

Backlog--

IF anyone ever takes the time to set down the qualifications for college presidents, there are a few basic specifications which should head the list.

He should be all-knowing and wise—or he should at least give that impression to those who would do his job differently.

He should be awe-inspiring and a trifle unapproachable.

He should be careful, deliberate and thoughtful, yet decisive, unyielding and courageous.

He should have a remarkable sense of balance—legislature on one hand, faculty on the other, students and administration, parents and policy.

Above all, he should look and act like a college president—dignified, reserved, bespectacled, tastefully dressed, his dry wit skillfully disguised . . . and he absolutely *must* smoke a pipe.

And if the University of Oklahoma's Dr. George L. Cross objects to conforming to this presidential prototype, he has no one to blame but himself—since his record 16 years as president have set the standard.

Actually Dr. Cross' anniversary might be counted from January, 1944, when he took over as acting president—but at that time he had no intention of being stuck with the job. He even had his professorship guaranteed by the Regents so that he might return to his work no matter how many enemies he had made as president. But enthusiasm for his new position and a growing desire to see through some needed academic improvements made this guarantee unnecessary. In September his title became official.

President Cross characterizes himself as a retooled scientist. As a scientist (research botanist) he had been trained to be concise, brief to the extreme. He soon learned, however, that a college president never uses one word where he can work in two.

Hardly had Dr. Cross become accustomed to the presidential routine when he became the somewhat reluctant heir to the problems of the post-war campus. In the spring of 1946, O.U. had an enrollment of less than 5,000. That fall more than 15,000 were demanding admittance and something over 10,000 were squeezed in. What's more, they were veterans—and they were married—and they had children—and they expected someplace to live.

Finally a delegation of married veterans threatened to pitch a tent city on the North Oval if housing were not provided. President Cross reached for the phone, called a

Dallas firm and ordered a million dollars worth of prefabricated houses—on credit. He must have had some uneasy moments when the cautious Regents turned down his first request for self-liquidating bonds to pay for the pre-fabs, which were already being put together in Sooner City. Fortunately for all concerned, the Regents went along with the plan at their next meeting.

If it is difficult to please regents, faculty and taxpayers, it is nearly impossible to please students. A year without a student mob on the president's lawn (usually protesting a ruling on holidays) cannot be counted much of a success. Early in his administration the president took part in such a gathering himself. Leaving his car across the street, he marched with the students up to his own front porch and listened while the protestants demanded his whereabouts from the houseboy, who referred them to Vice President Dangerfield. The crowd dispersed, and Dr. Cross returned to his car unrecognized.

Once he did make the mistake of going outside to talk to a mob of unhappy collegians. He was unceremoniously hoisted on student shoulders of varying heights and given a bumpy ride to the corner.

It didn't take long for the president to realize that whatever he said—or whatever some reporter thought he said—was news. His classic remark to the legislative appropriations committee that he was "trying to build a university the football team could be proud of" was intended as sarcasm, but circled the globe as a serious statement. After appearing in *Time* magazine, it was printed in Australia and Japan, and *The Reader's Digest* even sent him a check for \$10 for reprint rights.

There have been some tragic moments, too, in the past 16 years, such as the disastrous night of the BOQ fire in 1949 when the flaming wooden dormitory claimed 3 student lives, injured 71 others. The most difficult task he has had as president was telling the last family, who were personal friends, that all the missing students had been accounted for and the remaining unidentified body was that of their son.

The retooling has not always been easy, but now that it is complete, Ex-Scientist Cross has come to at least one basic conclusion about the role he plays: A college president cannot afford to worry about things that are not as they should be, but he must deal with them as they are and if possible try to make them a little better before he leaves.

—CJR

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