Captains of Erudition: How the First-Generation American University Presidents Paved the Way for the Student Development Profession

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the origins of college administration, particularly student development, as a profession unique from faculty positions by researching the influence of key American university presidents at the dawn of the 20th century. This paper explores precipitating factors leading to the rise of this new type of president, scornfully coined “Captains of Erudition” by Veblen (1918), and the emergence of the student development field. An evaluation of this generation of presidents is offered, followed by a section highlighting key consequences of this pivotal period for higher education today. Original presidential writings from the early 1900s by key university presidents on the subject of university administration are explored, as well as historical pieces evaluating their presidencies and their decisions leading to the realm of student development as a distinct class of higher education administration.
The costs of higher education are subjected to great scrutiny at present. As the economic downturn forces colleges and universities to attempt to do more with scarce resources, the college administrative profession experiences increased pressure to defend its existence, its size, and its purpose. A Goldwater Institute study published by Greene (2010) studied the growth of administrators in higher education institutions from 1993-2007. During this period, the number of administrators per 100 students rose 39.3%, while teaching, research, and service positions grew only by 18%. Whether or not critiques on “administrative bloat” in the academy are fair or necessary is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to acknowledge that the profession of college administrators is a contentious and controversial existence during difficult economic times. In its important article, “The Lattice and the Ratchet,” The Pew Higher Education Research Program (1995) highlighted the growth of the administrative profession by offering the image of a lattice:

> Just as most institutions enjoyed real revenue growth in the 1980s, so apparently did most institutions substantially expand their administrative and academic support staffs. The result has been an extension of the scale and scope of an administrative lattice that has grown, much like a crystalline structure, to incorporate ever more elaborate and intricate linkages with itself. (p. 99)

This paper explores the origins of the rise of what is now known as the student development profession. Specifically, this paper focuses on the tenures of key university presidents at the dawn of the 20th century. Do their tenures plant the seeds for the student development profession? In what ways? These questions are explored by first highlighting precipitating factors leading to the increased profile and scope of the university presidency. Then this paper discusses the influence of the generation of university presidents in the post-Civil War era. Finally, this paper concludes with implications of this pivotal shift in the presidential role and the subsequent field of student development.

Precipitating Factors

Brubacher and Rudy (1997) wrote an insightful description of the college president during American higher education’s infancy:

> What about the organization of the college below the president? When colleges were in their infancy there was no organization below him, or rather the president was the whole administration. He did the work which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was delegated to such lieutenants as deans, registrars, and librarians. (p. 27)
In other words, the president was a one-stop shop of college administration. By 1910, university administration was a distinct career path which could be pursued wholly separate from the teaching profession (Bledstein, 1976). In the course of higher education history, this is a relatively short time for such a fundamental shift. What role did college and university presidents play? It is helpful first to consider the contextual factors at play on the stage of American higher education at the dawn of the 20th century. Only then can the influence of the first generation of university presidents on the field of student development be truly understood and appreciated.

The Rise of the Extracurriculum

Rudolph (1990) noted a vital extracurriculum developed within American colleges by the 1870s. Student-initiated literary societies, the Greek letter fraternity movement, and organized athletics all became vital components of the collegiate extracurriculum. This extracurriculum, according to Bledstein (1976), “remade the college campus into a distinct American phenomenon. In the generation before the Civil War . . . the college was being transformed” (p. 248). This extracurriculum soon came to overshadow the educational experience in the lives of college students. Rudolph (1990) referred to its presence as a monster in which “taming it would now become as necessary a project as the long-delayed reform of the curriculum itself” (p. 155). The unintentional consequence of the extracurricular “monster” was a robbing of the college professor of a measure of prestige and authority (Rudolph, 1990, p. 157). Thus, the American college had evolved into an enterprise in which the faculty only had limited authority over the college student. Given the explosive growth experienced in American higher education after the post-Civil War era, the American college became ripe for the emergence of administrators to fill this newfound gap in student oversight and power.

The Post-Civil War Boom

In the aftermath of the Civil War (post-1865), many of the colleges that survived experienced tremendous growth. Rudolph (1990) highlighted perhaps the greatest benefit the Civil War had on the American college: “The Civil War in many ways clarified the dimensions and the prospects of the American experiment. It swept away the pretensions of the southern plantation aristocracy. . .” (p. 242). The notion of college being exclusively for the elite was now in question. Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins University, proclaimed in 1906 that “it is neither for the genius nor the dunce, but for the great middle class possessing ordinary talents that we build colleges” (Bledstein, 1976, p. 293). Such a statement would have been unthinkable prior to the Civil War by most college presidents. Yet colleges in the post-Civil War era began actively recruiting, not just receiving, students (Bledstein, 1976). In addition, tuition charges from 1880 to 1920 were stable and relatively affordable for college students (Thelin, 2004).
Additionally, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 played a powerful role in the growth and expansion of the American college in the post-Civil War era (Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2004). Agriculture, technical education, and professional competency training such as medicine and law further broadened the base of the American college. Bledstein (1976) wrote, “Inflation in size was matched by inflation in the variety of consumer services . . . American universities established themselves on as broad a base as possible” (p. 297).

The paradigmatic shift of middle-class Americans to consider college as accessible, the active recruiting of students by colleges, and the reasonably affordable sticker price created an atmosphere for significant growth. From the 1870s to the 1880s, the total number of bachelor’s degrees awarded by American colleges increased 28%, and an additional 56% in the next decade (Bledstein, 1976). Not only were existing colleges growing in their enrollments, but new institutions emerged. In 1870, there were 563 institutions of higher education. By 1890, the count had grown to 977 (Bledstein, 1976).

With this growth came growing pains. As enrollments rose, so did the demand for more faculty and administrators (Schwartz, 2002). In the latter half of the 19th century, educators began to show signs of discontent with their quality of life, and Americans began to distinguish between “academic” functions and “professional” or “technical” functions (Bledstein, 1976, p. 269). The explosive growth in the post-war era, coupled with these seeds of discontent, created an opportunity for a revolution in the very nature and structure of American higher education. Americans began to look to Germany for a new model to guide their institutions.

The Birth of the American University

F. W. Clarke (1901) summarized this revolution:

All this material progress, by which our civilization is distinguished from civilizations of former times, has its roots deep down in the investigations of men who sought truth for its own sake, and whose work was done, in great part, within the universities. Germany, small in area, weak in natural resources, has seen this principle most clearly . . . True culture means productive scholarship, and that is the moving force behind our modern civilization. Its home is in the universities; and to them we must look for our greatest advancement in the future. (p. 104)

America heeded Clarke’s (1901) words. Higher education would no longer simply teach and train the privileged elite of America. It would also research and advance students beyond the undergraduate level. The proliferation of degree offerings of the new American university was a “bulwark against an aristocracy of wealth” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 279).

The rise of the new American university fostered an interesting perspective on the traditional college. The old college was considered simply that: old. Rudolph (1990) lamented, “The collegiate tradition in the United States could not find new inspiration in
the spirit of the German university without some loss to the collegiate way” (p. 272). The old ways of participating in the college experience quickly faded and its image began to suffer. Clarke (1901), in a particularly scathing critique, wrote, “The college stands for a lower grade of work, with definite limitations; the university represents higher attainments and a more nearly university scope” (p. 99). Additionally, University of Chicago president W. R. Harper (1900) expected three of four existing colleges to be reduced in status or modified into junior colleges. He may have been the first to predict that this restructuring of the higher education landscape in America would result in the “growth of a system in the higher educational work of the United States, where now no system exists” (Harper, 1900, pp. 45-46).

The use of the word “system” was prophetic and visionary. In the decades after the Civil War, higher education in American was transformed from simply a local effort to educate to a nationwide system to be grown, sustained, organized, and managed. The system was voracious. Rudolph (1990) writes, “The developing universities revealed an appetite for expansion, a gluttony for work, a passion for growth which constituted one of their most fundamental characteristics” (p. 343). Upon a cursory glance, one may be inclined to believe that this growth was simply evolutionary. The American higher education scene was maturing. The post-Civil War era brought stability and civilization that fostered opportunities for universities to flourish.

However, a deeper exploration into the explosion of American universities at the dawn of the 20th century reveals a very strategic plan on the part of a new generation of university leaders. The expanse and scope of the new American university desperately needed order amidst the chaos (Rudolph, 1990). These were large and influential organizations in need of leaders to manage them. Rudolph (1990) wrote, “These men . . . seized the initiative in American higher education after the war in the way that John D. Rockefeller seized it in oil, Andrew Carnegie in steel, Washington Duke in tobacco . . .” (pp. 244-245). It was at the dawn of the 20th century that the adopted German research model of higher education now gave way to a distinctively American university. The English university, upon which the American college was first modeled, focused its efforts upon producing gentlemen aristocrats. The German university emphasized the production of scholars. The American university emphasized neither culture nor scholarship, but preparing Americans for lives of service (Rudolph, 1990). Thus, this new American university needed a new type of leader. The era of the “Captains of Erudition” had begun, the penultimate administrators to the field that is now known as student development.

The Rise of the “Captains of Erudition”

A new and distinct professional class of higher education administrators had “emerged in the generation after 1870 as a specialized group of men who pursued their individual careers by running colleges and universities” (Bledstein, 1976, p. 287). The issue of growth introduced what Rudolph (1990) described as “the whole apparatus that came
to be known almost everywhere by the loose term ‘the administration’” (p. 417). This loose term became a full-fledged force by 1900. By 1902, college presidents were even encouraged to “undertake special training” (Veysey, 1965, p. 306).

This new breed of professional university presidents “were leaders unparalleled in the history of American higher education . . . As administrators, they built the superstructure of a distinctive American institution” (Bledstein, 1976, p. 331). This generation of university presidents was led by C. W. Eliot of Harvard, D. C. Gilman of Johns Hopkins, N. M. Butler of Columbia, J. B. Angell of Michigan, A. D. White of Cornell, and W. R. Harper of Chicago. It was with this generation that the clergyman college president became a relic and the executive president became the standard.

Graves (1901) further explained this new breed of university administrators:

> With the inauguration of President Eliot in 1869, the present ideal of a college president began to develop . . . A college president, in its latest ideal, is an executive in the fullest sense of the word. Though in entire sympathy with education, he is a business man and a broad-minded man of affairs . . . He may be a scholar—and very often is—or even a minister: but these qualities are merely incidental and have little to do with his success as an administrator. The “executive” president is at present the latest and best type, and in developing our science of administration we may safely follow his lead. (p. 683)

Primus inter Pares to Simply Primus

This paradigmatic shift in the role of the university presidency bore some common themes. First and foremost was a distancing, both intentional and unintentional, from student life and the teaching role. In all of the correspondence between Gilman and Eliot, “not once did they concern themselves with the management of student affairs . . .” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 272). The growth of American universities, coupled with the robust extracurriculum, developed a chasm between the students and the administration, one not easily bridged.

Even more intentionally, university presidents at this time overtly promoted and defended the existence of an administration completely separate from faculty. Thwing (1900) wrote what claimed to be the first book on the subject, titled *College Administration*. Eliot himself wrote a volume entitled *University Administration* in 1908. Eliot (1908) also propagated administrative culture within the faculty, looking for promising young men who might become administrators. This encouraged a demarcation of the teaching and administrative roles. Administrators began treating faculty as clients (Bledstein, 1976). Eliot (1908) himself posited that administrators deserved higher salaries than their teaching counterparts, as their work “did not offer the satisfaction of literary or scientific attainment; the long, uninterrupted vacations which teachers enjoy, or the pleasure of intimate, helpful intercourse with a stream of young men of high intellectual ambition” (p. 15).
No longer could the university president be considered an educative force. He (they were all male) was now an administrative force (Rudolph, 1990). This fundamental shift in the role occurred due to dynamic and powerful contextual factors, coupled with university administrators who actively embraced their new role and even encouraged the change. With Eliot leading the way, the new type of university president became a chief executive officer, with his primary duty being supervision. The responsibilities of the presidency were now simply too broad and expansive, leading Eliot to conclude that the administrator who tried to do everything himself “would in the end do little and that little ill” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 366).

The university president was no longer primus inter pares (first among equals). He was now simply primus (first). They had seized power and ultimate control. Even Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia, founded proudly upon the primus inter pares model, eventually succumbed (Brubacher and Rudy, 1997, p. 366). The institutional power now rested solely in the hands of a few men. The issue that emerged: What to do with it?

Innovations From the Presidency

The corporate university. First to go was the old mold of president as a professor with a few additional duties. In its place appeared an aggressive, sometimes authoritative businessman. Presidents such as Eliot, White, and Harper became known for introducing the business world to now industry-standard techniques of corporate promotion and exploitation (Bledstein, 1976). Rather than borrow what companies were doing well, they clearly saw things they were not doing (but should have been) and applied them in the higher education context. This innovation not only aided the explosive growth of American universities in sheer numbers; it also increased the university profile in the eyes of industry and commerce.

Not all saw this as a positive development. Thorstein Veblen (1918), prominent sociologist and economist, offered a stinging critique of the university adoption of a corporate model in The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men. In this memorandum, he scornfully labeled the university presidents “Captains of Erudition,” lamenting that the presidents have grown the universities to such an extent that business principles are now indispensable (Veblen, 1918, p. 221). In Veblen’s view, the business pursuit of higher education greatly diminished scholarship. He found common ground with those such as Eliot, who clearly distinguished between the roles of teacher and administrator. However, where Eliot promoted the administrator role, Veblen critiqued it, lamenting the “commercial frame of mind of the university administrator” in light of “the professional frame of mind of the seeker and teacher of pure knowledge” (Bledstein, 1976, p. 288).

Regardless, due to the work of the first-generation university presidents, higher education in America could now be accurately depicted as a system and an industry, one that many businesses at the time would envy.
Faculty growth. For all of the animosity created by the administrator presidents, their toil and innovation certainly benefited teaching faculty in some key areas. First, the sheer number of faculty positions grew tremendously. The number of faculty members more than tripled between 1870 and 1900 (Bledstein, 1976). More students meant more demand for teachers. Second, presidents not only wanted to raise the profile of the university administrator; in many ways they also wanted to increase the status of the teacher to recruit better scholars. President Eliot made this point clearly at his inaugural address at Harvard in 1869: “Very few Americans of eminent ability are attracted to this profession. The pay has been too low, and there has been no gradual rise out of the drudgery . . . ” (Bledstein, 1974, p. 277).

These emphases on size and scholarship resulted in a perhaps unintended yet inevitable consequence. The sheer size of the American universities resulted in the need for organization among the teaching faculty into what is now known as academic departments, each with its own structure of hierarchy. The University of Chicago grew from one department of biology in 1893 to five more specialized biological departments within a few years (Rudolph, 1990). This “meant five new department chairmanships, five new little hierarchies . . .” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 400).

Thus, the presidential vision of a distinct teaching role and a distinct administrative role had failed. University presidents had grown their schools to such a size that it necessitated teaching faculty to take on some administrative duties as mid-level faculty administrators. While the distinct boundaries between administration responsibility and teaching responsibility may have blurred to some extent, the university administrators achieved a different kind of victory: infusing administrative culture into the academy itself. Rudolph (1990) summarized the phenomenon:

> The American colleges and universities, in their development from simple institutions to complex organizations, not only replaced the old-time professor with the academician, that trained specialist who knew the rights and privileges and responsibilities of a profession and who in so many of his experiences was indistinguishable from other organization men, but the colleges and universities also required a new kind of executive officer, new methods of financing, new areas of administration. Growth fed upon growth, and the answer to the problems of growth—unless it was to be chaos—was organization. (p. 417)

Within the hierarchy established by the first-generation university presidents, a departmentalization was developed, a set of organizations within the organization. Educational philosophy aside, size alone required this sense of order (Rudolph, 1990).

Industry standardization/accreditation. By pioneering the administrative role and transforming universities into a corporate model, the first generation of university presidents brought order amidst chaos within their respective institutions. But their thirst
for administrative order could not be quenched merely by organizing on a local scale. They intentionally sought to bring about standardization and accreditation across the system in their dispensation. The first step was to establish more uniformed college entrance requirements. The first published work on college admissions appeared in 1902 by Edwin C. Broome, then the headmaster at Andover. In it, Broome (1902) calls upon universities to use examinations for admission in order to bring some uniformity to the expansive growth and diversity in American higher education. Rudolph (1990) corroborated, citing that “the first College Board examinations were held in June 1901; by 1910, twenty-five leading eastern colleges and universities were making use of the standard examinations of the college board” (p. 438).

Broome’s words did not fall on deaf ears. In the post-war period, university associations were established: The National Association of State Universities (founded in 1896), the Association of American Universities (founded in 1900) and the Association of Land Grant Colleges (founded in 1900). All were concerned with bringing order and standards to the chaos of American higher education. In 1906, these three groups convened in Williamstown, Massachusetts, to lay the groundwork for collegiate and university accreditation (Rudolph, 1990).

In 1908, the Carnegie Foundation sponsored a conference on entrance requirements. The primary focus of the conference was to define a “unit” of admissions credit. The result was the “Carnegie Unit,” the forerunner of the now commonplace “credit hour.” The Carnegie Unit was “in some ways the ultimate organization, the epitome of academic accountancy, the symbol of the search for standards” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 438). It persists as a fundamental component of American higher education administration.

These advancements in the standardization cause led Hawkins (1997) to proclaim the years from 1895-1920 as the “Age of Standards” (p. 318). He credits university presidents for launching the standardization movement, and many of the achievements of the Age of Standards are still foundational components of academic administration today (Hawkins, 1997, p. 326).

**Building the administrative lattice.** The first generation of university presidents had achieved a remarkable amount of strategic change within the industry. As explored above, they were responsible for bringing enough order to the collection of post-war colleges and universities even to be considered an industry unto themselves. They had grown their institutions in size and prominence, introduced and developed academic departmentalization, and established industry standardization and accreditation. What resulted was the further distancing of the president from the day-to-day business of the university, specifically the development of its student body.
in order to focus on policy and university planning (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 367). This required a savvy ability to specialize duties, hire people to fulfill those duties, and delegate them appropriately. Brubacher and Rudy (1997) provided a brief and generalized progression of this trend:

On the whole the first specialization of the presidential function was the appointment of a librarian. Next, recognition was extended to the office of registrar . . . The median decade for the appearance of deans was the 1890s, with the subdivisions into deans of men and deans of women coming some time later. (p. 367)

The president ultimately became free to be the seer Eliot envisioned through the hiring of vice presidents and deans. Ward (1934) claims that Eliot appointed his first dean of faculty in 1870. Schwartz (2003) dates this first appointment in 1890, coinciding with the first appointment of a dean of students. Regardless, this proved to be the foundation of what is now called the student affairs profession. Thomas Clark of the University of Illinois was one of the first to carry the title “Dean of Men” (Schwartz, 2003, p. 220). LeBaron Russel Briggs was Harvard’s first dean of men, and promoted his newly established office by publishing *Routine and Ideals* (1903), a collection of speeches he had given to schools, colleges, and his students at Harvard. Schwartz (2003) writes that

Men like Briggs ushered in a new era in American higher education. Swelling enrollments at the turn of the 20th century had brought many students to campus who found the dual challenge of rigorous academic study and social freedom overwhelming. (p. 220)

By 1900, 81% of institutions had established the office of dean of men (McGrath, 1999).

Harper (1903) of the University of Chicago explicitly lobbied his governing board for deans to be further distanced from the traditional teaching role. He advocated that deans “should be given greater freedom from teaching, and especially should this be done in cases in which there is clearly marked ability for investigation” (Harper, 1903, p. xlvi). He also suggested that the University of Chicago should create a distinct deanship to focus on student issues, claiming that the current deans’ administrative work is “sufficient to engross their time” (Harper, 1903, p. xlvii).

The expanding administrative lattice had begun. Not only had the university presidents achieved the expansive growth that allowed them to become the “Captains of Erudition,” but they had even replicated their system of administration many times over within their own institutions. This paved the way for the realm of student development, beginning with the deans of men and women.
Discussion

Implications. At the dawn of the 20th century, the Captains of Erudition's views were revolutionary. To those in agreement with Veblen (1918), they were scandalous. Yet they provide a profound, albeit indirect, implication for higher education today. The old time college president viewed the college through one lens: education. The new university president changed the lens altogether, encouraging higher education through an educational and corporate lens. Areas of present interest to a university president now considered essential were seeded by the Captains of Erudition: marketing, revenue-streams, profit-centers, etc. (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). Though it would be a stretch to directly link the Captains of Erudition to the proprietary sector at the forefront of discussion in higher education today, this paper at least reveals that the ability to consider such endeavors originated in the efforts of the Captains of Erudition.

Additionally, the first generation of university presidents carved out what is now its own career path: higher education/student affairs administration. This career path can be pursued entirely separately from academic teaching. In addition, the university presidents created a pathway for scholars with administrative leanings and skills to become administrators. Either route allows for possibilities to participate in the administrative profession and reveals the extent to which the Captains of Erudition infused administrative culture into the fabric of the American university.

Ironically, this creation of an administrative career path birthed a new scholarly pursuit: higher education/student affairs administration as an academic discipline (or collection of disciplines). Graves wrote in 1901 that “next year President Wheeler, at the University of California, will institute a course of lectures on college administration, and that Dr. Harper intends eventually to establish a chair in the subject . . . ” (p. 685). Cremin (1997) observed that Columbia was the first to offer a Ph.D. in the field of education in 1893 (p. 407). Many other schools soon developed their own graduate programs in education and educational administration. Henderson (1960) proposed doctoral degrees in higher education as a beneficial way to train college administrators in the 1960s. An association committed to the network, support, and scholarship of higher education studies was birthed in 1976 and called the Association for the Study of Higher Education (“ASHE History,” http://www.ashe.ws/?page=163). Student affairs organizations such as College Student Educators International (ACPA), Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), and The Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD) can also thank the first generation of university presidents for their pioneering work in developing the student affairs profession. A collection of peer reviewed journals also exists, such as the Review of Higher Education, the Journal of Higher Education, the Journal of College Student Development, and Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development to name a few.

Another implication of the pioneering work of the Captains of Erudition is that, to some extent, they encouraged what is now known as a great chasm between faculty and
administration within higher education institutions. The problem is so pervasive that the Pew Higher Education Research Forum (1995) went so far as to claim that on “most campuses there is an inherent tension between academic and administrative units . . . . More often, that tension yields an unproductive competition for resources” (p. 99). Often caught in the middle of this tension are those middle managers, also known as deans. They must walk a fine line serving both the faculty interests as well as the wishes of the upper administration to be change agents and belt-tighteners of the institution. This precarious posture of deanship led Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, and Nies (2001) to proclaim that “deans serve two masters” (p. 1). Often, neither master is incredibly pleased. This poses unique challenges for student development professionals, who often feel sidelined or ignored by faculty and academic administration. Where faculty and administration navigate a tenuous relationship, student development professionals often live on an island unto themselves.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to trace the history of the university administrator back to its origin as a means to understand the development of the student affairs profession. Research on the subject continually and overwhelmingly led to one source: the first generation of university presidents, who rose to power in the wake of the American Civil War. Whether or not their tenures as presidents achieved good or ill is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to say that the Captains of Erudition left a profound mark on the American higher education landscape, and without their innovations, the student development profession as we know it may not exist. Their forceful leadership brought about expansive and explosive growth as well as systemic standardization, and further established student affairs administration as a profession and academic discipline. Their legacy in many ways mirrors the legacy of American higher education: loud, demonstrative, successful, and contentious.

Veblen (1918) distinguished between the frame of mind of the university administrator and that of the teacher. Bledstein (1976) rightly noted that, “for the past three quarters of a century, the debate about the nature of American higher education has continued to be conducted in Veblen’s terms” (p. 288). While the office and study of higher education/student affairs administration has proved sustainable, it will always be married to the faculty. This marriage is tenuous, controversial, and fraught with pitfalls, but it is a codependent union. The Captains of Erudition arranged it, and now colleges and universities must find their way to a fruitful, mutually beneficial relationship. Drew Moser (Ph.D., Indiana State University) is an Associate Dean of Students and Director of the Calling and Career Office at Taylor University.


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