

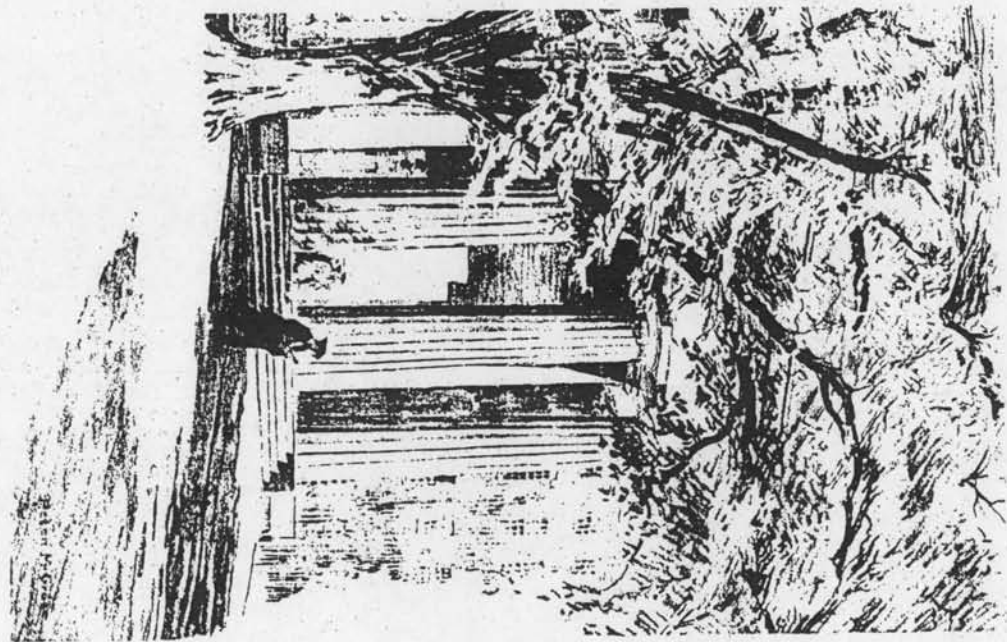
**THE STRUCTURE  
OF BROWN UNIVERSITY**

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HENRY M. WRISTON



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BROWN UNIVERSITY  
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## FOREWORD

*The Corporation of Brown University desires the alumni to have a full understanding of its comprehensive program. I was directed, therefore, to prepare a series of statements of which this is the first. The second will deal with plans for student housing and the third with the over-all program of the University. They are designed to promote a better understanding of our common objectives. I earnestly hope that each alumnus will read them with sympathetic appreciation of the problems faced by the Corporation.*

HENRY M. WRISTON

## THE STRUCTURE OF BROWN UNIVERSITY



**T**HE governmental structure of Brown University is unique, different from any other in all the world. Yet its individualism, characteristic of Rhode Island, has been so tempered by time that the University functions effectively in the modern world.

Brown's Charter was enacted as a law of the Colony and remains as a statute of the State. It is our fixed star; we can do nothing that contradicts its prohibitions or transgresses its grants of power. It has both the advantages and the disadvantages of age. On the one hand there is the great prestige that comes with long survival; that is an asset of incalculable value. Moreover, some of the rights and privileges granted in 1764 do not appear in modern charters; they are a priceless inheritance. On the other hand there are inevitable archaisms which occasionally prove embarrassing. It should not be surprising that the Charter, fashioned so long ago, has shortcomings as a working instrument. It is remarkable that it can operate at all in an environment so radically altered.

The chief source of its vitality is that in establishing an educational institution our forefathers dared very boldly. They had pettinesses, even as their modern successors, for they were human. But when they embodied their thoughts and their plans in that fundamental Charter, they curbed their differences and made a concerted effort to achieve something distinctive. It contains no weak or timorous word; no great issue is dodged. With intrepidity and confidence they put freedom at the core of the new enterprise. For that reason the Charter of Brown University made history in the field of education, in social relations, in religious toleration, and in the cultural life of this community, this commonwealth, this nation, and, indeed, the world.

The Charter recognizes five elements in our immediate constituency: the Corporation, the President, the Faculty, the Students, and the Alumni.

The Corporation is bicameral, being composed of a Board of Trustees and a Board of Fellows. Its meetings are extraordinary, absolutely without parallel. The two bodies assemble separately in the same room at the same time, the Trustees under the chairmanship of the chancellor, the Fellows with the president as chairman. They follow the same agenda and have a joint secretary. Each body votes separately, but every motion requires concurrent action. Half the number of Fellows

present—which, with a bare quorum, might be only three persons—could block the proceedings of the whole Corporation. The checks and balances characteristic of eighteenth century constitutionalism appear in their strongest form, for there is no provision against deadlock. The procedure constitutes an extraordinary precaution against hasty or drastic action.

The Charter aimed to keep the emphasis steadily upon the intellectual, rather than the operational, functions of the University. To that end control of the business affairs of the institution was not assigned to the Trustees alone; they were required to share the management of those activities with the Board of Fellows. Consequently the Trustees never meet except when the Fellows are also in session. Thus the general management of the business of the University is the joint responsibility of Trustees and Fellows acting together. Because of this fact the committees of the Corporation are usually joint committees. The Advisory and Executive Committee and most others which act between meetings of the Corporation are so constituted. In voting upon the work of committees, the two Boards act separately, and they must concur in order to adopt recommendations or to ratify committee action.

The Board of Fellows, however, possesses separate and distinctive powers in addition to those shared with the Trustees. The Charter specifically

delegated to the Fellows, who were called the "learned faculty," control of "the instruction and immediate government of the College." They, therefore, can and do meet separately when discharging their functions of approving curricula, establishing degree requirements, and voting degrees. The design was to guarantee intellectual independence by committing the educational process wholly to the hands of a group who were to reflect the cultural and scholarly character of the University. In no other American institution was the primary intellectual emphasis more clearly defined or so carefully protected.

Any description of the operation of the Corporation is likely to leave a sense of confusion. Experience alone reveals how well the governing bodies function. In 1930 a distinguished group of educators made a survey of the University; they professed bewilderment after they had read and discussed the Charter; but when they applied the test of history, they concluded that "somehow it worked . . . machinery and coordinate boards giving the appearance of cumbersomeness and occasions for friction and delay did work."

I confess that after my first meeting with the Corporation I did not understand how a body so organized could ever reach a responsible decision upon a matter of great difficulty. Experience has shown that it can. The amendment of the Charter in 1942 illustrated the point. The question was old;



it had been discussed recurrently for half a century. Compromise and partial solutions had been given fair trial and had not proved satisfactory. Summoning its powers of decision, the Corporation met the issue deliberately but firmly, discharging its vital function at the highest level of responsibility. The votes had to be taken not once but twice, with several months intervening for observation, reflection, and debate. At the end the dissenting minority was very small, and the decision left no bitterness. The wisdom of the action is attested by the speed with which the result was accepted by the entire constituency.

More recently the Corporation has faced another basic problem—student housing. Again the issue was old; many expedients had been tried, yet the situation remained unsatisfactory. Following careful preparatory work by their subsidiary body, the Advisory and Executive Committee, the Trustees and Fellows reached important decisions upon fundamental policy and program, with steadfastness and calm.

What is the secret of the successful operation of a complicated organization that so baffles and confuses observers? The answer is really very simple indeed. It works as long as both Trustees and Fellows center their attention upon the interests of the University instead of quarrelling about their respective prerogatives. Mutual cooperation makes a seemingly cumbrous instrument function with

smoothness and even flexibility. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a university governing body that discharges its high responsibility with equal effectiveness. There have been mistakes, of course. To impatient reformers decision sometimes seems to move on leaden feet. In the long perspective of Brown's history, however, the record of the Corporation is notably good.

The second element in the structure of the University, recognized by the Charter, is the president. Reference to the office is brief indeed: "It is constituted that the instruction and immediate government of the College shall forever be and rest in the President and Fellows." His election is provided for, he is made a member of the Fellows and their presiding officer, but beyond those brief references to the office his powers are left to delegations of authority and to practice under the Charter. Historically the powers of the president have varied from something approaching dominance almost to insignificance. His influence has been conditioned by the climate of opinion in which he moved, by the temper of the Corporation, the faculty, and the alumni. It will surprise many that these factors have proved more important than the personality of the president. Two of Brown's most vigorous leaders—Wayland and Andrews—ended their labors for the University in frustration.

The president is expected to be an educator, to have been at some time a scholar, to have judgment

about finance, to know something of construction, maintenance, and labor policy, to speak virtually continuously in words that charm and never offend, to take bold positions with which no one will disagree, to consult everyone and follow all proffered advice, and do everything through committees, but with great speed and without error.

During the war the powers of the president have not been very real. The basic determination of the admissions policy of the University has been in the hands of the Army and Navy; the curriculum has been to a great extent prescribed; the fundamental decisions with regard to the research program have been with the armed forces. Personnel policies have been disrupted by leaves of absence for military or other war service and by the unavailability of well-trained young men. In fact, the whole situation has been so abnormal that most of the days and many of the nights have been given over to finding expedients to keep integral the main fabric of the institution. It has required a struggle merely to preserve intact the central objectives of the University. For the last four years the president's task has been to conduct a strategic retreat in the face of overwhelming odds. During the retreat it was necessary to map a great counteroffensive that would rally the whole constituency for a forward drive. The moment for that new thrust is at hand.

The third element in the structure of the University is the faculty. No powers are delegated to the

faculty by the Charter, though it provides for the appointment of personnel. If powers are undefined, obligations are specific. The faculty must give youth of all religious denominations "a like, fair, generous, and equal treatment." In their teaching the faculty are required to "respect the sciences," and not to make "sectarian differences of opinions . . . any part of the public and classical instruction."

If the Board of Fellows insisted upon exercising its full prerogative that "the instruction and immediate government of the College shall forever be and rest in the President and Fellows," the faculty would have no corporate function at all. But over the years sound practical sense has led to such formal and informal delegations of authority, to such realistic and sensible interpretations, that in practice the Brown faculty exercise an initiative and control of curriculum, discipline, and educational policy similar to that exercised in institutions whose charters read wholly differently. The Board of Fellows, nonetheless, continues to take a lively interest in educational matters. At a recent meeting, for example, after the degrees had been voted, a couple of hours were spent in discussion of the make-up of the present faculty and plans for maintaining and enhancing its strength.

No tension exists between the Fellows who possess the authority and the faculty who exercise the power because both concentrate upon the great issues and relegate the lesser to insignificance. It is

a reminder that constitutions can be interpreted in action as long as there is sound perspective upon the task at hand.

The Charter refers to the students only in the passive voice, as it were. Their religious preferences are protected, their morals are set down as a primary concern, but they are definitely to be governed. There is no hint in the Charter that any duties or powers shall be conferred upon them. Yet, anyone familiar with the American college world might live upon this campus for years without detecting in practice any less self-government, any less participation in the activities of the University than would be found in an institution where, by charter or by statute, the students were assigned formal powers. On the contrary they have a varied and interesting life, a freedom of opinion and action which runs well beyond ordinary collegiate practice.

What are the Charter provisions regarding the alumni? Mention is brief, being only by inference, in the preamble. The reference occurs in the frequently quoted phrase, "institutions for liberal education are highly beneficial to society by . . . preserving in the community a succession of men duly qualified for discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation." The Charter thus refers to the activities of graduates in the community but assigns them no powers, duties, rights, or responsibilities in the conduct of the University

itself. The alumni were expected to be the ambassadors of the institution in the world at large.

So indeed they are. Brown University is judged in the scholarly world by its students who enter graduate and professional schools, by the work of its alumni as teachers and administrators. It is judged in the community by the "usefulness and reputation" of its graduates in their daily tasks and their civic activities. Their good repute is a solid and continuous asset.

Despite the silence of the Charter, however, precedent and practice have developed a wide zone of responsible alumni activity within the institution. This was a historical necessity. If the benefits promised in the preamble were genuine, it was inevitable that those graduates who discharged "the offices of life" with distinction in the community would, as a corollary to that attainment, be called to the responsibility of supporting the institution which had contributed to their own position. When the University had nurtured men of character and distinction in sufficient number, they would naturally be chosen to take their places in the Corporation.

Practically, alumni control the Corporation. Of the Fellows, twelve in number, all but three are alumni. One of the three is the president who, by almost universal custom, is appointed without reference to his previous collegiate affiliation. The reason is clear: in a country where education has

no national controls, where each institution is under the jurisdiction of its separate board, the only means of attaining coordination and harmony among the myriad institutions is by the free interchange of professional personnel, instructional and administrative. The over-all success of this principle in the United States is obvious. Several years ago Brown conferred an honorary degree upon the second Fellow not a graduate of this University. He is a leading member of the clergy in that denomination which has always had, and still continues to have, so profound an association with the life and reputation of Brown. The third non-alumnus is a direct descendant of one of the founders and a member of the family from whom this institution derives its name. There is, consequently, a personal intimacy with the history and destiny of the University which gives him a relationship somewhat different from that of an alumnus, but no less significant.

In the Board of Trustees the dominance of the alumni is even more overwhelming, all but four of the forty-two members being Brown men. Two of these four represented the Quaker interest as was provided in the Charter at the time of their election. One of the other two is the holder of an honorary degree from Brown; both are long-time residents of Rhode Island with a deep concern for the welfare of the University.

Moreover, the interests of the alumni as an or-

ganized group have been given explicit recognition. Graduates have the privilege of nominating (virtually electing) one third of the members of the Board of Trustees. Everything has been done to facilitate complete independence of choice, to provide the most convenient arrangements for such nominations, and generally to make the representation as effective as possible. The procedures are embodied in an agreement which leaves them wholly in the hands of the Associated Alumni up to the moment of formal election. A list of candidates is prepared by the Executive Committee of the Associated Alumni, after full opportunity is given regional Brown Clubs to make suggestions. The slate is determined at the Advisory Council meeting, and the nominees are then voted upon by the whole alumni body. The two persons thus chosen are formally elected by the Corporation, eighty-five per cent of the members of which are alumni. As provided by the agreement, Alumni Trustees resign at the end of seven years and are not immediately eligible for reelection. In this manner their mandate from the alumni body is kept fresh, but their terms are long enough to let them gain experience in the work of the Corporation and play an effective role in its functioning.

By historical processes the alumni, for whose participation in the governance of the University the Charter made no provision, now dominate it. The Corporation, indeed, is a fair cross section of



those who, after initial guidance by the University, have achieved "usefulness and reputation" in the world at large.

Alumni loyalty, translated into official responsibility, produces amazing manifestations of self-sacrificing devotion. We have, for example, the full-time services of a treasurer who accepts no remuneration but brings to his duties industry, wisdom, and skill which are beyond praise. Week after week the Investment Committee wrestles with our basic financial problems. The Advisory and Executive Committee at its monthly meetings and its members in between times give scrupulous attention to the detailed business of the University. The Board of Fellows not only meets its formal obligations but evinces a lively interest in everything that affects the integrity of our intellectual life. Special committees spend time, thought, and energy upon the solution of particular problems. The semi-annual over-all review by the full Corporation is an effective instrument for coordinating the varied activities having to do with the management of Brown's affairs.

Membership in the Corporation is only one means by which the alumni directly influence the course of the University. The Associated Alumni are a completely autonomous body with a powerful influence and great responsibilities. The Executive Committee of that body and its Advisory Council affect policy at many points and help

shape our course. The *Alumni Monthly* is published by the University and sent free to all alumni; it is wholly controlled, however, by a board of editors appointed by the Associated Alumni; it is, therefore, an organ of opinion and promotion under alumni direction. The Alumni Fund Trustees establish their own procedures and conduct their own campaign. The Athletic Advisory Council virtually determines the athletic program. To all these activities, and to those of the many regional Brown Clubs, large numbers of alumni give loyal and valued service.

The reality of alumni power is apparent in all its substance and verity. The processes exist by which it may be channeled into fullest effectiveness. It is one of the primary functions of the Associated Alumni to be certain that these procedures are understood by all graduates. As each alumnus pictures clearly his relation to the College and accepts its implied obligations, he takes his place as an active and vital member of the organization of the University, formally and informally contributing to the determination and execution of policies.

In summary, if one examines what actually transpires, it is evident that, despite the brief and oblique reference in the Charter, there is a larger substantive control of this University by its own alumni than in any but a very small group of institutions in the entire country. In no institution is it greater.

Such is the structure of Brown University. Without violating the fundamental law by which we are governed, practical expedients have opened the way for the faculty, the students, and the alumni to play roles quite unforeseen in 1764. Because so much of this structure rests upon tradition and experience, it is dependent upon mutual respect and forbearance. Lacking active cooperation the whole fabric would disintegrate.

The balance between the several elements is maintained by absorption in the fundamental educational purposes of the institution. Success is utterly conditioned by maintenance of those essential aims in right perspective. Friction with regard to prerogative would instantly upset that balance. If the Board of Fellows were selfishly to exercise its full powers, the faculty would be helpless. If the faculty were to insist upon the full letter of their delegated authority, the student body could be deprived of all independence. If the Corporation were jealously to protect its formal rights, the alumni body could be without influence.

Similarly, if the alumni in any of their organizations were to make an issue of their recognition rather than exploiting the great powers and privileges which they possess, there could be no effective cooperation. A separatist spirit, by which any one element were set against, or even apart from, other elements of the constituency, would result in evil. Kipling summed up the way to disaster when he

denounced the pretentious "brave new world," "where all men insist on their merits, and no one desists from his sins." It is essential to the welfare of our University for all men to insist on *its* merits, and for each to desist from *his* sins.

With the end of the war, great problems recently overlaid by preoccupation with immediate concerns are materializing. If they are attacked with boldness and courage, with wisdom and energy, with everyone doing his best, they can be met. If all cooperate vigorously, there will be an opportunity for Brown to seize a position of leadership in education such as it never had before.

The war's inflation and the prospect of post-war inflation necessitate large increases in resources just to maintain our position; yet more will be needed if we are to move ahead. We must set about raising that money promptly. Student housing at Brown has not been satisfactory for at least a hundred years; now is the time for everyone to see that it becomes an educational asset. Student recruitment and selection can be doubly successful with the aid of a loyal and enthusiastic alumni body. The faculty needs strengthening; retaining our distinguished scholars and teachers, replacing those who retire, and attracting others depend upon faith that Brown has a great future. Once that faith falters, an institution becomes a happy hunting ground for other universities in search of talent. A united constituency is essential to the

fullest measure of faith in the future of the University.

We are the inheritors of a grand tradition. Our alumni roll is star studded with great names. We have a strategic position and notable assets. There lie before us opportunities exceeding any we have known in the past. The Greeks had a word for our present need — “enthusiasm.” It is one of the most picturesque of all the words borrowed from antiquity. It means “filled with a god.” Godlike men have powers beyond the human, endurance beyond the mortal, energy beyond their own. The founders of Brown University exhibited those traits. The magnitude of our modern task demands the same qualities. We should cherish our great past as a source of inspiration, and then summon fresh courage and renewed energy to attain new goals.