A MAN AND A COLLEGE

A TRIBUTE TO

Charles Edward Diehl
(1875 - 1964)

SOUTHWESTERN AT MEMPHIS
A MAN AND A COLLEGE:

CHARLES E. DIEHL'S
THIRTY-TWO YEARS
AS PRESIDENT
OF SOUTHWESTERN AT MEMPHIS
(1917—1949)

Southwestern records with sorrow the death of President Emeritus Charles E. Diehl on February 27, 1964. With selfless devotion and noble sacrifice he labored untiringly and uncompromisingly, often against great odds and often faced with heartbreak, in the building of this College.
CHARLES EDWARD DIEHL (1875-1964)
Anyone writing of the achievements of a college president is aware that he is recording also the efforts of many people—faculty, directors, alumni, students, philanthropists, officials of educational foundations, and all supporters of the institution. A president initiates or approves action, then directs it; therefore he must accept responsibility for failure; conversely he should receive a large share of credit for success. The amount of credit given to him depends, first, upon the nature, quality, and extent of his actions, and second, upon the conditions under which he had to work. On both counts the accomplishments of President Charles E. Diehl assume not only proportion, but significance unusual in an area of higher education during three decades.

To state tersely Dr. Diehl's educational achievements gives no proper idea of their magnitude. He moved the college from a town to a city. He formulated an educational program. He put this program into successful operation. He thus developed what is in effect a new college.

An adequate account of these acts cannot be given here; yet they must be briefly characterized, so that one may justly understand what they are, how he did them, and what they mean.

The Material Achievement

In 1917, when Dr. Diehl became president of the College, then located at Clarksville, Tennessee, it had assets—plant and endow-
ment—valued then at approximately $400,000. At the end of Dr. Diehl’s administration, thirty-two years later, Southwestern had assets worth over $5,000,000. This increase of 1250 per cent, an average of 39 per cent or about $156,000 a year, was made despite a depression and the dislocations of two world wars. Such growth in capital assets is all the more remarkable when one realizes that it was made in addition to paying off in 1930 a mortgage indebtedness of $700,000 on the Memphis plant, and in addition to funds for current expenses of over $40,000 a year contributed by Memphians for more than ten years.

Yet such figures do not indicate the human cost to President Diehl and his many helpers of moving the College. To deprive a town of a college is major surgery, very painful to all concerned; and the town always fights the operation. Although Southwestern, when located at Clarksville, Tennessee, on the northern fringe of its four-synod territory, had long been neglected, Dr. Diehl had to wage a long battle against sincere, well-meaning people opposed to the removal. Unavoidable court action left its wake of unpleasantness. In ecclesiastical circles there is an old saying, “The preacher who builds a church has to move.” Dr. Diehl not only built a new college home; he moved into it and remained for twenty-four years.

In 1925, transplanting a college was not as simple as it was for Princeton in the eighteenth century and for Trinity (now Duke) in the nineteenth. Today, even a small college must have far more equipment than the average institution a generation ago. Moving a large family is exhausting enough; Dr. Diehl moved a college community. But first he had to build a new plant.

Nothing reveals his shrewdness and vision better than what he did. Planners of public buildings are notoriously near-sighted. Legislators, boards of directors, and college presidents more often than not build for the day after tomorrow. A huddle of nondescript buildings, quickly outmoded and deteriorating on inadequate grounds is
often the unsightly result. Such a mistake was avoided in building the new Southwestern, because Dr. Diehl had a complete conception of a proper college; consequently, to him buildings were not merely housing, but a part of education itself. “... appropriate and beautiful surroundings,” he has written, “will have a transforming influence upon generation after generation of students and upon the very character of the institution itself. Beauty, like truth and goodness, needs but to be expressed.” Teaching his doctrine of “genuineness and excellence” would have had a hypocritical sound in architectural mediocrities. Therefore he insisted upon stone construction in simple, collegiate Gothic style, and he purchased a quarry to insure the complete harmony of all additions to the plant.

Four decades ago such long-range planning and building may have seemed quixotic. But time justified both. Cheap, brick “boxes” thrown up on many college campuses several decades ago are already shabby and in need of the repairman or wrecker. Southwestern’s stone halls grow more beautiful with every passing year. The best has proved to be the cheapest, not only because of durability and educational function, but because of the continuing appeal of a beautiful plant to donors of buildings and other memorials. Contributors are thus assured of both permanence and a context of good taste for their gifts.

One question must be asked. Why did friends of Southwestern follow Dr. Diehl in such planning? It is relatively easy to recruit workers for immediate and readily foreseeable ends, very difficult to do the same for long-term efforts toward high conclusions. The city of Memphis, the four cooperating synods, the Carnegie Corporation, the General Education Board, and other supporters have given several million dollars to Southwestern and thus upheld Dr. Diehl’s hand, because they became convinced that his plan was worth its cost and that a very able, totally dedicated man could not fail. They knew he would not quit; so they did not quit him.
A college president once said to the writer of this essay: "Take care of the finances of a college; everything else will take care of itself." Dr. Diehl was never so naive as to believe that. He always insisted that the material, academic, and spiritual elements in education are organic, therefore, inseparable, parts of a "harmonious whole." To him, for example, a dormitory is not merely "a machine for living," for more than a student's scholastic work is influenced by the buildings which are his college home.

Yet Dr. Diehl was always keenly aware that nothing will excuse intellectual mediocrity in a college. A Puritan mother said long ago, "Child, if God made thee a Christian and a good scholar that is all I ask of thee." On that ideal also Dr. Diehl focused all his academic planning. Naturally, his curricular developments were all spurs to the mind. The honors courses, introduced in 1928, for brilliant upper-classmen; the tutorial courses, adapted from the British system at Oxford University, inaugurated at Southwestern in 1931 after several years of study; the degree with distinction, in 1935, for able students who wish less specialization than that required for honors; and the comprehensive examinations in the major field, in 1945—all were designed to induce every student to discover the extent of his ability by striving for excellence.

But excelling intellectually is not enough. Education that does not develop moral responsibility may even be vicious. A student is hardly encouraged to develop honest habits by being proctored and policed as if he were dishonest, yet most American colleges and universities regard all students as potential cheats and liars. A college, by trusting young people, gives them the best chance of becoming worthy of trust. Students become honest by acting honestly on their own responsibility. Consequently, Dr. Diehl's fostering of the student Honor System, initiated in 1918, during the first year of his administration, remains one of his finest acts. As a result of
student self-education under the Honor System the immature high-
school taboo against reporting cheaters and the code of “getting
what you can any way you can” began to break down and to be
replaced by the moral compulsion of campus opinion. For nearly a
half century, because of the Honor System, Southwestern students
have been trying to act honestly, so that everyone may receive
scholastic justice. No better practice for responsible citizenship could
be devised.

Such steady development of the curriculum and of self-education
is stimulating to students; it also keeps a faculty intellectually flexi-
ble. This, however, was not all of Dr. Diehl’s strategy in proving
and developing his professors. He asked new teachers to present
papers before the entire staff and defend their statements. Pro-
fessors whose classroom methods were inadequate were asked to
remedy them. Promising young members of the faculty were aided
by him in obtaining fellowships to complete doctoral degrees. Above
all, he tried to keep members of the faculty thinking about the
total picture and objectives of the College. This he did not only by
requesting suggestions from individuals and faculty committees, but,
at times, as in 1933, by obtaining a letter from each professor in
regard to the practices and goals of the College.

As Dr. Diehl spent a lifetime in judging and encouraging good
teaching, it is not surprising that by his own example as an executive
he gave a lesson to fellow administrators. Although he said in his
inaugural address over forty years ago that getting money should
not be the main business of a college president, he raised prodigious
sums under seemingly impossible conditions. Yet he did not change
his mind after 1918, nor forget his obligation to be an active spir-
itual and academic leader of his college community. He remained,
despite all stresses, the constant reader and student, and until the
last years of his tenure gave regular public evidence of this leader-
ship in brief addresses at the beginning of each session and, above
all, baccalaureate sermons, which were such models of simplified learning and graceful composition that they were annually published at the students' request. No better writing of its kind can be imagined than his baccalaureate sermon of 1928, *Living With One's Self*. Thus he disproved the prevalent notion that today's college president can be only a money-getter.

He acted his role completely, but he also had good luck: he looked like a president acting. For he had presence and a right sense of occasion, gifts which would have made him pompous had they not been constantly tempered by a hearty and almost irrepressible humor. Hence his demand for taste and restrained style in all college functions led to the development of one of the most beautiful American commencements in the Hubert F. Fisher Memorial Garden under the oaks. All of which means that students and faculty were proud of him on public occasions and that the total result for the College was a sense of tone.

*What These Achievements Mean*

Dr. Diehl's accomplishments at Southwestern mean, first, that a church-related college can be first-rate academically.

It is not impertinent to say that this needed to be proved in our time. Church colleges did not retain the academic leadership which they had held in the founding of Southern higher education. Almost exclusively their presidents and faculties were recruited from the ministry, at times from the ranks of the superannuated. Some of these noble men of immeasurable spiritual influence, who had spent their best years in the pastorate, came to educational work too late to adapt themselves effectively. As a result, they were unable to keep pace with the rapid academic progress of the secular colleges. It was natural, therefore, that these men should have excused the academic shortcomings of their colleges by stressing the essential neglected by private and state institutions, that is, moral and spiritual training.
No less strongly than the clerical presidents who preceded him Dr. Diehl stressed the spiritual. "Mere intellectual development," he held, was not enough; youth must be "trained in the principles of Jesus Christ." Yet he insisted as strongly that academic and material requirements "are the same for the Christian college as for any other college." He resolved, therefore, to build a church-related institution so excellent academically that traditional apologies for scholastic standing would be unnecessary. That he succeeded was nationally recognized in September, 1949, when Southwestern was granted a charter for a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

Such an educational program was the natural result of his training and experience. He was acquainted with excellence, for in 1896 he received the Bachelor of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University and in 1900 the Master of Arts degree from Princeton University and in the same year graduated from the Princeton Theological Seminary. The following seventeen years in three Southern pastorates intensified his conviction of the primary importance of man's soul as well as his mind.

No less significant was his coming to the presidency of Southwestern at the age of forty-two, mature enough for wise procedure and young enough to master the new field of the liberal arts college. By thirty-two years of total application he achieved a position in educational circles unequaled in his time by any other president of a church-related college in the South. Recognitions, such as the Secretaryship of the Southern University Conference, Presidency of the Association of American Colleges, membership on the Board of Visitors of the United States Naval Academy, honorary Doctor of Laws degrees from Davidson College and the University of Chattanooga, besides appointments to various educational committees, attest the fact. In 1941, he was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

These honors which came to Dr. Diehl were also in effect given
to Southwestern. Likewise, the establishment of a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the funds granted by the General Education Board and the Carnegie Corporation, and the excellent records of Southwestern graduates in professional and graduate schools, indicate that the traditional Presbyterian respect for learning with its insistence on a well-educated ministry had found in Memphis new vitality and a broader application.

But the long presidency of Dr. Diehl proved not only that a church-related college can be first-rate academically, but that it can make a distinctive contribution to higher education. It is, however, axiomatic that this cannot be done unless certain conditions obtain. A narrow, intolerant college cannot be academically respectable. Strict thought-control, whether religious, political, or educational, makes genuine scholarship impossible for students and faculty. Moreover, professors of high integrity, spiritual and intellectual, will not teach in institutions strongly enforcing party-lines of any sort. Without an able faculty a college can exist; it cannot lead.

Aware of such truisms, Dr. Diehl succeeded in obtaining superior professors, not by financial inducements (that was impossible), but by offering them an academic program and policy that would maintain their intellectual self-respect and test their resourcefulness. It seems little short of a miracle, and certainly a tribute to his leadership, that he secured and retained so many able teachers—people of courage and idealism, who were willing to forego economic security in order to bring something new into Southern education. This primary fact—superiority of teaching staff—made Southwestern’s contribution possible.

The significance of that contribution is considerable. Southwestern was the first church-related liberal arts college in the South to develop a new plan of undergraduate instruction. The adaptation of the British tutorial method to an American college curriculum was an event in Southern educational history. The tutorial courses,
the honors work, the degree with distinction, the unique integrated course in the humanities entitled "Man in the Light of History and Religion," comprehensive examinations in major fields—all prove that a college like Southwestern can be imaginative, dynamic, and experimental. And these curricular innovations have been marked by unusual wisdom: Dr. Diehl and his faculty revivified learning by changes and combinations of traditional forms and subjects.

Finally, one may say, paraphrasing Milton, "A good college is the precious life blood of master spirits treasured up to a life beyond life." What Southwestern has "treasured up" by Dr. Diehl’s life-effort is an accomplishment unparalleled among Southern liberal arts colleges.
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A native of Alabama, he received his B.A. degree from Southwestern, his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago. He taught at Mississippi State College for Women before returning to Southwestern in 1931 as a member of the Department of English. In 1940, Dr. McIlwaine became Professor of English at the State University of New York and later served for a number of years as Chairman of the Department.


Dr. McIlwaine was Guest of Honor and speaker at the annual Alumni Day celebration in 1949. On the occasion of the installation of the chapter of Phi Beta Kappa on December 5, 1949, he was made a foundation member.

He and his wife, the former Catherine Rudolph, x’27, of Clarksville, Tennessee, live in Delmar, New York. They have a son, Robert Shields, who is an instructor in English at Southern Methodist University.