

Western Kentucky University

**TopSCHOLAR®**

---

Faculty/Staff Personal Papers

WKU Archives Records

---

5-11-1965

## UA37/44 Succession

Gordon Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/fac\\_staff\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/fac_staff_papers)



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty/Staff Personal Papers by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

May 11, 1965

It is hard for me to keep up with the enormous changes that seem to be coming every day: the many buildings under way or being planned, the changes in faculty, the growth of our student body, the rapid development of Western into a university in fact if not in name. Our growth since 1955 reminds me of Lowell's description of the typical New England spring, which is always late as compared with more southerly regions but comes with a bound once it gets started. For years our college marked time. Some of this was due to the general condition of things, some was due to inadequate leadership, some was due to a lack of sufficient demand from our service area, some was just politics and its trifling with conditions. To have lived through such a time qualifies us older ones to be suspicious of laissez faire, best translated in modern slang as "Let things ride." No greater threat to any institution--social, religious, educational, political, business--can be found than that. Our national government has lived through several such eras, when it seemed too much trouble to start anything; think of the rather inadequate leadership in the Presidency after Jackson and before Lincoln, and think how dead-level was the same leadership after Lincoln for ever so long. In a wise-crack column of many years ago appeared this warning: "Keep your business wound up, or the sheriff will come in and wind it up for you."

Among the dozens of things Western is doing or starting I want to talk a bit about a very serious one: succession. It is time, I think, for a serious attempt to follow the big colleges and universities and arrange for departmental heads to step down at sixty-five and teach until complete retirement. Many of our worst ills as a college would have been avoided if that rule could have been applied to us. It is a false loyalty to assume that old blood is better than young blood merely because it was good some time ago. You know

how I stuck my neck out when you asked about my possible successor when I said that relative youth must be the first consideration. I believe this now even more than I did then. Years ago, not long before I reached sixty-five, I said again and again that I wished that I could step down as the head of the English department and devote my remaining five years of service to my classrooms. Naturally, I would have resented it if I had done this and no other departmental head, no matter how old, had followed suit. Many people still try to be nice to me by saying that I am still as able as ever to run a department, but I hush such well-wishers by reminding them of the tragic dangers of too-old leadership by departmental heads. A few visits to our curriculum committee a few years ago should have convinced even the most skeptical that there arrives in all lives a point of no return and that it is false loyalty to keep a person in authority long past his usefulness. As yet I am not sold to the idea of having a department run by a chairman, appointed for a few years. I do feel that a departmental head should be given a longer chance to show his ability than a mere four- or eight-year term. If he is worth being a departmental head, he ought to be given sufficient time to mature some of his plans.

Western has needed, ever since it aspired to be a four-year college, some definite and rather hard-boiled method of rating its faculty. Inequities in salary used to be one of the sorest sore spots around here. I realize that there is never any sure way of translating worth into dollars and prominence; but a stagger at such a system is, as you know, necessary if we as a college mean to hold up our heads among colleges in general. I am greatly pleased with the efforts that you and your administration have made to formulate a policy about the ranking of teachers. More power to you, in this as in many other fields!

While I am on this subject, I had about as well say another thing or two. There has been entirely too much name-calling in Bowling Green. If anybody taught in Ogden, or was president, at least, he was Doctor, and no amount of catalogue reading could or would correct this. Many people seem <sup>to think</sup> that it is highly complimentary to call a teacher Doctor, maybe to make him feel good; this strikes me as being like calling a buck private Captain to make him happy. The public knowledge of a teacher's actual rating is to be desired; I see no reason why we could not do this, for Indiana University had the ratings in print--in the catalogue and on the schedules--fifty-odd years ago; I have heard that this is common practice in all large colleges and universities. I knew which of my teachers were Professors, which were Associate Professors, which were Assistant Professors, and which were Instructors from my first term at Indiana. Why not? Of course, we had to come a long way here to be a college, but we are one and can be excused from the fault, if it is one, of letting the average citizen know who is who. There was a time, not too long before your time, when we got scolded if we even asked our ratings and rankings. Some of us knew, some asked officials of the state department of education, and some assumed rankings that they never had. If a ranking or rating is worth having, there should be no hush-hush about it. Again I am glad that Western is growing in this direction and can soon, let us hope, recognize publicly the necessary ratings of any or every faculty members.

So common was Doctor used by everybody here, with a rare knowledge of its appropriateness, that I refused to exhibit my own Ph. D. diploma. I framed it to keep it from getting wrinkled or dirty and then set the framed sheepskin inside my storeroom, with its face to the wall. I urged students for decades to call their teachers Professor if they liked, for that term is appropriate in general, but to be sure to

have some reason for using any other term. Since my retirement I have been caught in the trap of which I speak. Locally, I am Dr. Gordon Wilson, and nothing seems able to stop that. Consequently, I sometimes find myself calling myself that when speaking to some visitor or stranger. I still like Gordon Wilson, with no prefixes or suffixes attached, but I realize that, in general, that would seem a bit too raw and familiar among strangers and, especially, among younger friends. In my age-long period of teaching I always prefixed Mr., Miss, or Mrs. to the name of any student, no matter how young or how long I may have known the student or the family. Outside the classroom, I rarely used a title, because I remembered the friendly connections that I had always had. If I were to go back into the schoolroom tomorrow, I am sure that I would return to my lifelong habit and would use this formality regularly. Even though I have gone bareheaded for fifty-five summers, when I put on my winter hat, I unconsciously tip it when I speak to a woman of my acquaintance. My right elbow just bends, trained through ages of custom. Once I asked a girl student whether she approved of that custom. She frankly said she would not know how to regard it if a student were to tip his hat, but that she would feel somehow slighted if the professor passed her, spoke, but let his arm hang down without touching or tipping his hat. Our manners are far easier now than they used to be, but I find the students, except the beatnik element, still favorable toward some show of courtesy and good breeding.

When I look back to earlier times when stiffness was equated with good breeding, I sometimes wonder at our forbearance. Talk about Democracy, we just didn't have much of it then. And the ones of us who believed in it almost as a religion often got our ears pinned back by our elders, even when we still retained lots of what would today be called stiffness.