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Walter Dill Scott and the Student Personnel Movement

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Walter Dill Scott (1869–1955), tenth president of Northwestern University and pioneer of industrial psychology, is an essential architect of student personnel work. This study of his accomplishments, drawing on records from the Northwestern University archives, tells a story about the people he influenced and his involvement in codifying what was formerly student personnel work, now called student affairs.

The primary purpose of a college training, away and beyond that of imparting a certain amount of factual knowledge, is that of producing changes in the behavior and thinking of students. Every hour of the week, within class and without, should contribute to this underlying purpose. (Walter Dill Scott, as cited in Correspondent, 1936, p. 92)

Walter Dill Scott was a pioneer in the establishment of personnel procedures for industry and business. He later applied the same techniques to the military during World War I. Later, as president of Northwestern University, he brought the same techniques to the college campus.
and refocused his personnel psychology theories from employees and offices in training to college students. From his perspective as an industrial psychologist and a college president, he saw the intersection of psychological measurement and assessment and vocational guidance for college students as a great opportunity. This article begins with a brief biography of Dr. Scott and then expands to discuss his significance in the history of student affairs and his unique role in the student personnel movement in American higher education.

A Biographical Sketch of Walter Dill Scott

Walter Dill Scott was born in Cooksville, Illinois, not far from Bloomington–Normal, Illinois, in 1869. He was one of five children—two boys and three girls. His father had been a carriage maker in Boston until poor health forced him to find other work. The Scott family moved to a farm in Illinois where he, his older brother John, and their three sisters managed the small family-owned farm (Beatty, 1980).

Undergraduate Years

Early in their lives, Dr. Scott and his brother decided that they wanted to be teachers, but the family lacked the money to pay for a college education. But by teaching in rural schools near Normal, Illinois, Dr. Scott was able to afford to take some college courses at Illinois State Normal College (now Illinois State University). He sat for a special examination and earned a scholarship to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in 1891 (Beatty, 1980).

At Northwestern, Dr. Scott blossomed into an active undergraduate including service as first-year student class treasurer and senior class president. He edited the *Syllabus*, the campus paper; was vice president of a literary society; and played left guard on the varsity football team. A man well over six feet, he was an imposing figure in street clothes and on the football field.

When an undergraduate, Dr. Scott abandoned the idea of becoming a teacher and set his sights on becoming the president of a Chinese university. He was familiar with numerous missionary colleges in there that had been established by various religious denominations. With his new career goal in mind, he enrolled at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago after completing his undergraduate degree at Northwestern in 1895. In 1898, he earned his Bachelor of Divinity degree and married Anna Marcy Miller, who also attended Northwestern, and together they raised two sons (Beatty, 1980).

Study Abroad

With degrees from Northwestern and McCormick, Dr. Scott was well prepared to move to China, but no openings for ministers were available; instead, he decided to pursue his interest in psychology. He and Anna moved to Germany where he studied under Wilhelm Wundt, one of the fathers of the new social science of psychology. Wundt “separated” psychology from philosophy and
Walter Dill Scott was creating a worldwide following with his ideas and writing in experimental psychology, which led to the development and application of behavioral psychology. Wundt saw behavioral psychology as a pragmatic way of using learning as a conditioned response to the environment, which could then be studied systematically (Reiber & Robinson, 2001). Dr. Scott earned his PhD in educational administration and psychology under Wundt at the University of Leipzig. At the same time, Anna earned her doctoral degree in philology and art from the University of Halle. Both Scotts completed their degrees in 1900 (Beatty, 1980).

**Early Career**

The Scotts returned to Chicago where Dr. Scott accepted a position as an instructor in psychology and pedagogy at Northwestern in 1902. He moved quickly through the ranks of academe and was promoted to full professor in 1907. He also authored three books: *Theory of Advertising* (1903), *Psychology of Advertising* (1908), and *Increasing Human Efficiency in Business* (1912). In 1916, he was granted a leave of absence to work as the director of the Bureau of Salesmanship at the Carnegie Institute of Technology where he studied the psychology of salesmanship and applied psychological tests and measurements to business (Beatty, 1980).

When World War I broke out, Dr. Scott offered to implement his personnel psychology theories in the U.S. Army for officer training and personnel classification purposes. He was initially rejected, but later he was allowed to try his system at Ft. Myers in New Jersey where he had great success; and the “Scott system” was applied to officer training in several settings. He was so successful that the Army awarded him the Distinguished Service Medal in 1919 (Beatty, 1980).

After the war, in February 1919, Dr. Scott and several former Army associates founded the Scott Company, *Engineers and Consultants in Industrial Personnel* with offices in several major U.S. cities—a highly successful consulting firm with notable clients (Ferguson, 1976). The officers and associates of the Scott Company (Scott, ca. 1923; Ruml, n.d.) included an impressive list of future college and university leaders, including several signatories of the *Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV; American Council on Education [ACE], 1937). Foreshadowing the SPPV, Dr. Scott and Robert Clothier (1923) wrote that the primary goal of their work was to link employee efficiency to satisfaction, which could be achieved with management methods focusing on the individual rather than the work.

The Scott Company was off to a very successful start when Dr. Scott was invited to return to Northwestern to become president of his alma mater. In the same year, he was elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA). Dr. Scott could not resist the offer; and in 1920, he became president of Northwestern and, concurrently, the APA. Early in his presidency, he saw an opportunity to apply the new field of personnel psychology to higher education. It was clear to him that the ideas and methods he had used so successfully in business and factories as well as in the U.S. Army could also work on the college campus with college students. The Northwestern
News Index (1922) reported his hiring under the headline, “Northwestern to Polish as Well as Teach: University Appoints Personnel Leader to Guide Moral and Social Attitudes.”

The Personnel Department at Northwestern

Despite his national reputation and success in developing and applying his personnel psychology methods in the military and in industry, Dr. Scott did not rush to make changes at Northwestern. He waited two years before he initiated the Personnel Office on campus. As president, he inherited an institution that needed some significant changes: Northwestern faced several significant problems, including a shaky financial base with an inadequate endowment; a troubled physical plant with an immediate need for new residence halls, classroom space, and research buildings; as well as unreliable recruitment, admissions, and retention issues (Scott Hall Committee, 1939).

Dr. Scott’s faith in the benefits of industrial psychology led him to reorganize the administrative staff at Northwestern to better serve student needs. He was shrewd enough to implement these organizational changes in small doses; having experienced the initial rejection of his innovative ideas by the U.S. Army, he was careful to make incremental changes. In this way, he was less overbearing than his presidential predecessors though it is clear, however, that he remained personally involved in student policy issues, as evidenced by his establishment of several boards (Scott, 1920–1921) and his long-term involvement with the Board of Supervision of Student Activities (1921–1939).

Creating the Personnel Office, 1920–1925

Dr. Scott believed that a campus personnel office could offer solutions to his enrollment management issues, help increase student satisfaction through the assessment of student needs, and aid in the job placement of students after graduation by using personnel methods that had proved successful in industry (Scott, 1922). To play a key role in this significant change of the Northwestern administration, he hired a former associate from the Scott Company, L.B. Hopkins, to head up the new Personnel Office at Northwestern. The institution had little extra money to fund the new effort, so he convinced Wilson Brothers, a manufacturing company with whom he consulted previously, of the pragmatism of his personnel psychology approach and, through them, secured the salary for Hopkins to be the first director of the Personnel Office (Scott, 1923, June 8). With Hopkins working to carry out their common plan, he was free to devote his energy toward fundraising to keep the university solvent. In a letter he wrote to Hopkins in 1925, Dr. Scott jested, “If I can raise two and a half million dollars in a year and you can select and direct all the students, we shall ultimately have quite a university. Here’s to the Greater Northwestern thus created!” (p. 2).

The Personnel Office staff began their work by introducing one of the key steps in the personnel psychology approach—interviewing and classifying all the new students on campus. As he had done in his consulting work with the Army and with his many business clients, he and Hopkins
instituted an individual record, which used an “appointment card” format. The new Personnel Office created the appointment cards for each new student and detailed information on each student was gathered through yearly interviews as they progressed in their study. The Personnel Office staff member who met with each student would inquire about the student's work, social activities, family characteristics, and other key elements of the student's background.

**Walter Dill Scott’s Personnel Philosophy**

In a speech to the junior class to explain the functions of the new office, Dr. Scott explained the following:

I don’t assume that all of you will make grand opera singers; I don’t assume that all of you can run one hundred yards in ten seconds. I do expect that there are some things that each of you can do better than you can do other things. We want to help you find out what things you can do best. (as cited in Hopkins, 1923, p. 5)

Dr. Scott was keenly interested and involved in the work of the department, as evidenced by the many memos he sent to L.B. Hopkins as well as his annual Board of Trustee reports (Scott, 1922–1941), which included the activities of the Personnel Department alongside reports from each of the academic departments on campus. As an example, Hopkins sent a memo to him in which he noted data relating scholastic standings and psychological test scores of college accomplishment could be used to aid in the selection of the upcoming first-year student class (Hopkins, 1923, March 13). In the memo he wrote, “[w]e must not lose sight of the fact that qualities other than scholastic ability must be considered in selecting next year’s freshmen [sic]” (Scott, 1923, March 13).

In many respects, the new Personnel Department was created to perform duties similar to a typical personnel office found in industry; but instead of focusing on enhancing worker productivity, it focused on student adjustment and achievements to promote and increase efficiency. Hopkins (1922) noted that “American universities are more and more asserting and assuming responsibility for the general development of their students as well as for their purely formal education” (p. 227), representing a major philosophical shift in personnel application.

Hopkins listed the four aspects of well-balanced personnel work on a college campus and how these were used as the basis for developing personnel work at Northwestern:

1. an interest in individuals;
2. an appreciation of the methods of science, as opposed to unsupported personal convictions, feelings, or class prejudices;
3. utilization of scientific methods and scientific knowledge in personnel pursuit; and
4. the coordination of the work of all agencies within the institution participating in either personnel service or personnel research or both, so that service and research in the institution may not proceed on divergent paths, but rather work in a reciprocal relationship. (as cited in Lloyd-Jones, 1929, p. 19)
In campus interviews (Fry, c.a. 1924) and through articles (Hopkins, 1924), Dr. Scott and Hopkins described the Personnel Office as a way of taking a “personal point of view” to help a large university operate like a smaller one in its individualized treatment of students. A 1926 pamphlet stated the motto of the Personnel Department on its cover: “Before all else . . . comes the individual, his welfare, his opportunity for self-development” (Personnel Department, 1926).

A National Movement

Once the Personnel Office was up and running, both Dr. Scott and Hopkins began to look for additional ways to improve the functions of the operation. One missing element they noted was the lack of women on the staff who might better address the needs and interests of female students. Hopkins identified a young undergraduate, Esther McDonald, who had expressed strong interest in psychology and Dr. Scott and Hopkins’ personnel psychology in particular. McDonald was a very active undergraduate and an outstanding student at Northwestern, and she was engaged in several student organizations and understood the importance of connecting the individual student with the institution through not only academics but student activities as well.

With Dr. Scott’s approval and Hopkins’ endorsement, McDonald was appointed to be the Personnel Department’s first assistant director for women after graduating from Northwestern. She also arranged to pursue her master’s degree while serving in the Personnel Office. McDonald, better known to contemporary audiences by her married name, Esther Lloyd-Jones, served in her new position for two years, 1924–1926, before leaving to do graduate work in personnel services at Teachers College, Columbia University under the tutelage of Sarah Sturtevant and Ruth Strang. Her experiences at Northwestern eventually led to her dissertation, Student Personnel Work at Northwestern University, the first comprehensive work on campus student personnel services. Her dissertation was later published as a book in 1929. Dr. Scott was so excited about her book that he ordered 140 copies from the publisher to hand out to faculty, staff, and alumni across the country (Scott, 1929, August 21).

Work of the Northwestern Personnel Office, 1926–1933

In 1926, the same year that Esther (McDonald) Lloyd-Jones left for Teachers College, L.B. Hopkins left Northwestern to become president of Wabash College in Indiana. D.T. Howard was hired from the Northwestern psychology faculty to serve as the second director of the Personnel Department and remained in that position until 1935. Following the lead of his predecessor, Howard sent a letter to the faculty in which he described the aims and working plans of the department (Howard, 1926). His intention, emphasized several times in the 10-page letter, was to convey that a personnel approach was “not a matter of joining and fitting, but rather of nurture, cultivation, and development” (p. 4). Two year later, Howard (1928) expressed his belief that the office had “arrived” to become an established student service at Northwestern, noting that students relied on the department for advice and assistance with their problems. The office staff grew to 14 members by 1930;
and by then the office had become responsible for a wide range of activities, from academic performance and undergraduate spirituality to financial aid, retention, and broader admissions policies.

When L.B. Hopkins assumed the presidency at Wabash College, he followed Dr. Scott's example at Northwestern and quickly established a Personnel Office on campus. To implement both the concept and practice, he took it upon himself to personally interview all Wabash students during his first year, using the personnel techniques that Dr. Scott had developed at Northwestern. Another Scott Company alumnus, Robert Clothier (dean of men at The University of Pittsburgh during 1929–1932 and president of Rutgers during 1932–1951), was also worked to adopt Dr. Scott's personnel methods at his institution.

ACE and SPPV

In the mid-1920s, the personnel effort on college campuses was limited to only a few other institutions beyond Northwestern. The personnel movement might have remained a limited effort, except that ACE took interest in Dr. Scott's work, and planning began to make the personnel method a national movement. The initial impetus for the application of personnel methods on additional campuses came from the January 1, 1925 Conference on Vocational Guidance sponsored by the National Research Council and attended by representatives of 14 colleges and universities. An executive committee was created and took on the immediate task of finding a source to fund a nationwide effort to explore the use of the personnel method on additional campuses and to broaden the scope of the personnel movement.

The ACE task force approached the Rockefeller Foundation for assistance and was awarded $7,500 (around $93,000 in adjusted 2010 dollars). The money was used to fund a national survey on personnel methods to be directed by Hopkins (1926). The results from the survey showed a strong interest on the part of many colleges and universities to use the personnel psychology methods, but also showed a mixed response in terms of application of personnel methods and understanding of the concepts, much less any expertise in implementation.

To respond to this vacuum of knowledge and awareness, ACE created five new committees to work on specific areas related to the use of personnel psychology in higher education and to a lesser degree in high schools. The five committees were: Personal Record Cards, Achievement Tests, Personality Measurement, Occupational Information, and Personal Development. The committee was chaired by Herbert Hawkes, dean of students at Columbia, and included: Hopkins, president at Wabash College; Frances F. Bradshaw, dean of men at the University of North Carolina; and W. W. Charters, professor at The Ohio State University (Hopkins, 1926).

The original intent was for the personnel effort to be applied in high schools as well as at colleges and universities. With the belief that if students could be interviewed and classified in high school, the personnel method would be even more effective in college. Over the next several years, the ACE committees met and conducted several other surveys, and eventually began to see the per-
sonnel movement move forward incrementally (Schwartz, 2010). In the 1930s an ACE subcommit-
tee, the Committee on Student Personnel Work, headed by E. G. Williamson of the University of
Minnesota and including several women, most notably Esther Lloyd-Jones, continued the work of
the original ACE effort that began in 1925–1926. This subcommittee, under the direction of ACE
president George Zook, met throughout 1936; and in 1937, published the SPPV (ACE, 1937).

The SPPV did not exist in isolation; it was part of a much larger effort sponsored by ACE and
a number of member colleges and universities through considerable collaboration between ACE
and representatives of the vocational guidance associations, appointment secretaries (now career
services), the deans of women and, eventually, some deans of men. In the 1930s, the desire to expand
and codify the personnel psychology efforts that Dr. Scott and his colleagues introduced at North-
western in the early 1920s became a significant movement in higher education. Although the SPPV
as promulgated by ACE was not immediately adopted, it certainly became a well-known and much
discussed movement in higher education with many proponents. An equal number of detractors,
however, were concerned that the “scientific nuts” who created the personnel movement would
remove the compassionate, interpersonal relationship with students from the role of the work of
the deans of men and to a lesser degree, deans of women (Schwartz, 2010).

**Developments at Northwestern, 1930 and Beyond**

While the activities of ACE were advancing, Dr. Scott was focused on his own campus and its
continued reorganization and efficiency. In 1930, he requested that the Personnel Department com-
plete an efficiency study of campus administrative operations. These included a review of the deans
of men and women, personnel officers, admissions staff, religious organizations, student activities,
and student health. He specifically wanted to know the following:

1. Does any one person or position attempt to carry on the work that might better be per-
formed by another person or position?
2. Is there a conflict or competition between persons and offices?
3. Are there phases of personnel work that should be done that are being omitted?
4. Can you suggest desirable changes in our present set-up? (Scott, 1930)

In 1933, Dr. Scott proposed a new office to the Board of Trustees that would coordinate and
make the efforts of campus agencies related to extracurricular activities more effective (Scott, 1933).
The approved motion moved, at Dr. Scott’s insistence, Elias Lyman, formerly assistant to the presi-
dent, into what contemporary practitioners might consider a new role as vice president of student
personnel services.

This experiment would not last long. As Lyman later noted in a memo to the deans and fac-
ulty at Northwestern, he believed his role in coordinating the “extra academic” aspects of student
life was not successful due to inevitable conflicts. Specifically, he wrote, “their plans for develop-
ment were developing areas of inevitable conflict . . . and could be resolved only by a major reorga-
Organizational design” (Lyman 1939, p. 5). In the intervening years, Lyman (1935) proposed a more centralized organizational structure to promote efficiency and eliminate “a system of divided responsibilities . . . incomprehensible to the general public who cannot understand why a multiplicity of contacts with the student is necessary or desirable” (p. 19). Although Lyman’s plan left room for the existing deans of men and women, in 1936 he abolished both positions and implemented a new organizational structure otherwise similar to Lyman’s proposal. The Daily Northwestern (News Board, 1936) reported that, although some other universities also had eliminated these offices, “this ‘brainchild’ has been evolved by President Scott and will be unique as a pioneer in the field of university counseling” (p. 7).

At Northwestern, specialized professionals with formal training in the field of personnel work became fundamental to the work on campus. Dr. Scott described this change as an attempt to avoid departmentalization in counseling services (News Board, 1936). As he told one reporter,

Personnel work in the past has tended . . . to be split among a group of specialists, each attempting to interpret some one phase of undergraduate life, such as housing, discipline, health, social activities, and the like. The new plan will allow the breakdown of departmental barriers and will permit the direct routing of the student to the staff member best qualified to counsel with him [sic]. (Correspondent, 1936, 92).

Esther Lloyd-Jones (1929) had earlier recommended this form of specialized, central administration in her book (p. 208) and then in a letter to Dr. Scott (Lloyd-Jones 1935) after he requested her opinion. In her letter, she noted the “next step toward improvement in this field will be some careful provision for coordination of the functions, bringing them into relationship with each other . . . and into coordinated focus on each individual student” (p. 3).

Dr. Scott solicited advice from others as well, including Robert Clothier (1935) and L.B. Hopkins (1935), prior to enacting this second organizational shift. In his response to Scott, Hopkins remarked, “[t]o my mind it is a mighty fascinating thing to speculate about but about as explosive as dynamite to play with.” Hopkins’s letter also hinted at another possible link between industry and the university, referencing “the Edwin Booz associates’ recommendation concerning a dean of students.” Booz was a former student of Dr. Scott’s and a colleague in personnel work in the Army during World War I; together they established a business consulting firm in 1919, which is still in existence as Booz, Allen, Hamilton, Inc. (2012).

The major development this action accomplished was to merge personnel work with all other facets of noninstructional staff, uniting it under one coordinating officer. Lyman (1937, pp. 1–3) outlined the role of the Office of Counselors, intended to organize staff concerned with student activities (e.g., fraternity/sorority relationships, behavioral issues). The former Northwestern assistant dean of men, J.L. Rollins, was made director of dormitories, a new coordinating office at Northwestern expected to work closely with the Office of Counselors.
The formation of the Board of Personnel Work split the faculty and staff at Northwestern into two distinct groups, which Lyman strove to philosophically unify under a general goal of student education (Lyman, 1938, 1939). Tensions would later lead to the creation of a faculty-led Council on Personnel Work for Students (Evans et al., 1939) as a means of formally reinvolving the faculty in noninstructional work—particularly in policy determination and disciplinary functions. The council would be granted the latter, but the authority to determine policy would be left to the board and Dr. Scott’s considerable influence as president.

This second reorganization at Northwestern, informed by prolific thinkers who would later codify the student personnel profession, supported Dr. Scott’s role as the lead architect among a staff of many consultants. During these transitional years, he worked closely with his staff and his network of correspondents to ensure that his personnel philosophy informed his administrative pragmatism. Not long after this transition at Northwestern, the SPPV was published in 1937; the SPPV was heavily influenced and deeply indebted to Dr. Scott and his associates.

**Walter Dill Scott’s Legacy**

The legacy of Walter Dill Scott is in some ways indirect. This study of his accomplishments related to the origins of student personnel work tells a story divided between the people he influenced as well as his own direct involvement. As a result, it is not surprising that the contemporary view of Dr. Scott does not recognize him for his pioneering efforts in personnel psychology, nor is he credited for the adaption of his personnel psychology principles and his application of those principles to the college campus. It might be argued that it was his associates (e.g., Hopkins, Lloyd-Jones, Clothier, and others) who advanced many of the contributions detailed in this study; but on closer inspection, that argument fails on several points.

It is quite clear that Dr. Scott and his inspired work in psychology was key in influencing others. Hopkins and Clothier were initially employees of his at the Scott Company, and Lloyd-Jones was his student and mentee at Northwestern. It was his insightful and determined application of his theories and practice in personnel psychology to industry, then to the military, and finally, to higher education that paved the way for the significant changes in what was then known as student personnel work and is now called student affairs. His creation of personnel psychology is sine qua non or “essential to the existence” of the current practice of student affairs.

**Conclusion**

Dr. Scott was optimistic about the future of his new Personnel Department after the first year of its establishment. In his President’s Report to the Board of Trustees, he wrote the following:

[...] the University has high hopes of the Department, and while the year’s work has been necessarily mainly organization and preliminary collection of data, actual achievements promise well for the future. I believe that such a scientific study of the students as Mr. Hopkins is...
making will lead to an understanding of successes and failures in college and later in life which will have a vital effect on the evolution of education. (Scott, 1923, November 3, p. 7)

The organizational scheme he developed and refined to professionalize and then operationalize student personnel work is familiar to student affairs personnel almost a century later. His significant contributions and influence make a compelling case for his inclusion as a legacy of the profession and lend credibility to his role as an essential, if not the, architect of student personnel work.

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