Introduction

In a real sense, I watched this biography being written by its then young author, Frank K. Burrin, who had chosen to write his thesis for his advanced degree about the life and work of one of America's outstanding administrators in the field of publicly-supported higher education.

Frank Burrin had what few biographers have when they work—namely, almost daily consultation with the man himself over a period of several years to check and recheck every facet and fact of his story.

Edward Charles Elliott became president of Purdue University in the early years of the decade known as the "Roaring Twenties," a period of tremendous growth in the nation's publicly-supported universities, and served his institution through the period of severe national trial known as the Great Depression, through the nation's economic recovery during the late thirties, and then into the cataclysmic years of World War II.

In the years of his tenure as president, major social, economic, and political upheavals and crises had direct and profound effects on universities and their basic missions of advanced teaching, research, and extension education, as they do today.

In good times and bad throughout his twenty-three-year tenure, Purdue University flourished in a dynamic way, because the most descriptive word for the man himself is dynamic.

I knew him as an engaging, yet powerful personality—certainly a strong-minded individual who could meet and hold his own with any man.

At all times he was an individual like no one else, and he tackled his problems in his own inimitable way. He set humanity
above administrative regulation. He viewed people and their problems in their individual setting, and he vigorously resisted classifying all problems in terms of ancient ordinances and practices.

President Elliott's leadership was by no means confined to Purdue University alone. During his time as a university president, he was indeed one of the acknowledged leaders in the hierarchy of educators in this country.

In 1938 President Elliott was the motivating individual who called together a group of thirteen university presidents from leading public and private institutions in the Midwest. When this group, which called itself the Committee of Thirteen, met that year in Chicago, he was elected chairman, and he served in that capacity until his retirement from Purdue in 1945. This group met regularly and later became what is known today as the Council of Ten—the presidents of the universities in the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives, commonly called the Big Ten.

It was typical of President Elliott, in his early leadership of this organization devoted to initiation and sponsorship of interuniversity cooperative endeavors, that he insisted upon institutional individuality. The meetings themselves were to be informal discussions where presidents could speak freely. They were to be confidential and afford an opportunity for frank discussion without the worry of premature publicity. "And," said President Elliott, "if the president of the institution is not interested or cannot attend, don't send a substitute!"

Until his retirement, President Elliott missed but one meeting of this committee—a remarkable testimony to his interest in and concern for higher education in the Midwest.

President Elliott was a great speaker because he loved our language. He treated it with personal and intellectual pride, used it like a master both in public and in private, and deeply enjoyed coining a phrase which not only emphasized the point he wished to make, but also delighted his listeners.

He could demolish a man as well as stimulate him. Certainly those who were privileged to know him or to work closely with him valued his friendship and treasured his companionship.

The life, work, and public performance of university presidents are the subject of much concern to many students of the American scene today. But what is today is always based on what happened yesterday. This book about a dynamic and remarkable university president—its facts, statements, anecdotes, and conversations—was not based solely on the author's search of the written record. It was written with the benefit of a closely personal association between the author and his subject, President Edward Charles Elliott. I
therefore commend it to all who are interested in the story of higher education and those few great individuals who contributed mightily to its role in the fulfillment of the American dream.

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