WROE ALDERSON AS ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEUR: THE WHARTON YEARS*

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Wroe Alderson was associated with the Wharton School for just under six academic years. He started teaching there in the Fall of 1959 and remained at Wharton until his death in late May of 1965. I, in turn, was associated with Wroe for most of that period — first as a student in his Marketing Theory class, then while writing a dissertation testing Alderson’s survival and behavior systems concepts for a de facto supervisory committee on which he served and, finally, as a junior colleague responsible for administering a number of the projects Wroe was conducting under Wharton School sponsorship. However, the projects I administered on Alderson’s behalf were only a part of Wroe’s activities during what, in retrospect, appears to have been an incredibly productive six year period. These wide ranging activities, as best I and others concerned can now recall them, are discussed below.

1. The Wharton Research Initiatives

Shortly after arriving at Wharton, Wroe Alderson became Chair of that School’s Management Science Center. Most of Wroe’s Wharton-related activities were conducted using the very modest resources of this Center. The then Dean of the Wharton School, Willis Winn, used Ford Foundation funding to underwrite core secretarial and related expenses and some project costs. With that support and more specifically targeted funding sources that Wroe generated, the Management Science Center carried out a number of activities involving conference administration, research and publication. These undertakings included the three major activities as discussed next.

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The Administration of the Annual Marketing Theory Seminars

Since 1951 Wroe Alderson had been the driving force behind an annual gathering of marketing professors and those from other disciplines whose ideas and presence, Wroe felt, could contribute to the further development of marketing theory. The only known history of these meetings is to be found in an unpublished manuscript that E. D. McGarry had prepared for the last of the regular Theory Seminars, the one held in Boulder in late August of 1965, less than three months after Wroe Alderson’s death (McGarry, 1965). McGarry discusses the informal launch of the meetings and the intellectual excitement associated with bringing together, in an informal setting at which all present were expected to contribute, many of the leading marketing academics of the period. Those specifically mentioned as being present at early Marketing Theory Seminars included Paul Converse, Hix Huegy, Roland Vaile, Wenzel Dolva, Ralph Cassady, Reavis Cox, Larry Lockley, Hugh Wales, Wendell Smith and, of course, the co-founders with Alderson of the Seminars, McGarry himself and Leo Aspinwall.

McGarry mentions the interdisciplinary visitors at the various seminars and Alderson’s response to them. In 1953, Wroe discussed Puzzles and Problem Solving in an Operations Research context and then West Churchman followed up with a discussion of the philosophical background of the underlying theories. Edward Chamberlin attended in 1954 and related his theory of Imperfect Competition to marketing theories—an effort which led Alderson in reply to develop his thesis of Imperfect Rationality in Consumer Behavior. In 1955, McGarry reports that, partly intellectually inspired by the presence of his friend Kenneth Boulding, Wroe developed his concept of heterogeneity of demand. At the 1956 meeting, the invited interdisciplinary guest was William J. Baumol, then a promising young economist who had done some consulting for Alderson & Sessions. It was at this meeting that Alderson presented to the group some of the other material subsequently published in Marketing Behavior and Executive Action.

McGarry indicates that by the end of the 1950s the seminar had changed drastically since its early years.

Much as we tried to limit the attendance to those who had some theories to discuss, we found an increasing number of well recommended teachers and researchers who wanted to attend. We realized that we needed a continuous stream of younger men into our ranks to keep the undertaking alive. Moreover, as Wroe pointed out, there were new values not contemplated in our original plans which would result from having more people attend. It would provide a larger audience in which to disseminate our ideas. It would (also) give an opportunity (for others) now entering our profession to express and expand their ideas.

With the growth in attendance, changes had to be made in the programming. No longer could we have the type of spontaneous give and take discussions with