the undergraduate college.

Eliot's best-known reform was the elective system. Undergraduates could choose from a wide variety of courses in each field rather than follow a prescribed curriculum. By offering many advanced courses to undergraduates, Eliot was able to employ in the college outstanding scholars who divided their time between undergraduate and graduate schools. Harvard became a leading center for graduate study and research and by the 1890s had earned an international reputation for academic excellence.

Always interested in secondary education, Eliot was active in the National Education Association (NEA), becoming president in 1903. He strongly influenced the 1892 report of the NEA "Committee of Ten" that led to the standardization of college preparation and admissions, and he helped found the College Entrance Examination Board in 1906. In 1910 he edited *The Harvard Classics*, a "five-foot shelf" of outstanding books through which those unable to attend college might acquire a liberal education. He retired in 1909 and died at Northeast Harbor, Maine, on Aug. 22, 1926.