SCIENCE

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CONTENTS

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THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

THE only qualification I have for discussing the college presidency is the extraordinary opportunity I have had for studying colleges at first hand. During the past three years I have visited one hundred and five of the institutions listed in the reports of the United States Commissioner of Education as universities and colleges. These one hundred and five institutions are in twenty-nine states.

The main object of my travels has been to learn what I could about higher education in the United States; and, for various reasons, I have learned much from the inside. I have been a guest of the household. Trustees and faculty, students and citizens, have appeared glad to find a member of their profession, from afar, upon whom they could unburden themselves with fair assurance that the confidence would not be violated. I trust that I can be sufficiently concrete in discussing the college presidency without proving myself an ungracious guest.

Of the one hundred and five colleges and universities that I have visited I have become sufficiently acquainted with possibly fifty-one to form judgments concerning the success of their presidents in meeting the expectations of those whom they served. In other words, I believe that, in fifty-one cases, I have uncovered the sentiment of teachers, students and graduates with respect to their presidents. In the other cases, I have not collected adequate evidence for a valid generalization; either the testimony has been meager, or, though abundant, it has not pointed unmistakably in one direction. In these cases the presi-

dents may or may not be satisfactory to their constituents. I do not know.

Of the fifty-one presidents, thirty-four appear to be unsatisfactory. I mean that a majority of the faculty, students and alumni of thirty-four institutions *appear* to be in favor of a new president. In other words, if my observations are correct, two college presidents out of three are regarded as failures. If there is any error here due to the selection of institutions, it tends to make the proportion of failures too small, inasmuch as I purposely sought instances of satisfactory administration, colleges generally regarded as successful, those most likely to be attractive to men of power. Furthermore, had I taken a period of years, instead of one year, the proportion of failures would have been larger, since only those presidents who have survived are included in these figures. For example, one of the institutions, now in the successful list, had disposed of three unsatisfactory presidents in ten years.

On the other hand, it may be true that a man engaged in finding teachers for a new college was more likely to meet the disgruntled than the contented members of faculties. And it goes without saying that my judgment may have been false, even where the sentiment appeared to be almost unanimously in favor of or opposed to the retention of the president. It was not always so easy to get at the facts as it was in one college where the entire faculty, with one exception, had just petitioned the trustees for a new president. I dare say that certain complaining faculties, if sobered with the responsibility of an actual vote, would bear with their presidential troubles rather than fly to ills they knew not of.

Nevertheless, after these attempts to safeguard my conclusion against error, I am satisfied that a majority of college and university presidents in the United States have failed, on the whole, to perform, to the satisfaction of those most intimately concerned, the various duties now assigned to that office. If I were to class as failures those who had proved unequal to one or more of the obligations usually attached to the office, there would remain in the successful group scarcely a score. And who knows what reduction would appear in this small list if it were submitted for approval to a representative group of university leaders—let us say, to the American Association for the Advancement of Science?

With the chances of entire success in the college presidency two to one against the incumbent, it is a bold college professor who *seeks* the office. Possibly he has no adequate conception of the obligations involved.

What are those obligations? What do we expect of the American college president? From my observations, I am inclined to sum it up by saying that he must be all things to all men at all times and under all circumstances.

First of all he must be a scholar; he must have achieved distinction in a particular field, and he must continue to advance knowledge in that field. Otherwise he is not regarded as a respectable head for a so-called institution of higher learning, and comes to be regarded with contempt by certain scholars of the faculty. This means that he must have spent most of his life, before election to the presidency, in preparation for something other than the presidency; and, after election, he must spend much of his time, no matter how urgent his other duties may be, in work that has little to do with administration.

A second obligation is that of teaching.

It is urged with reason that the college president should be a good teacher and should continue to teach, in order that he may keep in close touch with the students and with the teaching problems of his faculty. The American college has been widely condemned in recent years because many of its classes have been entrusted to young persons who did not know how to teach and to scholars who did not care to teach. It is said that the college has neglected its function of teaching partly because the president and the classroom have been divorced.

It is said, with equal reason, that the college president should supervise the teaching. Expert supervision is regarded as absolutely necessary in every other branch of education, even though the means for training teachers, and the professional requirements of teachers, for all schools below the college are so much better than formerly. Yet the group which has the least preparation for teaching is the very group that teaches with the least supervision. At many a college, the president never appears in the classroom. If he is to be held responsible for the college as a teaching institution, and for the retention and promotion of men partly because of teaching ability, it is reasonable to expect him to supervise the teaching, until that duty is definitely assigned to another person. Supervision is, therefore, regarded by many persons as a third among the president's obligations.

A fourth duty of the president is business management. The increasing complexity of college affairs; the larger and more elaborate budgets; the development of new departments; the promotion of profitable relations with other institutions; the growth of the material equipment—buildings, laboratories, gardens, farms, museums, hospitals, dormitories, dining-halls, experiment stations, libraries, playgrounds;—all thrust upon the college executive obligations similar to those that exact the entire time and strength of the head of a commercial enterprise. If the business organization of the institution is to bring about and maintain the maximum economy and achievement, it demands the constant care of a man whose services in the open market are rewarded with several times the usual college president's salary. I know a man who was recently offered the presidency of a university at a salary of ten thousand dollars. He chose to retain his professorship at less than half that salary. He told me that if he were to give up his opportunities to study and write and teach in favor of a business career, he would accept—not the university presidency—but a previous offer to manage a commercial house at a much larger salary. As a matter of fact college presidents do delegate business matters to other officers; but, in nearly all instances, the ultimate responsibility, apart from the investment of funds, rests upon the president of a college, as it does upon the president of a railroad, or a bank, or a department store.

A fifth duty of the president—the raising of funds—is akin to the last; it is business, but a highly specialized form of business. It has no counterpart among the obligations that fall upon the head of an ordinary commercial establishment. No matter how well-endowed the institution may be, or how liberally supported by public taxation, the president is expected to increase its resources. Each alumnus applauds the effort—until the president reaches *him*. I have heard many of the faculty and graduates of a certain college flatly condemn their president—certainly among the ablest dozen college presidents in America—because they thought he had failed in this one part of his job, though

they admitted his notable success in every other part. In a few places, as at Oberlin, the increasing of the endowment has been made the business of a special officer; but in nearly all institutions the success of the president is measured to a considerable extent by his results in this specialized form of begging. If the institution is dependent on the periodic whims of legislatures, certain qualities are needed—those that make the expert lobbyist. If the institution is private, other qualities are needed. In either case, the man who is equal to the task could receive large rewards for his work in the domain of commerce—and be judged by his success in this one thing instead of a dozen.

But this is not all. The social obligations of the office—a sixth group of duties—are real and heavy, and they are becoming more exacting every year. Several men who a decade or two ago were regarded as admirable for the presidency of a certain university are now considered impossible because they *or their wives* are not socially notable, or because they have insufficient income for the extensive entertaining that now seems inseparable from the position. A man might be elected president of a railroad because of what he himself could do. Not so with the college president. He *and* his wife are elected. Some men disqualify themselves early in life by falling in love with a woman who could never become the social servant of a university.

It is part of the president's social duty to keep in close touch with the students, in order that he may contribute to their social education, and incidentally find out what is going on in the institution, to the end that he may wisely administer student affairs. The social duties also pertain to relations with alumni, for the president must seek opportunities of educating them, in order that they may help instead of hinder the progress of the university. The president is regarded by visitors from abroad as a social figure head, a public host, on duty the year round. But most important of all in the eyes of the trustees are the social obligations resplendent with the possibilities of influencing benefactors. There is no club or committee, no dinner or dance, no tea or reception, no convention or fair, no rally or round-up without its possibilities. The president and his wife could easily spend all their time and energy, and many times their salary, in social functions at their home and abroad, related in definite and promising ways to the satisfaction of the growing needs of the institution. Whatever one may think of all this as a concern of higher education, the social obligations of the president and his wife are real and heavy, and to a large extent, unavoidable.

In the seventh place, the president is called upon for every known form of public speaking. The idea prevails that he should be ready to speak at any time, on any subject, to any audience, anywhere; and some men apparently try to live up to the idea. He is expected to deliver eulogies over the bodies of prominent citizens and to make men merry with his after-dinner speeches; he is asked to address the chamber of commerce and the Browning Club; he is urged to harangue political mass meetings and to read poems at the dedication of Carnegie libraries; there are traditional obligations to preach sermons and conduct funerals; there are always the demands of teachers' conventions and alumni meetings, of women's clubs and legislative hearings, and others without number. What the next one may be he can not predict. Much of the proposed speaking he can avoid, but there is much that goes with the office. A man who could not speak in public might attain eminence as a physician, engineer, mer-

chant, architect, banker, scientist or playwright; a college president is sure to fail in much that is expected of him unless he is a public speaker of considerable power.

One of the essential qualifications of the college president I have left until the last; it is possibly the rarest and most important of all. He must get on with men and women, and somehow keep them working harmoniously and enthusiastically for the really important things in the life of the institution. He must needs be a spiritual force.

This power of leadership is made up of many elements. The first and last is patience. Another is a catholic interest and sympathy that enables him quickly to get the viewpoint of other men. Another is primary devotion to things bigger than himself, for a self-seeking man can not retain leadership in a college community. Another is a sense of his own limitations, for conceit repels. Conceit, however, is not likely to survive long after one attempts all that is expected of him as a college president.

Consider this necessity for getting on with men, retaining their confidence and loyalty, yet yielding no principle. He must command the support of trustees for policies they do not understand; he must deal justly with both factions of a faculty to the probable satisfaction of neither; he must keep the faculty happy without the desired salaries, staff and appropriations; he must deny the students what seem to them the chief desires of their hearts; he must send boys home and tell their parents that they are not equal to other men's children; he must defer the ambitious projects of citizens, in devotion to ideals the city can not share; he must use the alumni in making changes which the alumni naturally oppose; he must bring benefactors close to the college, while denying them the privilege of controlling it; he must attack tradition among worshipers of tradition; he must face opposition whether he performs or fails to perform any particular act; he must spend more time than he has, in explaining his conduct, or be condemned for not explaining. All these, and many more, are among the obligations of the presidency.

The question what *should* be expected of a college president I have not ventured to discuss. I have confined myself to conditions as I have found them in one hundred of our better institutions. I now venture to suggest that the trouble is not chiefly with the men, but with the post. Trustees do not, as a rule, select the least competent persons available; but they offer to men who have proved competent within a reasonable scope an almost impossible array of tasks. There are five hundred college presidencies, and not enough men to go around, as the office has evolved in the United States. There is something in the remark that a college president is "neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring." And there is something more than humor in the charge that a college president is, "*ex-officio*, a liar and a coward." A person in public office, attempting the impossible, is liable to every kind of criticism.

I venture the further suggestion that the remedy is not to curb the power of the president, while continuing to expect too much; it will not help matters to encumber executive action with complications and delays, while leaving upon the office more duties than a man could meet even with the power of a despot. The college president is already regarded as a poor risk by life insurance companies.

It may be best to assign certain of the functions enumerated above to other officers. The duty of spiritual leadership, historically the most important of the functions of the college president in America,

has now been delegated in many places to a chaplain or a board of preachers. But the change has not been applauded always by those who believe in moral and religious education. The increase of endowment and equipment may be assigned to a special officer, but the president is, *ex-officio*, more likely to influence prospective benefactors. So, also, with social obligations, they attach to the office; they can not be transferred to another person, by executive action or by vote, like the advertising department of a soap factory. The president can easily turn over to others all the privileges of the scholar, the supervisor and the teacher; but the fact that he has done so is one of the present charges against him. Furthermore, he is loath to resign these privileges, if he has any capacity for intellectual leadership. Finally, the president might be relieved of business management—that branch of affairs which has always been most foreign to the dominant interests of great scholars and great teachers. But, as a matter of fact, I have found the most confusion and the unhappiest faculties in those institutions, of all that I have visited, where the authority in business matters has been vested in some person or persons other than the president. Nobody can possibly make a budget satisfactory to all concerned; but the one most likely to take successful leadership in budget-making is the one most intimately and sympathetically in touch with every aspect of the life of the university. That person, under present conditions, is the president. His other duties are so intricately involved with business affairs, that it seems unreasonable to withhold control in this domain while holding him responsible in others.

In short, the principle of centralization of responsibility and adequate authority, which is well established in all public school affairs, must be reckoned with in all new plans for university control. Something should be done by way of reorganization or definition, to the end that a college may have more than one chance in three of obtaining a successful president. But whatever is done should be based on this principle of centralization of responsibility with adequate authority, and on the scope and the difficulties of the president's obligations.

The discussion of faculty control carried on in SCIENCE, and elsewhere, is much to the point. It should lead presidents to clearer ideas of their short-comings and professors to a more sympathetic understanding of the causes. It should lead to greater faculty control through officers elected by the faculty for short terms, and to faculty representation at stated meetings of the trustees. It should lead to a fixed plan for salaries in each institution, that would go a long way toward reducing the proportion of failures among presidents. Finally, I believe this whole discussion should bring us to some consideration of the fact that preparation for the office of president, in spite of the excessive demands upon the office, is left largely to chance. So far as I know, there is not even a course in higher education given in any college or university in America. Nor is there such an opportunity as a Kahn traveling fellowship might provide for prospective presidents. When we consider the administration of higher education of sufficient importance, we shall make provision for trained leadership. Meantime, let us all be charitable,—trustees, presidents, professors, graduates, students; our faults are many, and which of us is without them?

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