

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

J. E. WALLACE STERLING (1906 – 1985)

John Ewart Wallace Sterling, Chancellor and former President of Stanford University, died on July 1, 1985, at the age of 78.

His association with Stanford began in 1932, when he entered as a graduate student in history. While working towards his Ph.D., he served on the research staff of the Hoover Library. Upon receiving his doctorate in 1938, he was appointed to the History Department at the California Institute of Technology, where within seven years he became full professor and chairman. He had just been appointed as head of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in 1948 when he was offered the presidency of Stanford in November of that year.

President Sterling came to a university marked by promise and problems. The university was a strong one, with outstanding individual departments. But it was not of the first rank in scholarly reputation. Its orientation was regional, not national or global. Further, it suffered from severe financial problems. The Stanford legacy, extraordinary in its time, had by the 1940s become inadequate, and there was no great tradition of gift-giving by alumni and friends of the university. Finally, there was the major problem of the Medical School. Located in San Francisco in totally inadequate facilities, it had either to be abandoned or made a more integral part of the university.

President Sterling quickly proved his outstanding qualities of leadership. He set his sights high, and the achievement of quality became his first priority. For students, the primary obstacle to improving their caliber was lack of financial aid. Less than 5% of Stanford students received financial aid when he took office. As a result of his personal interest and direct intervention, that figure went to over one-third during his presidency. Numbers increased also, but slowly, from 8,300 to 11,300, primarily at the graduate level. However, quantity was never the aim, only quality.

Even more emphasis went into improving the faculty, both in numbers and in quality. A continuing priority was increase in faculty salaries, used to attract and keep the ablest possible faculty. This was accompanied by increasingly high standards for appointments and promotions. Perhaps even more important was the atmosphere of high aspirations and high expectations created by Wally (one cannot avoid the nickname by which he was addressed and referred to by all; it is so much a part of his persona). The size of the faculty rose with the quality level; there were 322 members of the Academic Council in 1948, and 974 twenty years later.

His closeness to the faculty was not confined to administrative considerations of numbers and quality. He clearly enjoyed and valued contact with the professors. Until the creation of the Senate in 1968, the entire Academic Council was the governing body, over which Wally presided with wit, good humor, even in trying moments, and evident pleasure. He also presided over the Executive Committee of the Academic Council, which prepared the agenda, and his relaxation and sense of being at home are still cherished by those of us who participated.

He was a firm defender of academic freedom for the faculty in a difficult period when such defense was strongly needed. Despite formidable pressures, faculty accused of left-wing tendencies, unjustly or justly, were protected and defended.

We may also recall to the Senate that the present Faculty Club building was given high priority by him and constructed during his presidency.

Central though the quality of faculty and students was, and is, the university had many other problems which Wally had to face. The university had to be reoriented to a broader perspective. Over the years, membership of the Board of Trustees was drawn from a much wider geographical base and from outside as well as inside the Stanford community. The university not only became a research and educational center of international eminence, but it literally went overseas. In 1958 the pioneering institution of the overseas campuses was introduced.

Under Wally's imaginative and bold direction, the problem of the Medical School was resolved. It was moved to the campus, where it became integrated into the University in a way rare for medical schools. Its scientific standing jumped to its present intellectual prominence within a few years. Yet fears that the medical school would be a financial drain on the university were proved unfounded.

Wally took the initiative in putting the financial affairs of the university on a firm footing. He introduced systematic long-range planning. From this basis, the university launched the PACE campaign, the largest fund-raising effort for any university up to that time. It was successful beyond even optimistic expectations, with Wally playing an intimate guiding and leading role throughout.

His leadership was recognized outside the university and indeed internationally. Perhaps most significantly, he served from 1961 to 1963 as President of the Association of American Universities, a consortium of the leading universities of the nation. Honorary degrees, participation in many governmental boards, and an honorary knighthood in 1976 from Queen Elizabeth II testify to his world-wide recognition.

We have used the term "leadership" frequently, because no one better embodied that elusive concept. His way was not that of the authoritarian. It was to encourage and support others in their respective roles. A dean, a department head, a faculty member, a student leader was encouraged and expected to be independent in thinking and decision but was held up to the highest standards. Wally had no problem giving credit to others for their accomplishments. He was secure and did not need the applause directed to others. He was especially good at selecting younger and less well-known people for his study committees and administrative appointments and at giving them backing and confidence needed to bring out their best. But the autonomy he gave was accompanied by a requirement of responsibility, especially potent because his knowledge about the university, even to details, was so deep.

His retirement years were active ones, including co-chairmanship of an even larger and again record-breaking fund-raising campaign for Stanford.

Kenneth J. Arrow, Chair
Lyle M. Nelson
Rixford K. Snyder
H. Don Winbigler