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BOOK REVIEW

UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION

REVIEWED BY

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Eliot, Charles W. (1908). University Administration. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, The Riverside Press. Pages: 296. n/a. Reprints: Bushnell Press (2008) Price: $25.95USD; Bibliolife (2009) Price: $40.85USD; Nabu Press (2010) Price: $42.45 CDN; Read Books (2015) Price: $38.56CDN; Palala Press (2015) Price: $34.95USD; Wentworth Press (2016) Price: $26.60USD.

"What's past is prologue" Charles Eliot on university administration

In 1908 Charles Eliot, who was then in his 39th year as president of Harvard College, wrote a book with the simple but direct title, *University Administration*. That Eliot would have expected a flurry of re-prints of *University Administration* a century later is not likely. Were he alive today, however, he likely would be surprised, and perhaps gratified, by the re-discovery of many of his ideas.

What explains this resurgence of interest? Eliot addressed issues that are as contemporary now as they were then: mergers, pitfalls in accepting gifts from self-interested donors, reorganization of governance to involve politicians less and public trustees more, the recruitment of faculty, stewardship of endowments, decentralization. Since 1950, thinking about how universities should be managed has had a decidedly Whiggish tinge of cumulative progress, for example: Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) was succeeded by Management by Objectives (MBO), which was succeeded by Zero Base Budgeting (ZBB), which was followed in succession by Strategic Planning, Benchmarking, Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Responsibility Center Budgeting/ Responsibility Center Management (RCB/RCM). "Administration" became "management" which in turn became "leadership." Higher Education as a field of study has tended to treat each as the turning of a new page, rendering its predecessors obsolete. A re-reading of *University Administration* gives us second thoughts about automatically preferring the present over the past or, at least, over-estimating the distance between the past and the present. Here are some examples.

One of Eliot's most influential reforms was the development of a system of "spontaneous diversity of choice" in which undergraduates selected most of their own courses, which today is recognized as an "elective" system with a "general distribution" requirement. The innovation, although at first regarded as a radical experiment, soon found its way into undergraduate curricula generally. Eliot described the reform as "the most generally useful piece of work which this university has ever executed." All this seventy-five years before Canadian universities began to abandon fixed specialization "honours" requirements.

Eliot foresaw what today closely resembles Responsibility Centre Budgeting and Management. In 1900, Harvard had only about 3400 students spread across only five faculties. In Eliot's view, only five were needed at any university. One wonders why there was any need for a decentralized organization. To Eliot's way of thinking, there was no case to be made for centralization in the first place. Eliot was pragmatic about the limitations of top-down organization: even within faculties "admirable teachers . . . may easily know nothing to speak of about

more than half of the subjects of instruction." Decentral structure was not an entirely new idea at Harvard. Eliot, however, pushed the principle further downward from faculties to departments, arguing that bottom-up "the departmental organization is therefore likely to affect in the future, not only the internal, but also the external structure of the American university." As for the president, Eliot was openly frank: "He should be often an inventing and animating force, and often a leader; but not a ruler or autocrat." Eliot recognized that there was much that a president not only did not know, but could not know, about the workings of the university, a view that he also extended university trustees. He gave as an example decisions about library acquisitions and junior academic appointments, which he argued could be made competently only at the departmental level.'

Eliot, however, reserved to the president alone what he regarded as an essential top-down role in holding faculties, departments, and administration accountable that has much resonance today. The president, he said, must be "on his guard against mounting expenditures for management and materials as against expenditures for direct teaching."

Extending his thinking about bottom-up decision-making, Eliot advanced an approach to fund-raising that Canadian universities began to practice within only the last decade: deans and department chairs as principal fund-raisers. This was not to say that the president had no role in what Eliot politely called "securing benefaction." Here Eliot's views seem modern a century later, for public as well as private universities. Eliot listed three "more efficient methods in use to which the president should contribute." The first today is known as "transparency." Eliot believed that to promote private giving "complete publicity" should be given to the university's "annual receipts and expenditures [and] gifts annually received" in order to demonstrate "pecuniary need." Even today, obtaining that much information from many universities is difficult. The second responsibility of the president today falls under the heading of "stewardship." Here Eliot came straight to the point to assure donors that the university "scrupulously respects in theory and in practice the wishes of all givers, and makes the beneficent action of every endowment perpetual." The third job of the president in fund-raising was to assure donors further that "all the income of the university is used appropriately and frugally, so that there will be no misdirected expenditure and no waste." In other words, as university fund-raisers today know, it is difficult to secure gifts to compensate for bad management. For public universities, the same could be said about the prospect of governments' covering university deficits.

Eliot was not naïve about what today is a wariness about the steering effects of large-scale private giving and corporations' practicing "strategic" philanthropy. Here, too, he was direct and unapologetic about being on guard against, or at least suspicious of, conflicts between the interests of the university and the self-interest of donors. Foreseeing certain aspects of "entrepreneurial" philanthropy, Eliot was again blunt: "It is extremely doubtful if any of the forms of advertising do a university any good."

There are some modern issues that Eliot skirts in *University Administration*. He never mentions co-education, although Radcliffe College, Harvard's college for women, was founded during his presidency, and had been in place for 25 years when he wrote the book. Eliot was known, however, to be opposed to co-education. Harvard's notorious system of religious and racial quotas for admission was not installed until the presidency of his successor. In Eliot's time as president, admission was based strictly on academic qualifications, a practice to which he referred with firm approval. The quota system did not change the academic qualifications, but added to them qualifications aimed as assessing "character" as a screening device. It is impossible to know what Eliot's position would have been. A good guess, however, is that he would be been opposed. He included in his book a discussion of what he called "desirable mixing" among "all grades of American society." He acknowledged the role played by parental education in student participation in higher education. His introduction of an elective system removed Christianity from its preferential position in the curriculum. His summary view was that "in the great majority of students who are neither rich nor poor, every variety of disposition and capacity appears; and it is they who in the long run determine the social quality of the college." A modern sentiment far ahead of its time.