

# ‘The Power of Tradition, The Imperative of Change’

*Throughout its 223-year history, Exeter has sought to balance these two forces in its academic curriculum. As the Academy prepares to conclude its latest curriculum review, history instructor Ron Kim examines when the curriculum has changed, and why.*

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HE CURRICULUM at Phillips Exeter Academy has changed dramatically since the school's founding in 1781. The first students spent the majority of their time studying Latin, Greek and arithmetic, with the remainder of their studies devoted to a variety of topics, ranging from ancient history to, in the words of Academy historian Frank Cunningham, “those sciences wherein they are commonly taught” to “English grammar, including exercises in parsing and analyzing, in the correction of bad English, Punctuation, and Prosody.”

Today relatively few students take Latin or Greek, and students have a far wider selection of courses. Even within the core curriculum, which mandates certain minimum requirements, there is much choice. How did we get from 1781 to 2004?

Throughout the history of the Academy, there have been subtle shifts in the curriculum.



A class meets in front of the Academy Building.

Over time instructors have changed their practices, altered their assignments, replaced older courses with new titles. This evolution has contributed to curricular change, but more commonly change was the result of less subtle, more overt shifts. Curricular changes over the past 223 years have been significant, but they have not come easily, and major alterations have more often been imposed from the outside rather than from within the institution.

## A CLASSICAL EDUCATION

For much of the first 100 years of this school's history, the curriculum changed little, if at all. A student who enrolled in 1870 and aspired to attend college was likely taking the same

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courses as a student in 1783: a lot of Latin, Greek and arithmetic, plus a smattering of other subjects. That is, unless the student had no intention of attending college. Today we think of Exeter as a college preparatory school, and thus it is surprising to discover that the most prominent curricular issue for the school in the early 19th century was the degree to which it provided either preparation for college or a terminal degree. According to a history of the Academy currently being prepared by the Winthrop Group, "In 1818, the trustees voted to divide the Academy's curriculum into two parts: the Classical Department for students heading to college, and an English Department for those finishing their formal education in Exeter." While the former "offered a course in Latin, Greek, mathematics, ancient history, and English grammar and composition," the latter covered a far wider range of subjects, many with more practical applications than the classical curriculum.

The opening of a free public school in Exeter in 1847 obviated the need for Phillips Exeter to continue offering its English program. This was a relief to many faculty and the trustees. While the English program provided the school with enrollment, it also attracted students who were much older than the college prep student, sometimes as old as 26. Few students bothered to complete the three-year course of study in the English program; and, as one trustee put it, the English department was full of "the idle and the stupid." The downside of the termination of the English program was that it reduced enrollment at the school to a perilously low figure of 69. According to historian James McLachlan, the author of *American Boarding Schools*, it was not unusual to see prep schools suffer a drop in enrollment when a town opened a free public school. In this case, the enrollment decline was somewhat self-inflicted.

It was mathematics professor Joseph Hoyt's job to arrest this decline. He responded, in 1854, by reforming the classical curriculum to meet college entrance examinations.

This was a logical decision for a few reasons. First, without the English program, all students were presumably attending Exeter in order to gain preparation for college. Second, the classical curriculum was not terribly well-organized. Students arrived at Exeter with various degrees of aptitude and then took courses until they were deemed fit for college. Hoyt organized the curriculum into junior, middle and senior years with students passing from one level to the next, having proven that they had shown progress in their abilities. Hoyt hoped that this would encourage colleges to view Exeter's

graduates more favorably, and in turn attract ambitious students to Exeter. Third, it was important to elevate the colleges' opinion of



The Second Academy Building (1794-1870)

For much of the first 100 years of Academy history, the curriculum changed little, if at all.



The Third Academy Building (1872-1914)

A student who enrolled in 1870 was likely taking the same courses as a student did in 1783: a lot of Latin, Greek and arithmetic.



The Fourth Academy Building (b. 1915)

The Civil War and its aftermath changed everything, including the meaning of education. The nation had industrialized rapidly over the

Exeter. In the first 50 years of Exeter's history, 1,991 students had enrolled at the school but less than one-quarter (474) eventually graduated from college. Many of these were students in the English program who never had any intention of attending college, but nonetheless one could question whether Phillips Exeter was a college preparation school.

Hoyt's efforts proved successful, and by 1860, Exeter's enrollment had grown to 161.

By 1873, close to a century after the first students enrolled at Exeter, the institution appeared to be secure. Its major curricular struggle had passed with the classical curriculum winning out. It had strengthened its reputation as a college preparatory school. And it had rebounded from its low enrollment and addressed the potential challenge posed by the town's public school. Neither the faculty nor the principal could foresee the challenges that lay ahead.

### AS HARVARD GOES . . .

One major change was driven by Charles Eliot, who had been appointed president of Harvard in 1869. One of his first acts as president was to alter the entrance requirements at Harvard "to include preparation in 'useful' subjects such as the sciences, history, and modern languages."

The changes at Harvard led to a reflexive response at Exeter. There was little choice in the matter: Exeter billed itself as a college prep school, and the college that it prepared students for was Harvard. If Harvard changed its admissions requirements, Exeter would have to change as well.

In an effort to offer more useful courses, the trustees asked Principal Albert Perkins to teach physics and botany, which he agreed to do, and classics professor Bradbury Cilley to teach French and German, which he refused to do.

That necessitated hiring a new faculty member, the first of several added in the ensuing decade, as the Academy also began offering courses in modern and physical geography, soon adding U.S. history and other subjects. The ripple effect of Eliot's decision was additional faculty and increased costs.

Eliot's goal in changing Harvard's entrance requirements was not to make life difficult for Exeter; rather it was a response to forces greater than any one institution.

course of the previous decade, demanding training and aptitude different from that expected just a few years before. The country had advanced permanently from the agricultural society originally envisioned by Thomas Jefferson to an interconnected, industrial system. The social and political challenges facing the country were also greater than at any time since the Revolution. Eliot's call for more "useful" education was a pragmatic and understandable response to changing times.

But however understandable, the pressures placed by Eliot on Exeter led to unpleasant results. The additional faculty led to a tuition increase of 25 percent at a time when free public schools were increasingly common. Faced with budgetary problems, the trustees in 1875 accepted a bequest from Woodbridge Odlin, class of 1817. Odlin wanted PEA to resurrect the English program it had eliminated over a quarter-century earlier. Odlin had asked this of PEA before, but this time he raised the size of his intended donation to the school to \$20,000, roughly \$350,000 in today's terms.

As the Winthrop history notes, "The money endowed a professorship, permitted hiring additional instructors to teach a growing variety of courses, and provided scholarships for as many as 10 students a year. Although the new English curriculum was more coherent than its earlier incarnation, it nonetheless altered the character of the school." The Academy, according to one historian, "was becoming, by the 1880s, a junior college. Its focus on the fundamental questions began to blur." It was not clear whom the Academy was supposed to serve, what it was supposed to teach or to what end. Would Phillips Exeter prepare students for college or would it be a substitute for college? Exeter's attempt to meet Harvard's entrance requirements initiated a series of events that created the greatest turmoil in Exeter's history.

### A TIME OF TURMOIL

The resurrection of the English program altered the composition of the student body and its behavior as well. The students attracted to the English department were often older, usually rowdier and certainly less fearful of the consequences of their actions. At stake for them was not a Harvard education but basic training that they could reasonably find at other institutions, including perhaps the local public school. Mischief, even riots were not unusual, police were frequently called in to control the students, and in general Phillips Exeter gained the reputation among locals as a school of undisciplined troublemakers. These students were often beyond the reach of the faculty. With the exception of Abbot Hall, boarding students resided in homes in the area where supervision was uneven, to say the least. Phillips Exeter had explicit expectations of boarding homes, but they were often ignored with little consequence. As a result, the school's students could misbehave beyond the reach of the

school, if they even cared about the school's reaction.

Charles Fish, who became principal in 1890, was fearful enough for his own safety that he carried brass knuckles. He convinced the trustees to once again consider abandoning the English program.

The trustees agreed to the review, knowing that its termination would come at a significant cost.

Once again, Harvard accelerated this process of curricular change. Principal Fish decided to take advantage of a new educational consulting service that Harvard's President Eliot had established. Called the Schools Examination Board, the service consisted of a committee of Harvard faculty who would visit secondary schools to review their policies and curricula.

In 1892, Fish arranged for the board to come to Exeter. Its verdict was quite critical. The board agreed that Exeter met its somewhat modest objective of furnishing "the elements of a solid education," but it criticized the school's tendency to do little more than meet college admissions requirements. This was "particularly true of the courses in English, history, and modern languages." These deficiencies were all the more distressing given that the board recognized Exeter as one of very foremost secondary schools in the country and thus an inspiration to other schools. Finally, Harvard's board also "re-

commended the use of an entrance examination to screen applicants and help ensure higher uniform quality in the student body." In practical terms, this last recommendation had the greatest immediate impact, for it meant the end of the English program and the bequest that came with it. Between 1890 and 1894, the enrollment at Phillips Exeter dropped from 355 to as low as 123.

Around the same time that Exeter was facing its grave difficulties, a number of private academies in neighboring Massachusetts had become public high schools. There was no guarantee that Phillips Exeter would not experience the same fate. It was

Harlan Page Amen, who succeeded Fish as principal in 1895, who began to pull PEA out of its descent. Amen was concerned that too many subjects were taught to too many students by too few teachers. Amen sought to increase the size of the faculty and to pay them more. All this required money, and thus Amen insisted on raising tuition by almost 25 percent from \$81 a year to \$100.

Amen also articulated guiding principles for the Academy's future. First, the school was intended for boys and not young men. Amen complained that the school would have difficulty offering uniform instruction when the ages of the boys ranged from 12 to 30. Academy historian Myron Williams, author of *The Story of Phillips Exeter*, described one extreme case, in which a 28-year-old man with a wife and two children attended and graduated from the Academy. The new principal also emphasized that industriousness would characterize an Exeter student and his experience.

## It was Principal Harlan Page Amen who articulated the Exonian virtue of industry.



Principal Amen (bottom row, center) and the faculty of 1899.

Exeter, he wrote, "insists first of all on honest labor. The day's work must be done." For the idle, Amen warned, "*Disce aut discede*"—"learn or depart."

Amen wrote, "In theory, at least, the boy who presents himself at the door of this venerable school still desires to educate himself, is ready to labor to that end, will accept unquestionably the learning that is imposed on him, and will be sufficiently guided by a learned and resolute preceptor. The Phillips Exeter Academy insists first of all on honest labor. The day's work must be done." For the idle, Amen warned, "*Disce aut discede*"—that is, "learn or depart." Amen did not change so much what students learned, but rather who would learn and how they should go about learning—that is, through very hard work.

By the 1920s, the curriculum at Phillips Exeter had not changed much in a quarter-century, the last time that Harvard had forced Exeter's hand. Like other boarding schools in New England, Exeter taught a traditional curriculum of ancient languages and math combined with modern subjects like English and history. "The four-year Exeter student was required to take four years of English, three of math, two of Latin, two of a modern language, a third year of either Latin or a modern language, and one year of history (mostly ancient). In his upper and senior years, he had the choice of four electives in advanced English, advanced math, advanced language, additional history, or science." This heavily humanistic program was the curriculum that paved the way for boarding school students to attend Harvard, Yale and other top schools.

But while the curriculum was successful in enabling students to get to college, its shortcomings were, according to the Winthrop history, evident to some students. "D.O. Stewart, a graduate of the class of 1921, observed: 'The main criticism, however, that one might make of our classroom education was that most of it never had a real connection with the world we lived in. Ancient History, Latin, Greek, French, German, Physics, Chemistry—these were mainly 'to discipline our minds' and to pass the dreaded College Board exams. And probably, for our age group, this was the best that could be demanded of the faculty. We had entered as boys. Now that we were men, it was up to the colleges to direct these well-trained minds into their real understanding of the world about them.'

Stewart's comments about the relationship between secondary education and college are revealing. There was a reassuring sequence from one to the next. Secondary schools drilled the requisite facts from the required courses into the students so that they could pass the College Board exams and enroll at a prestigious university. Colleges in turn could feel assured that they were accepting well-trained, high-achieving students. And both the secondary school and the college could take it on faith that students were developing a "real understanding of the world about them." Yet Exeter could not rest easily upon these assumptions for very much longer.



The faculty in 1947.

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Exeter billed itself as a college prep school, and the college that it prepared students for was Harvard.

## THE HARKNESS REVOLUTION

For 150 years, Exeter basically altered its curriculum only when a university, especially Harvard, changed its own curriculum or admissions requirements. Edward Harkness' 1930 gift to the school of \$5.8 million would change this pattern considerably.

Before Harkness' donation, instruction was traditional, with students absorbing the required knowledge from their learned professor. With student-to-faculty ratios hovering around 39:1, there was not much room for individual instruction or discussion. After Harkness' gift, the faculty-to-student ratios were slashed to roughly 10:1, and there was now much more room for give and take, discussion and inquiry. With this change, traditional instruction and progressive ideas clashed and a host of pedagogical issues came to the surface. Principal Lewis Perry had hoped that Harkness' gift would make Exeter a "center for experimentation." Typical of experiments, the results were not always predictable nor the results easily embraced.

At the center of the Harkness-era debates, according to the Winthrop study, were three issues: skills or content; core requirements versus electives; and breadth versus depth. These issues were difficult enough for the school, but the Harkness bequest created problems within the faculty. In order to lower the faculty-to-student ratio, Phillips Exeter hired many new teachers.

Quickly, Exeter's faculty was divided between longtime instructors steeped in Exeter traditions and new instructors with fewer assumptions about the way Exeter had to be. These new hires were also not impressionable young teachers who were inclined to follow the lead of more established colleagues. Many of the new instructors came from leading universities, attracted by Phillips Exeter's willingness to pay handsome

salaries at a time when Depression-era budgets were leading to salary cuts everywhere else. A combination of the new approach to teaching (or what we might call the Harkness system) and new teachers with new ideas led to animated discussions about the basic issues of secondary education at Exeter.

One practical issue that emerged from the debates about pedagogy was the place of the two-year Latin requirement. The Harkness system had stimulated student interest in a variety of subjects, especially those that seemed more relevant and practical. Those who favored the traditional curriculum defended the Latin requirement, and succeeded in maintaining it despite vigorous efforts to eliminate it. A few years earlier, Andover had dropped its Latin requirement in favor of history and science requirements. And ominously enough for traditionalists, Harvard President (and scientist) James Conant decided in 1933 to eliminate most of Harvard's language requirements. For the

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moment, the traditionalists won out at Exeter, offering a compromise that allowed a small number of students to gain a release from Latin so that they could take a two-year physics and chemistry course.

But the days were clearly numbered for the traditionalists. Change was afoot at Andover and Harvard, the composition and attitude of the faculty were changing, and the times were changing too. The United States was mired in a wrenching economic downturn, and the threat of fascism and war became more real as the decade progressed. It was difficult to be complacent or feel satisfied with old assumptions, and this was true of education too. As the Winthrop history points out, the proponents of traditional education had to respond to difficult questions from those who wondered whether learning Latin and Greek was useful. Didn't schools have an obligation to teach students to be useful to society? And if so, what was useful about Exeter's curriculum?

Though perhaps futile, resistance continued. Older, more established instructors were not eager to alter traditional courses in favor of popular trends. Conservatives and reformers alike could point to Harlan Page Amen's comments about the curriculum around the turn of the century. Amen tried to find a compromise between conservatives and progressives, acknowledging the power of tradition and the imperative of change. "We are doing our utmost to keep alive in the school the best of the

things which made the Academy's reputation in the past," he stated, "and yet to lay hold of anything that is really good in more modern methods of instruction and discipline. The earnestness and independence which have always characterized the Academy are precious relics of the past, and we shall maintain them at any cost...." The history of the Academy seemed to favor neither side.

Internal change was also difficult since the school had little experience with major, self-imposed curricular change. Previously, significant changes had almost always been dictated by changes at Harvard, and this in fact made change easier to accept—the faculty essentially had little choice but to meet Harvard's demands. In this case, while Harvard had become somewhat more progressive, it had not expressed a mandate for curricular change by Exeter. Change would have to be negotiated by members of the faculty and discussion about change would no doubt create friction between instructors, continue to spark discussion about fundamental issues, and ultimately create winners and losers.

## THE MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

World War II delayed any major curricular changes, but even during the war the momentum for change built once more. In 1942, the first of a five-volume report from the Eight-Year Study made recommendations that challenged many of Exeter's assumptions about high school education. The study, undertaken by the Progressive Education Association's Commission on the Relation of School and College, concluded that students who had been educated in schools without regard for college entrance requirements did just as well in college as those who had been

prepared for college in traditional schools. Departures from typical subjects during high school did not lessen readiness for college. In fact, according to *The American Curriculum: A Documentary History*, those students who had attended schools with the most revisionist curriculum achieved "distinctly higher standing" than their traditional counterparts.

In other words, preparation for college did not depend upon students taking certain specific courses at Exeter, or anywhere else. Given that Exeter was a college prep school, this was unsettling. That same year, the College Entrance Examination Board decided to offer examinations in more subjects, which meant that students could take less traditional courses and still strengthen their college credentials. Rising enrollment at PEA in electives like history and science substantiated the popularity of greater curricular choice.

Then, in the fall of 1945, a committee of Harvard faculty published a study entitled *General Education in a Free Society*. Nicknamed the "Redbook," the study devoted three-quarters of its attention to secondary school education. Like the Eight Year Study, the Redbook questioned specialization and called for a broader liberal arts education "built around English, the humanities, science, mathematics, and social studies."

For many Exeter faculty the two reports were reassuring. Exeter had been offering more electives, the students were taking them in greater number and the skills that students were learning through the Harkness table seemed to coincide with the kinds of skills that educators were demanding. As Mathematics department chair Philip E. Hulburd noted, "With the publication of the Harvard Report on General Education, in 1945... we found that we

## Recommended Reading

**For readers interested in learning more about the history of curricular change at Exeter in particular and at boarding schools in general, Ron Kim recommends the following books and materials:**

- The Academy's Deed of Gift, excerpts of which can be found at [http://library.exeter.edu/dept/Archives/deed\\_of\\_gift.html](http://library.exeter.edu/dept/Archives/deed_of_gift.html)
  - Background material on Edward Harkness and the Harkness system, which can be found at [http://www.exeter.edu/pages/aca\\_harknesstable.html](http://www.exeter.edu/pages/aca_harknesstable.html)
  - Myron R. Williams, *The Story of Phillips Exeter*. (Exeter: Phillips Exeter Academy, 1957)
  - William G. Saltonstall, *Lewis Perry of Exeter*. (New York: Atheneum, 1980)
  - Frank H. Cunningham, *Familiar Sketches of The Phillips Exeter Academy and Surroundings*. (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1883)
  - James MacLachlan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Study*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970)
  - Theodore R.Sizer, *The Age of the Academies*. (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964)
  - E. Arthur Gilcreast, "A New Curriculum at Exeter, Question Mark." (The Exeter Bulletin, Winter 1985)
- The Winthrop Group, a Cambridge, MA, historical consulting firm, is currently at work on a comprehensive new history of the Academy.

were already a good way along the right path, since our program seemed to include most of the recommendations made. However, the Harvard study was suggesting something Exeter was not doing—offering a balanced curriculum that included science and history but not Latin."

In 1945 Exeter created the Academy Committee on Educational Aims and Practices. The committee noted that with course requirements "heavy on the linguistic side," it was difficult for students to complete sequences in history or sciences, both of which were increasingly popular in the school and among colleges. There was even less time for students to take courses in the arts.

After several months, the committee agreed on a few requirements: four years of English, three of mathematics, three years of one foreign language, a year of American history and six additional major courses. The committee

believed that by cutting down the linguistic requirement from two languages to one, students would have the opportunity to undertake sustained study in major courses such as history or science, or in "minor" courses like art or music.

In late October 1946, the committee presented its plan to the faculty. The greatest debate centered around Latin. Would the two-year Latin requirement remain? Advocates of a more progressive curriculum argued that it should not. Traditionalists differed, arguing that it must stay, and they proposed an amendment to that effect. By a vote of 53–29, the amendment failed. Latin was now an elective, and the revamped curriculum was put in place by a vote of 62–18. To support Exeter's curricular change, Principal William Saltonstall offered the reminder that "the action of our faculty happens to coincide with the decision on the part of the Harvard faculty to

do away with the requirement of Latin for the A.B. degree.”

A much more subtle shift than the termination of the Latin requirement was the gradual improvement of grades over the course of Harkness-era education. In evaluating the effect of small classes on teaching and learning, Myron Williams noted that the school had recorded improvement in the use of the library, in the reduction of disciplinary issues, in the intellectual maturity of the students and in their grades. Williams was careful not to conclude that the Harkness plan alone was responsible for these improvements, but he suggested that such progress was not entirely coincidental.

Almost two decades after its inception, Harkness instruction had moved beyond the experimental stage and was more of an accepted norm of education at Exeter. Thus, by the mid-20th century, education at Exeter was no longer rooted in a Latin requirement, but it did revolve around the evolving principles of Harkness teaching and learning. Exeter had entered its modern era.

### BREADTH VS. DEPTH

With the elimination of the Latin requirement, students could now take more courses in different fields of study, and this was in fact one of the principal arguments in favor of curricular change. Only two years removed from the end of World War II, one could imagine great demand for courses in history or in science. Or one could foresee, as Williams suggested, boys pursuing “an opportunity to investigate art or music, [or] to study the Bible,” as a later report stated.

But in reality many students chose not to take an additional course at all. In 1953 the Exeter Study Committee

reported to the principal that 65 percent of three- and four-year seniors took the minimum load of four major courses or 16 hours of classes per week and opted not to take an additional offering. In fact, only about 25 percent of three- or four-year seniors ever

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took a course in art or music and only about 5 percent of these boys took a religion course. This must have been especially disappointing since the Academy had constructed the Lamont Art Gallery and new studios in 1953, just in time to accommodate very few students. The Exeter Study Committee noted that “it is often the three- or four-year senior who looks forward most eagerly to an easy year. It is also he who has had the greatest opportunity to develop competent study habits; it is often he, therefore, who has the greatest amount of technical proficiency. Yet from him is required the least classwork of any group of students within

the school.”

Although the Study Committee presented its worrisome findings in 1953, it took the faculty another nine years to alter diploma requirements. *The Exeter Bulletin* in 1962 offered the understated pronouncement that “the rate of change in the traditional curriculum at the Academy has been relatively slow.” To be fair, though, the introduction of Advanced Placement offerings in 1954 led some instructors to believe that they “induced seniors to keep working,” but by the early 1960s, concluded history instructor Henry Bragdon, the weight of faculty opinion was that they were not working very much.

The deliberate pace of change did not smooth tensions between those who advocated and those who resisted alterations in the curriculum. The faculty voted first to increase the seniors’ schedule to include a fifth course per term; then, according to Williams, it voted narrowly to “require a boy spending three or four years in the Academy to take a major or minor course in art, music, or religion sometime during his career, unless as a senior he takes five major courses.” One student complained that “there’s so much homework already that there’s no time to learn,” but another supported the change, arguing that “the present generation of Exonians have become lazy barbarians.” The alteration of requirements in 1962 essentially completed the 1947 curriculum revision.

The discussions in the early 1960s also anticipated the struggles that would appear in future discussions about curriculum. The faculty wrestled with the issue of breadth and depth, and decided to mandate greater breadth. It made this

change primarily because of dissatisfaction with the curricular choices of its best-trained seniors, those who had been at the Academy the longest and who thus could have done more, but chose to do less—a phenomenon then called “senior punt.” Concerns about the senior year today are thus clearly not new. Also anticipatory was a proposal offered by two Academy instructors, Henry Bedford and C. Arthur Compton, who advanced a “Supplementary Study” as an option for seniors. Uppers could “apply to a department for permission to carry out extended work as seniors in a subject field which may cut across departmental lines.” This course would count as the seniors’ fifth course and could be a substitute for an offering in art, music or religion. The focus of Supplementary Study was on broadening learning opportunities for seniors, including the possibility of interdisciplinary studies.

A similar idea to Supplementary Study appeared again in the report of the Academy Planning Committee, which was formed in the summer of 1964. Given the rather broad charge of “evaluating the past and present and planning the future of The Phillips Exeter Academy,” the APC, as it was called, offered various recommendations, including the creation of the Quarter Off Program, which would give rising seniors an opportunity to pursue a social service project off-campus, and a Student Service Program for all students. The Report of the Visiting Committee in 1965 applauded these two recommendations from the APC not just for their altruistic benefits but more for their potential educational value. After acknowledging that instruc-

tion at the Academy was generally excellent, the report stated that “the administration might well study methods by which its goal of education for service could be made more apparent and meaningful to the boys. It struck us that perhaps Exeter’s dedication to excellence might seem to some to exist in vacuo, that it was not necessarily clear just what all this excellence is for.”

The ideas for Supplementary Study and the Quarter Off Program converged in the form of an independent senior study program. By the end of the 1960s, up to 92 students enrolled in a wide range of independent senior study programs, sometimes taking them off-campus for extended periods of time. These projects came with much institutional support, but ironically the rising interest in independent senior study programs also reflected doubts about traditional educational institutions and practices. The political and social upheavals of the 1960s led to questions about traditional assumptions, including those that supported Exeter’s curriculum.

Not only were students questioning traditional curricula, but so too were leaders of independent schools. The Four School Study Report proposed a radical realignment of secondary school education. It suggested that the proper role of schools like Phillips Exeter might be in the form of a junior college, bridging the gap between the typical secondary school experience and college. The visiting committee in 1965 also pondered the possibility that Exeter could become a junior college, noting that the Academy was in many ways already like a college. The last time Exeter looked like a junior college was in the 1880s. It was not a compliment then,

and it was a dubious characterization in the early 1970s. It implied that however well Exeter was doing, and by most accounts it was doing well, it was time to re-evaluate its educational mission.

## GAZING INTO THE FUTURE

To help create some direction in a disorienting period, Principal Richard Day appointed a Long Range Planning Committee in May 1970 to look at forces shaping education over the next 30 years. It was an ambitious task, and the committee ultimately offered surprisingly prescient observations about the future. It predicted significant technological, economic and social changes, as well as challenges that could not yet be foreseen. Given this framework, the committee “noted that Exeter needed to continue providing a broad humanistic education that emphasized not only the acquisition of information but also the ability to obtain, assess, and use information in an imaginative way. It believed that skills were every bit as important as content and should receive proper emphasis in the curriculum.”

The Long Range Planning Committee helped guide the subsequently appointed Curriculum Committee, which was not initially inclined to radically revise the curriculum from its existing form. In fact one of the central issues was whether Exeter had to change at all. The committee reported general satisfaction from students, alumni, and faculty with the curriculum. A survey of 30 directors of college admissions indicated that they had “confidence in whatever program the Exeter faculty might choose to establish.” The committee asked, “Why do anything dif-

ferent from what we are doing right now, especially when we are apparently doing it well?” The committee initially felt that its task of curricular revision would be “easy.”

However, upon closer examination, the committee realized that the job might not be so easy after all. It observed that the curriculum had changed little over the previous 40 years, but it acknowledged that “the world for which we are preparing our students is not at all the world of the thirties and forties. Perhaps a curriculum ought to reflect something of the

The 1985 curriculum review was unusual in that it reached back to the founding charter in its concern not only for knowledge, but also for goodness, stating that “we at Exeter must emphasize not merely what we want students to know, but also what sorts of individuals we want them to become.”

changing needs of a changed society and student body.” Furthermore, when the committee began to ask some hard and familiar questions—about the balance between breadth and depth—it found the answers difficult as well. Other questions were, perhaps, more profound: “What are our present curricular requirements

preparing our students for, and how?” “Should we be primarily concerned with an education that is largely a learned body of information, or with the less easily defined goal of educability?”

Still other questions expanded the scope of curricular considerations. The committee discussed learning disabilities and asked whether diploma requirements might be more flexible in an effort to accommodate different needs. The committee also believed that the connection between the classroom and learning on the playing fields and in the dormitory, or what it termed “the indivisible curriculum,” was unclear. The committee members also asked if Exeter could preserve excellence “and yet give [students] a little more joy and a little less fatigue in the educational process, so that they do not arrive at college already burned out?” Ultimately, the committee recommended that “course requirements would become the tool to ensure that every student would acquire skills and content and, at the same time, follow a program with both breadth and depth.” They would have basic requirements and then acquire depth by doing advanced work in at least two fields of their choice. Also introduced were two interdisciplinary programs devoted to skills at lower levels. The committee also recommended a semester system.

The 1985 curriculum review not only built upon the 1973 review, but also reached farther back as well. During the 1970s and 1980s, numerous studies suggested that educational standards in America had declined precipitously to the point that we were “a nation at risk,” as one presidential report put it. The curriculum com-

mittee noted that “the intensity of the current attention is remarkable, provoked by such changes as technological growth, environmental decay, cultural conflict, and international hostilities.” While curricular change at Exeter could have been driven by these external influences, the 1985 review was driven instead by what the chair, history instructor Art Gilcreast, termed our “most fundamental Harkness traditions.”

### CHANGE FROM WITHIN

By reaching back to Harkness principles, the 1985 review acknowledged that many of the pedagogical challenges posed by the Harkness system had not yet been resolved and that one of the great contributions of the review would be to find some resolution. First, as Gilcreast noted, it “aimed its proposals at the average Exeter students of today.” As Harkness put it in 1930, “I have in mind a method where the average, or below-average boy, would feel encouraged to speak up, present his difficulties, and the teacher would know... what his difficulties were.” The committee thus recommended sectioning students by ability in math, science and language. While some faculty members feared that academic excellence might be sacrificed by sectioning and that standards would be eroded, the committee nonetheless was driven by a need to meet its perceptions of Edward Harkness’ original intentions.

Second, among the issues created by the Harkness system was an increased interest in broader fields of study, reviving once more the tension between breadth versus depth. The 1947 review addressed this tension to some extent by removing the two-year Latin

requirement, and thus allowing for greater course choice. The 1985 review went even further, determining that it was essential for well-educated Exeter students to emphasize breadth in their academic careers. As the review committee put it, “it mandates liberal education, which we stand behind because it results in the awakening of the inner resources and creativity of the individual. And this broad preparation also gives our students the freedom later on to choose directions in higher education that cannot yet be anticipated.”

Roughly 15 to 20 years earlier, it was possible to imagine Phillips Exeter in the form of a junior college. The 1985 report offered the contrary reminder that Exeter was in fact still a secondary school whose goal was still to provide a broad, liberal, nonspecialized education to adolescents. It was perhaps reassuring that most other top high schools were emphasizing a broad education and that Harvard, too, had recently proposed curricular reforms of its own that mandated similar changes to its diploma requirements. Nonetheless, the origin of these changes at Exeter were internal, stretching back decades to the Harkness gift.

The 1985 review was also unusual in that it reached back to the founding charter of Phillips Exeter Academy. While the faculty of today is routinely familiar with the phrase “goodness and knowledge,” it was used far less frequently than one might imagine. The concern for goodness certainly had not driven past curricular changes, and the 1985 review is rather unique in its mentioning of it. In one notable passage the 1985 review states, “We at Exeter must emphasize not merely what we want students

to know, but also what sorts of individuals we want them to become. We must seek to graduate young people whose passion for learning exceeds what they already know, whose interest in others and the world around them surpasses their self-concern, whose creativity and independence of thought sustains their continuing inquiry and reflection, whose quality of mind, in short, surpasses their education.” It went on to state that “such an emphasis on goodness in education, so clearly coupled in Exeter’s tradition with an emphasis on knowledge, becomes increasingly difficult to ensure in an age of such diversity and change. Yet it remains a prime responsibility and goal of an Exeter education.” The chief means to reach these lofty ends was rooted in the curricular changes themselves, namely in the broadening of humanities offerings and requirements. While the committee acknowledged that the study of humanities could not make students moral, it would lead students to ask “what it means to be moral.”

The 1985 curriculum has been adapted and reshaped, and it has evolved over the past two decades. The strength of some of its proposals has eroded, while others have become so rooted that they are synonymous with an Exeter education. What is perhaps most impressive about the last review is its sweep. It examined curricular issues like breadth versus depth, gaps in the prep year, and the problems of the senior year; it addressed the developmental needs of individual students in different disciplines; it asked about moral implications and the teaching of “goodness”; it recognized the challenges of a changing world; and it affirmed the strengths while acknowledging the weaknesses of the

students’ Exeter experience. All who are now engaged in this curriculum review certainly owe much to the review of two decades ago.

### EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION

Surveying the history of curricular change at Phillips Exeter, a number of salient points emerge:

- Exeter has been slow to respond to external pressures but it has done so eventually, usually through a process of evolution rather than revolution.

- The two words that best describe curricular change in Exeter’s history are Harvard and Harkness. Historically, Harvard forced Exeter to change (this is what education writer and theorist Alfie Kohn would call “Preparation H”) and Harkness has constantly asked Exeter to consider change.

- The core issues about the curriculum today do not differ significantly from Harkness-inspired debates that began in the 1930s.

- There has traditionally been very little specific discussion about goodness in the curriculum.

- As old as Exeter is, self-initiated curricular reviews are quite new and experimental. The Exeter faculty undertook curricular reviews in 1947, 1973 and 1985. The 1947 review was really about bringing Exeter’s education into the 20th century. The 1973 and 1985 reviews are our only modern curriculum reviews, and thus there are few road maps.

A balance between the power of tradition and the imperative of change continues to guide the faculty in its current review of the curriculum. A vote on any proposed changes to the curriculum will be held this spring, with implementation of the next curriculum scheduled for the fall of 2005. ●