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Re: Revocation of the Name of Nicholson Hall, Twin Cities Campus

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## Overview

We write as present and past directors of the University of Minnesota Center for Jewish Studies to advocate revoking the name of Nicholson Hall on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus, named for Edward E. Nicholson, the former Dean of Student Affairs from 1917 to 1941. The building was named for him in 1945. A President’s Report offered the rationale.<sup>1</sup>

We do so following the procedures laid out in Section VII, Subd. 4 of the Board of Regents policy: Namings and Renamings.

We bring this proposal forward because Edward Nicholson's actions on and off the campus grossly undermined the University's vision of intellectual openness and educational equality in his own time. His actions offend the University’s aspirations for diversity, equity, and inclusion in our time as well. Edward Nicholson’s performance as the Dean of Student Affairs was distressingly interwoven during his tenure in the web of antisemitism and anti-democratic political repression in Minnesota and nationally. He brings no honor to the University of Minnesota. Our case for revocation will provide extensive evidence and further development of the following:

- Nicholson surreptitiously but forcefully misused his office in the 1920s and 1930s through persistently repressive treatment of students and faculty, especially in compromising their rights to free expression and debate, which he was obligated to protect as a university administrator. In doing so, he politicized the office of the Dean of Student Affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> “Edward Everett Nicholson, 1873-1949,” Minutes of the University Senate: November 1949 - April 1954, 18-19 University of Minnesota. (1946). The Biennial Report of the President, 1944 - 1946. Page 14. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/91588>, accessed February 22, 2024. The report noted that “Following a now well-established policy of renaming campus buildings after well-known former members of the faculty or staff, the Board of Regents, on recommendation of a faculty committee, renamed the ‘Old Union’ Nicholson Hall, thus honoring Dean Edward E. Nicholson, who several years ago retired from the office of the Dean of Student Affairs.”

- He undermined and punished students and faculty who were committed to creating an open and democratic student culture and a campus that included Black and Jewish students equally with white and Christian students.
- He suppressed the expression of diverse opinions and engagement with and debate over the important ideas of the period, which students sought.
- He endangered students and faculty by gathering names of those people engaged in legal, non-violent student activism and secretly reported them to those whose purpose was to harm their careers and future aspirations.
- He sought to influence the appointment of University of Minnesota regents, which he was obligated to eschew as a neutral University officer who was responsible to all members of the Board of Regents.

These actions violated the University's historic commitment to openness and intellectual pursuits well summarized in the inscription added to grace the front of Northrop Memorial Auditorium in 1936 during Nicholson's own term of office, and which shines there still:

*"The University of Minnesota: Founded in the Faith that Men are Ennobled by Understanding; Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning and the Search for Truth; Devoted to the Instruction of Youth and the Welfare of the State."*

The naming of a building at the University represents a continuing honor in our time, and the career and activities of any individual so recognized must not violate the guiding principles and mission of the University as they are articulated now. This postulate is in accord with the Board of Regents policy: Namings and Renamings. The principles and integrity of the University of Minnesota are compromised by honoring a person who violated the Guiding Principles articulated by the Board of Regents in its Mission Statement.

**In all of its activities, the University strives to sustain an open exchange of ideas in an environment that:**

- **embodies the values of academic freedom, responsibility, integrity, and cooperation;**
- **provides an atmosphere of mutual respect, free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and intolerance;**
- **assists individuals, institutions, and communities in responding to a continuously changing world;**
- **is conscious of and responsive to the needs of the many communities it is committed to serving...**

The University's 2008 Mission Statement emphasizes the centrality of educating students at every level to participate in a multiracial and multicultural world.

**To share that knowledge, understanding, and creativity by providing a broad range of educational programs in a strong and diverse community of learners and teachers, and**

**prepare graduate, professional, and undergraduate students, as well as non-degree seeking students interested in continuing education and lifelong learning, for active roles in a multiracial and multicultural world.**

Edward Nicholson's partisan and ideologically driven conduct of his office undermined this mission in his own time and is deeply disturbing in ours.

## **Executive Summary of the Case**

Our case to remove Edward Nicholson's name from a University of Minnesota building consists of four sections. Each demonstrates that he deliberately subverted the University's mission and guiding principles as currently stated, which the Board of Regents identified as grounds for Revocation of a name on a University of Minnesota building. The four sections are:

1. **Nicholson repeatedly controlled and often suppressed the open exchange of ideas on campus that as Dean of Student Affairs he was obligated to protect.** This section reveals how Nicholson exercised his authority as Dean of Student Affairs in 1920-1921 and then from 1934 to 1941 to suppress a student movement that sought the open exchange of ideas, the right to circulate diverse ideas and materials in multiple venues, to control which speakers of various political perspectives were invited to campus, and to freely form student organizations to which he objected despite their sponsorship by university faculty.
2. **Nicholson created a secret political surveillance system at the university and covertly shared information about students and faculty.** This section describes Nicholson's political surveillance work on campus beginning in 1921, how he cooperated with the FBI, and how he then intensified that work through an alliance and quid pro quo relationship with partisan political operative Ray P. Chase. Chase was a long-time Minnesota State Auditor who challenged the independence of the University of Minnesota. He also served in the United States Congress and ran for and lost several offices. Thereafter, beginning in circa 1936, he worked as a Republican political operative and created an institute that distributed political propaganda that often falsely attacked the University for being dominated by communist students and faculty. In the late 1930s, he corresponded with and offered to exchange information about "subversives" with several reactionary and pro-German leaders in the United States.

Nicholson cooperated not only with the FBI, but engaged in on-campus surveillance of faculty and students and their organizations, even after approving their formation. He secretly shared these names with Republican Party activist Chase and with multiple political figures and organizations external to the University of Minnesota. He monitored student participation in off-campus political activities. These surveillance reports often specifically noted which students were Jewish or Black.

Chase published the first and most notorious work of antisemitic, as well as racist, political propaganda in the 1938 governor's election campaign. Some of that propaganda was based on information Nicholson surreptitiously provided to Chase. Following its widely distributed and discussed publication, Nicholson's alliance with Chase intensified as he continued to send him names of faculty and students for political use, despite Chase's obvious racist and antisemitic election tactics.

3. **Nicholson brought disrepute to the University by using his stature as a highly visible University administrator to advance partisan political ends outside the University.** This section explores Nicholson's role in anti-labor politics and the role he played in the Hennepin County Law and Order League from 1934 to (at least) 1937, as well as at the time widely-known accusations against him in 1936 and 1937 for misconduct as Chairman of the Association of Former Grand Jury Foremen. This conduct led the Minneapolis City Council to call on the University of Minnesota to remove him from his position in 1937.
4. **Nicholson, while serving as a dean, sought to influence the selection of Regents for his own political ends, a gross conflict of interest and duty as a neutral University administrator.** This section lays out how Nicholson, a high-level member of the University administration who would need to work with all Regents, engaged in behind-the-scenes campaigns from 1936 to 1941 to block the selection of candidates for Regents with whom he disagreed politically, and to advance candidates who were part of the major Minneapolis organized business interests who worked to stop unions, suppress dissent and activism, and engage in political surveillance. It describes his partnership with political operative Ray Chase to recruit and build political allies to advance their political agenda. Chase constantly attacked the University of Minnesota as a "communist hotbed," and irresponsible with its funds. Yet, Nicholson's alliance with Chase only grew in scope as they worked to influence the selection of Regents and ever more aggressively pursued surveillance of faculty and students.

### **Evidence, Sources, and Rationale**

Our case for removing Nicholson's name from a university building is based on research undertaken from 2016 to 2023 that draws on dozens of sources: the University archives of the University of Minnesota, the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society, FBI records that name Nicholson as a source, the *Minnesota Daily*, the Minnesota press, including the Black and Jewish local presses, and highly-regarded scholarly works on American and Minnesota history. Much of what we learned about Nicholson was not found in the papers of the Dean of Student Affairs at the University of Minnesota archives. Rather, the papers of Ray Chase at the Minnesota Historical Society held essential information about Nicholson, including not only correspondence between Chase and Nicholson but also dozens of internal University of Minnesota documents that could only have been sent by Nicholson to Chase.

Although, as is to be expected, there is a public record of students who appreciated Nicholson as dean, the voices of those he disciplined and constrained are far more difficult to find, as are private perceptions of him by his peers. However, confidential memos by his colleagues tell an important and different story about his tenure as dean, as do sources such as the *Minnesota Daily* and the Minneapolis press. For much of the 1930s, many student activists spent some or all of their periods of study in conflict with the very person who should have supported their commitments to racial equality and open and active debate about the major economic and global issues of their era. They belonged to organizations as diverse as the YMCA/YWCA, All-University Council, the *Minnesota Daily*, Executive Committee of the Boycott Berlin Olympics, and student activist groups such as the American Students Union, the Social Problems Club, and the National Students League, among many others. We have discovered examples of their deep frustration outside of traditional archives of university documents.

We call for the removal of Edward Nicholson's name because we support the University of Minnesota's commitment to honor those whose behavior is consistent with the University's mission and guiding principles, maintain the integrity of the University and enhance its reputation, upholding thereby the high principles of our state and university. We likewise support the University of Minnesota's commitment to revoke any naming inconsistent with these values. As scholars of Jewish Studies as well as other fields, we share a deep commitment to recognizing and analyzing the immense cost to religious and racial minorities at the hands of those in power in societies that have oppressed them. Some of our scholarship and teaching focuses on leftist and progressive movements, ideas and activism that are a powerful strand in modern Jewish history and were openly and unrelentingly attacked by Edward Nicholson. We are all too aware of what happened to Jews, minorities, and political dissenters throughout the world when state and institutional power was used against them and their allies. We are also attuned to the social and political conditions under which civic life flourishes and has been most successful in assuring the rights of religious and racial minorities. The University of Minnesota has committed itself to educate for and foster a democratic and pluralist civil society committed to the very openness that Edward Nicholson worked assiduously to undermine.

For these reasons, we submit this call to remove Edward Nicholson's name from a University building.

## The Case for Revocation

### Section One:

**Edward Nicholson repeatedly controlled and often suppressed the open exchange of ideas on campus in ways directly antithetical to the mission of a dean of students at a major public research university in his time as well as ours.**

This section reveals how Nicholson used his authority as dean of student affairs from as early as the 1920s, but more prominently from 1934 to 1941 to limit a student movement that sought the open exchange of ideas, the right to circulate diverse points of view and materials in multiple venues, to hear from speakers of various political perspectives, and to freely form student organizations with the sponsorship of university faculty. In this way, Nicholson's efforts violated the University's commitment to the free exchange of ideas that extended from its founding to Nicholson's time as dean of student affairs as well as to the Board of Regents Guiding Principles for the University of Minnesota that calls on the institution "to embody the values of academic freedom, responsibility, integrity and cooperation and to provide an atmosphere of mutual respect free from...forms of prejudice and intolerance and assist individuals...in responding to a continuously changing world."

### Historical Background

The work of the dean of student affairs changed dramatically beginning in the 1920s and grew exponentially until 1941 when Edward Nicholson retired. In writing his own history of the office, he reflected that the changes were not only the result of a growing student body, but from what he termed "the spirit of unrest not only in the University, but over the whole nation."<sup>2</sup> His observation referred to both the earliest stirrings of the first student movement in the nation's history and the political unrest during and immediately after WWI. That college student movement took shape in the early 1920s, and then became widespread in the 1930s, beginning with opposition to the entry of the United States into another world war with Germany. In addition, this movement was committed to students' rights on the campus for political autonomy and free speech, and to the fight for racial equality.

Students involved in the movement sought to engage in debate and discussion about the major economic and social issues of the day during the Great Depression, and to protest what they saw as injustice, which included fighting for the civil rights of Black Americans. Students also wanted a student government that gave them meaningful roles in campus life. The University of Minnesota had

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<sup>2</sup> "The Dean of Student Affairs," undated, Dean of Student Affairs Box 12, Folder Policy and Procedures 1935-1946, University of Minnesota Archives. Based on Nicholson's chronology in the memo, he is describing the period after WWI.



one of the most active student movements in the country during this period, along with the highest circulation student newspaper, the *Minnesota Daily*.<sup>3</sup>

Dean Nicholson oversaw, and thus had control over, every aspect of student life. He exercised that control aggressively. More than any other administrator, he was the lightning rod for student frustration and dissent because of his prominent role in suppressing them. What several student leaders did not know is that their disagreements with Nicholson led to his passing their names to both political partisans and the FBI, as will be discussed in Part Two.

Nicholson's approach to student activism was shaped by dramatic changes in America during and following World War I (1914-1918) when civil liberties were sharply curtailed. Both the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918) allowed, in the name of loyalty and support for the war, federal officials in various agencies--including an expanded FBI, as well as vigilante groups--unprecedented rights to censor the mails, withhold any mail or publications deemed unpatriotic, and attack with impunity organized labor, left-wing organizations, and conscientious objectors. Activists in those movements were harassed, physically attacked and incarcerated. Wiretapping and surveillance became important tools in these crusades. These draconian rules were widely challenged in their own era by a cross section of Americans, not only those who were harmed by them directly, but by politicians, journalists, scholars, and citizens who challenged their repression.

The end of the war brought no relief. The first Red Scare (1919-1920) more aggressively empowered agents of government, particularly the new FBI Radical Division under a young J. Edgar Hoover, to partner with the Department of Justice to detain and deport non-citizen immigrants without due process, on evidence which in most cases proved to be flimsy or non-existent. The Palmer Raids became an embarrassment to the FBI and the government. In addition, Hoover introduced a system which tracked any American who was deemed a Leftist by the FBI through a card file that ultimately contained the names of 50,000 men and women viewed as subversives. Little attention was paid to ideological and political differences among these people.

The Espionage and Sedition acts appeared to function as a model for Nicholson's approach to students and student activism as he sought to control student mail, to curtail open distribution of information and to limit access to publications on campus, despite President Warren G. Harding's withdrawing support for these very measures when he assumed the presidency in 1921.<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars of this period look back upon it as a devastating attack on American values and rights. Following WWI and thereafter there was never a consensus that the nation depended on these violations of Americans' rights to remain safe. Nicholson and his allies were on a reactionary end of that spectrum of debate. Section Two will explain that Nicholson's approach to the student left was often more extreme than at peer institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement 1929-1941*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 95. The *Minnesota Daily's* masthead in this period described itself as the publication having the highest circulation among universities.

<sup>4</sup> Among excellent recent and other scholarship on this era are: Beverly Gage, *Gman: J Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking Press, 2022); Adam Hochschild, *American Midnight: The Great War, A Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis* (New York: Mariner Press, 2022); Jay Feldman, *Manufacturing Hysteria: a History of Scapegoating, Surveillance, and Secrecy in Modern America* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).

## Dean Nicholson controlled and limited student life.

The first wave of student activism at the University of Minnesota focused on both opposition to the United States entering new wars in Europe and the requirement that all undergraduate males participate in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) "for the defense of the nation." Student activists opposed the ROTC requirement of three times weekly marching exercises, called "drilling." In 1932-1933, undergraduate students launched a campaign that would continue for some years to make the drilling requirement optional, as it was at the University of Wisconsin. In that same period, on the anniversary of the WWI armistice, there were yearly campus anti-war protests throughout the country from 1934-1941, at which point the United States declared war on Japan, and Germany and Italy declared war on it three days later.

University of Minnesota students organized among the largest of those demonstrations. Students held different sides on these issues, but the dominant group opposed entering another war in Europe and military drilling. Both opposition to war and ending mandatory ROTC were issues that engaged Minnesota's governor and state legislature, as well as the University of Minnesota administration.<sup>5</sup> Debates that appeared in the *Minnesota Daily*, campus politics, and the relationships between many students and Dean Nicholson centered on these concerns through the spring of 1934.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, these issues dovetailed with others on the campus in the 1930s that included students' broad campaigns to reform student government to take a more meaningful role in campus life, and the right to organize political groups as campus organizations. Students frequently found themselves in conflict with Edward Nicholson, who worked to contain and limit their rights to circulate information and to assembly, and limited their autonomy, as will be described below.

Nicholson was able to gain ever greater control over student activism, debate, and campus organizations in this period because of university policies that were both revitalized and extended to limit radically where and how any information for student organizations and activities could appear or be distributed on campus. Nicholson was broadly authorized to put in place a policy by the Board of Regents through President Coffman's appointment of him; however, it was Nicholson whose reach extended everywhere in student life. Notably, Nicholson did the following:

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<sup>5</sup> University life and politics in the 1930s were integrated into municipal, state and national politics. The party that dominated elective offices and the State House was the Farmer-Labor Party, one of the most successful progressive parties in the United States. Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> These events were described from the perspectives of student activists in three important sources: Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Oral history interview with Rosalind Matusow Belmont, April 4, 1982, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society pages 6-7, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/oh30.xml>, accessed February 22, 2024. Lester Breslow and Robert Scammon, "One Front in Minnesota." *Student Review*, January 11, 1934, 14-15.

- Exerted control over what mail could be delivered to students in campus mailboxes, not only from campus organizations but via first-class mail as well.
- Required his approval for any outside speaker to the campus, and additionally the University President's office had to approve anyone from out-of-state.
- Determined what constituted "propaganda," although he never defined it to any student group that was punished for engaging in it, including student publications.
- Decided the fate of any student group that sought official status as a campus organization.

In 1935, following anti-drill campus activism, the Board of Regents approved a resolution calling for confining "publicity material" to bulletin boards and recognized University channels. Dean Nicholson, however, as President Coffman's appointee, devised and enacted extreme controls. On January 30, 1936, the *Minnesota Daily* printed the new rules that were approved by the University Senate Committee on Student Affairs, whose student members were appointed by President Coffman, and whose faculty members were sympathetic to Nicholson's views. The committee worked directly under Nicholson.

The system he put in place was sufficiently severe that students were concerned that their organizations, according to the YMCA president, would be unable to advertise adequately even their dances.<sup>7</sup> The number of bulletin boards where information he approved could appear was limited to nine campus locations, and nowhere else, which stopped the use of any wall space in buildings, banners on buildings, or other public areas.

Nicholson not only radically limited where information could be posted and circulated, but in contravention of the University's mission and Guiding Principles, which are the criteria for honoring a person whose name is on one of its buildings, he also exerted control over the content of what was acceptable to be circulated. Every poster had to be approved by the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs. The rules were so finely detailed that, for example, regulations for advertising for a University Symphony orchestra concert were specified. As the *Minnesota Daily* noted, "Censorship of printed materials and speakers is in the hands of Dean Nicholson. The dean has not outlined any policies which he will follow in exercising his power."<sup>8</sup>

In addition, rules regarding three "classes of organizations" were also enumerated. The lengthiest rules referred to the dean's newly invented category of organizations with "partial supervision by off-campus groups." All judgments rested with Nicholson and no information was given about what would place a group in a particular category. Subsequent reflections in the

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<sup>7</sup> "Campus Fears Abuse of Rule on Propaganda," *The Minnesota Daily*, January 31, 1936. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/234518/19360131.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "Campus Fears Abuse of Rule on Propaganda," *The Minnesota Daily*, January 31, 1936. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/234518/19360131.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed February 22, 2024.

*Minnesota Daily* noted that “propaganda” and “propagandists” were never defined, which allowed Nicholson to reject anything he chose. He was now in charge of every aspect of every form of communication. The *Daily* article noted that “administrators” declared this constituted “liberalization” of rules. The claim was viewed as unconvincing throughout the campus.<sup>9</sup> The *Minnesota Daily* further noted that the “regulations were gathered and published largely as the result of several skirmishes during the past few months with liberal groups on the campus about the distribution of printed material.” The aim of these rules, according to the *Daily*, was unquestionably the suppression of the ideas of student activists.<sup>10</sup>

*Dean Nicholson exerted his control over the formation of student organizations at the University of Minnesota to stop debate and discussion of political issues.*

Students sought official recognition for their clubs, leagues, discussion groups, and organizations in order for them to meet on the campus. During the economic crisis of the Great Depression, shared meeting spaces were crucial to a community life. The landscape was dynamic; activists formed national and local organizations, dissolved them to join forces with others, and to branch off as well. Visions, ideologies, activism, and leadership changed in these groups; they were anything but monolithic.<sup>11</sup>

Dean Nicholson had absolute authority over whether students could form these groups through his leadership of the University Senate Committee on Student Affairs. Our research uncovered in the papers of Republican Party activist Ray P. Chase at the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society an abstract of what happened at some of the committee meetings where students and some of their faculty advisors came to plead their case for creating organizations which were associated with the national student movement from 1935-1937.

Minutes of these committee meetings exist in the University Archives. However, the notes in the Chase collection are far more detailed than standard committee meeting minutes. In addition to listing the names of students and faculty who appeared before the committee, the summaries of dated meetings reveal that Dean Nicholson, and to a lesser extent Dean of Women Anne Blitz, peppered students and faculty advisors petitioning to form groups with questions. The advisors were distinguished faculty of the University of Minnesota, including Benjamin Lippincott (Political Science) and Harold Benjamin, Assistant Dean of the School of Education. They and Professor Joseph Warren Beech (English), among others, sponsored student organizations that they stated they did not necessarily agree with politically because they believed deeply in the principles of a liberal education to debate and discuss ideas. (See Appendix: Exhibit 1)

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<sup>9</sup> “Poster Restriction Rules Announced by Senate Group,” *The Minnesota Daily*, January 30, 1936. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/234517>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> “Poster Restriction Rules Announced by Senate Group,” *The Minnesota Daily*, January 30, 1936. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/234517>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42-98.

Nicholson rejected the formation of a group if he believed it “was under the control of the Communist Party,” although he offered no proof that was the case. He refused many proposed clubs where students wanted to discuss political issues or hear from a wide variety of speakers who would be invited to campus. He insisted to the students and faculty advisors that such groups were unnecessary and undesirable.<sup>12</sup>

In 1936, for example, Warner Shippee, a student who was granted conscientious objector status by President Coffman so he would not have to join ROTC, was required to attest that he was not a member of one organization presumed to be communist in order to receive recognition for another group. He had to defend Robert Loevinger, a student active in student government and antiwar activism, as “not a communist.” Among the issues which the new group, an alliance of several student groups, cared about were “federal aid to students, Negro discrimination, academic freedom,” among others. Nicholson thought the group might be approved “provisionally,” but only if he could dictate which groups would be in the alliance and which he could exclude.<sup>13</sup>

Pages that summarized and were abstracted for Chase (apparently by Nicholson, to be discussed below) focus not only on the refusal to recognize a communist club, but on querying the student who proposed it, Rosalind Matusow, about how she spent her time, what she was doing at the women’s dormitory, Sanford Hall, and to whom she was speaking when she was there. She did ask the committee members why that was relevant. The minutes also include a letter the University of Minnesota received about Matusow from a person in New Jersey who accused her of being a communist. Matusow was not given an opportunity to see it or respond to it.<sup>14</sup> The subcommittee of the Student Affairs Committee assigned to explain why no communist club would exist at the University of Minnesota insisted that, “There is no demand for instruction in Communism from farmers, nor from organized labor, for office workers, nor employers. On the other hand, many important groups are violently opposed to all of its manifestations.” Nicholson and his subcommittee’s insistence that these issues did not matter to students, let alone Minnesota workers, farmers and citizens, defied the facts. These issues were constantly debated, not ignored, and campus life was alive with debate about those very issues. Dean Nicholson and his committee censored and suppressed that debate by denying its interest to Minnesotans.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, Ray P. Chase, Box 42 Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society. Section Two will discuss who prepared these documents for Chase.

<sup>13</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, Ray P Chase, Box 42, Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society, which covers students being asked about the National Student Alliance, and the quizzing of Rosalind Matusow.

<sup>14</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, Ray P Chase, Box 42, Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society, which covers students being asked about the National Student Alliance, and the quizzing of Rosalind Matusow.

<sup>15</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, Ray P Chase, Box 42, Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society.

Several of the University of Minnesota's most distinguished faculty members were disturbed by Nicholson's attack on student activists and student groups, which suggests that the questions and comments to which students were subjected are not only troubling from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Lippincott wrote to President Coffman urging him to question the policy of "recognition" of clubs and the control over speakers. He viewed the approach as "paternalistic," and worried that it constituted "censorship." He wondered, "For who is competent to say who should be heard?"<sup>16</sup> Lippincott directly repudiated Nicholson's control over student life.

Perhaps more surprising was a letter from Malcolm Willey to President Coffman about this issue. At the time, Willey served as Dean and Assistant to President Coffman, enforcing his policies. "What would we lose," he wrote in 1936, "if we recognized no groups and therefore were in a position to disclaim responsibility for any of them...There are apparently many (faculty) like myself who are gravely perplexed on the matter of student activities and who have more than reasonable doubts that the present system on this campus is not working to the best interest of the university as a whole, or the student relations to the administration."<sup>17</sup> Willey questioned the policy of recognition that rested solely in Nicholson's hands, with the consent of the Senate Committee on Student Affairs, and allowed absolute control over what groups and ideas would be judged acceptable to the University of Minnesota. Rather, Willey suggested, the University of Minnesota could sidestep accusations by legislators or arch-conservatives of supporting "radical" or even "liberal" organizations if any group could be formed. Willey, however, went farther when he spoke for "others on the faculty," who were fundamentally opposed to censoring student organizations or ideas.

The policies persisted, however. When students appealed to him for the right to meet on campus President Coffman would respond that it was not up to him, but to Dean Nicholson (with no mention of a committee process). Despite Coffman and the Regents having final authority, there was no question that Dean Nicholson was not only the policy's public face, but its architect.<sup>18</sup>

It was Nicholson who insisted that selected student organizations include the names of their members to receive recognition. The proposed Communist Club agreed to provide a list of names, but then noted that other groups were not required to provide them. All of them agreed that to publicly share the names of students who identified themselves as members of left-wing organizations could have dire consequences for them or their parents. They could be "blackballed" from jobs or professional schools in medicine or law, for example. Their names

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Lippincott to Lotus Coffman, April 15, 1937, Office of the President, Box 18, Folder Students, 1933-39, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Willey to Lotus Coffman, June 4, 1936, Office of the President, Box 84 Folder Communism 1935-1950, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Willey to Lotus Coffman, June 4, 1936, Office of the President, Box 84 Folder Communism 1935-1950, University of Minnesota Archives.

could be circulated to others off the campus. Deans Nicholson and Blitz simply insisted on names and did not promise or affirm that the names would never be revealed.<sup>19</sup>

Dean Nicholson sometimes proclaimed that he wanted to approve student groups. Ironically, even when he did approve a political club, he dispatched staff members to spy on those very organizations. Their reports often ended up off-campus in the files of a Republican political operative. In addition, he passed many of the very names he insisted on collecting, who he identified as “subversives,” to politicians and the FBI, which will be discussed in Section Two.<sup>20</sup>

*Dean Nicholson controlled the university mail system to restrict and censor information available to student activists.*

The rules that caused the greatest concern among students focused on the circulation of information through the student mailboxes located in Northrop Auditorium. Dean Nicholson exercised his control over the circulation of information to determine:

- What content students could communicate to others.
- To whom that information could be sent.
- What he deemed was of importance or of “no interest” to students.
- What was “political,” which he refused to define, but which allowed him to censor it.

The University mail system was under the immediate control of J.C. Poucher, who reported directly to Nicholson and was responsible for enforcing his directives, resulting in many forms of censorship. Rancor over these issues came immediately when the University announced the rules on mailboxes and led to student resolutions condemning the Dean of Student Affairs and to a lawsuit.<sup>21</sup> Nicholson enforced his policies on use of mailboxes even before the rules appeared in the *Daily*.

In the fall of 1935, Nicholson disrupted one of the year’s most significant national debates that reached the University of Minnesota. It focused on whether the United States should boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which were to be held in Nazi Germany, and whether to condemn openly Nazi policies committed to the racial superiority of Germans, the denial of all human rights, the rule of law and the elimination of Jews, Roma, and L.G.B.T.Q. people, among others. Nicholson refused to allow the Student Olympic Boycott Committee to circulate and inform all campus organizations of their boycott resolution addressed to the Amateur Athletic Union, condemning the Nazi refusal to allow German Jews to participate in the games. The committee

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<sup>19</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, p. 6, Ray P. Chase, Box 42, Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>20</sup> *Abstract from Minutes of Senate Committee on Student Affairs*, October, 1936-May, 1937, Ray P. Chase, Box 42, Folder October 1-25, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society. This issue will also be discussed in Section Two.

<sup>21</sup> “Poster Restriction Rules Announced by Senate Group.” *Minnesota Daily*, January 30, 1936. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/234517>, accessed February 22, 2024. “Coalition to File Protest Against Dean,” *The Minnesota Daily*, December 3, 1936.

also invited campus organizations to attend a meeting on December 5, 1935, where the resolution would be discussed.

On Saturday, November 23, 1935, the Boycott Committee attempted to distribute to the student mailboxes 140 letters seeking support for a boycott. The mail was refused by Poucher, who invoked Nicholson's rule that these letters could not be distributed because they lacked "all University interest." When refused, the Executive Committee challenged the rule by mailing 50 letters through the United States Postal Service to the heads of student organizations. The letter informed these student leaders that a resolution had been passed on November 17 and asked them to solicit their members' views and attend the final meeting. Nicholson rejected these letters as well. The letters mailed from off-campus through the U. S. Postal Service were returned rather than delivered. The students attempted to appeal, but it was to no avail. The only appeal was to President Coffman, who was out of the state.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, what Nicholson deemed of "no interest" to the student body was supported by many organizations, including fifteen social fraternities, the M Club (all male athletes who had excelled in sports), the YMCA/YWCA, the Catholic Newman Society and the Menorah Society, the Jewish student organization, and organizations of girls enrolled in physical education. The Farmer-Labor Club, Progressive Party and other groups also supported the resolution. It was also broadly debated on campus.<sup>23</sup> The *Minnesota Daily* editorialized against it. So many letters were written to the newspaper that it required a special section where they were published.

University of Minnesota students advocated different points of view on the resolution, and many were highly engaged and embraced vigorous debate on the issue. Nicholson attempted to control and contain debate by refusing their right to circulate information. He continually equated other peoples' politics with propaganda and cut off student access to send or receive information. Although students were allowed to meet, Nicholson erected a high wall of censorship that denied students the right to educate one another about the impact of world events on their lives and give them an opportunity to object to Nazi policies. He labeled that education "political," and censored it by invoking a Board of Regents policy that he essentially created. Nicholson suppressed the emergence of a multicultural democratic university when he claimed that this and other issues "lacked general interest."

Dean Nicholson's censorship was all the more troubling because the Department of German hosted on campus Hans Luther, the Nazi ambassador to the United States, on November 17, 1935. Luther's visit came two months after the Hitler regime had instituted the Nuremberg Race Laws, which, among other forms of persecution, stripped all Jews of their citizenship, forbade sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, and removed Jews from many forms of employment. In 1933, Nazis had organized massive book burnings of works written by Jews and intellectuals deemed as lacking racial purity. Luther's trip to the Midwest was scheduled to

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<sup>22</sup> "P.O. Rejects Boycott Mail," *Minnesota Daily*, November 26, 1935. "Boycott Group Plans Appeal." *Minnesota Daily*, November 30, 1935.

<sup>23</sup> "Anti-Olympic Move Stirs U of M Campus," *American Jewish World*, November 22, 1935. "Campus Group Asks Withdrawal of US Team," *Minnesota Daily*, November 20, 1935.



drum up support for America participating in the upcoming Olympics. The strongly German ethnic roots of the Midwest seemed ideal for Luther to find a sympathetic hearing, which turned out to be far from the case. In blocking mail about a boycott of the Berlin Olympics, Nicholson prevented students from communicating effectively with one another about an issue of this magnitude, shortly after confronting the public face of Nazism on their campus.<sup>24</sup>

A second conflict over the censorship of mail occurred in December 1936, as reported in issues of the *Minnesota Daily*. It led to a group of activist student organizations entering a “formal complaint” to the United States Attorney against Edward Nicholson for “interference with the U. S. mails.”<sup>25</sup> This conflict emerged from Nicholson’s refusal to distribute circulars sent in November via third-class mail from the Progressive Council, a coalition of the Farmer-Labor Club, the Progressive Party, and the Minnesota Student Alliance. The circulars simply mentioned events and urged students to vote in upcoming student elections. The circulars were impounded by the dean. Later that month, he refused to distribute first-class letters mailed by the Council to its membership, which were instead returned to the sender. Nicholson’s rationale was that the group was an “outside firm,” defined by Nicholson for this occasion and never previously. Therefore, he claimed, these student groups were not entitled to contact students.

The students lost their lawsuit over the delivery of US mail. The United States Post Office’s solicitor ruled that once mail was delivered to the University Dean Nicholson had the right to “impound” any mail to any faculty member or student sent to the campus based on his interpretation of Regents’ policies. Nicholson did not shrink from exercising that power. If this coalition made any further appeals, we have not uncovered these cases.<sup>26</sup>

Dean Nicholson focused on control and discipline in responding to students, which he achieved by making himself the sole authority to decide what was “politics,” what was “propaganda,” what was an “outside firm,” and what were acceptable political ideas, which then allowed him to censor information he disapproved. Censorship of the mail and control of its distribution was a key feature of the contested federal Espionage and Sedition amendments for the specific purpose of curtailing civil liberties. Edward Nicholson used these techniques to contain as much as possible the distribution of ideas that he deemed, without explanation, “dangerous.”

*Edward Nicholson’s vision of the role of dean of student affairs was repudiated and re-envisioned by his colleagues.*

In anticipation of Nicholson’s retirement, Dean Malcolm Willey, who served as a senior staff person to Presidents Coffman, Ford, and Coffey, was tasked with appointing a committee to consider the duties of a dean of student affairs. It led to a radical change, shedding many of the responsibilities that Nicholson had controlled. Indeed, no dean was again given that degree of control over student life.

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<sup>24</sup> “Luther Says Everything’s OK But Students Protest Olympics,” *Minnesota Daily*, November 25, 1935.

<sup>25</sup> “Coalition Unit to File Protest Against Dean,” *Minnesota Daily*, December 3, 1936.

<sup>26</sup> “Federal Post Office O.K.’s U. Authority to Hold P.O. Mail,” *Minnesota Daily*, December 11, 1936.

A confidential memo held in the University Archive illuminates effectively how Edward Nicholson was regarded by some of the people who had worked with him as his administrator peers. As part of the review of the Office of Dean of Student Affairs, Edmund Williamson, who was “coordinator of student personnel services” under Nicholson, penned a confidential memo to Willey. He wrote,

In my judgement these important phases of student life have been ineffectively supervised. Student leadership has been stifled and too much emphasis has been placed on control by means of authority. The control of student life by means of mores and leadership is more promising than regulation by the authority of administrators. A desirable type of sociology cannot be developed if the advisers of student government and activities wield influence through their disciplinary powers. For this reason discipline should not be a function of the two supervisors (Nicholson and Anne Blitz, Dean of Women) of student social life.<sup>27</sup>

Dean Willey’s committee appeared to agree with this assessment. In an apparent repudiation of Nicholson’s approach to managing student affairs, Edmund Williamson was appointed Dean of Student Affairs two years later and served for 28 years. Dean Williamson completely reorganized the office and his duties and philosophy of student life as dean.

## **Conclusion**

During Edward Nicholson’s time as Dean of Student Affairs, the University of Minnesota was alive with competing ideas about politics, economics, and citizenship. The emergence of a movement for integrated housing and Black rights throughout the 1930s revealed a campus beginning to create a multiracial democracy. Students were engaged with every global and national issue of the day. As Dean of Student Affairs, Edward Nicholson responded to the powerful campus student movement through repression, censorship, and control of ideas and students. Even when he allowed the formation of student organizations, as the next section will reveal, he continued monitoring student ideas and behavior with a plan to share that information outside of the University of Minnesota with politicians who were actively gathering names of “subversives” and “radicals” deemed as unpatriotic.

Nicholson politicized his office in the many ways he publicly sought to close off the campus as a place of debate and respect for competing opinions. His attack on activists’ ideas and movements for change was both evident and secretive. Nicholson sought to repress debate, demonstrations, and activism at sometimes remarkable lengths—limiting where information could be posted, what information could be circulated, and how dissent could be articulated. Section One offers only a fraction of the issues that Nicholson attempted to control because the

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<sup>27</sup> Memorandum to Dean M.M. Willey from E.G. Williamson, January 24, 1939, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 12, Folder Policy and Procedure, 1935-1946, University of Minnesota Archives.

list is just too long to detail every example. We have highlighted the most significant ones, and noted others in footnotes, or referred to sources about them.

The Dean of Student Affairs was not legally or officially the University's final authority. He ostensibly implemented policies set by the Board of Regents and President Coffman for much of the 1930s. Nevertheless, he initiated and exercised control over student life over the objections of other senior administrators and faculty. Nicholson was apparently not content to merely implement policies. He urged, for example, even greater control over students' rights to hear from outside speakers when he informed President Coffman in 1933 that United States Senator Thomas Schall (R-Mn) spoke to the Student Forum, the organization that brought speakers to campus, without prior permission from him or the president. Nicholson's solution was tighter control and greater centralization under his office of any invitation to any speaker. He proposed to "reestablish restrictions by action, we will say, of the Board of Regents."<sup>28</sup> The dean comfortably asserted his right to define what the regents wanted without consulting them. (See Appendix: Exhibit 2)

The way that he shaped and implemented these policies did not respect the guiding principle of academic freedom, "integrity and cooperation," and creating an "atmosphere of mutual respect free from forms of prejudice and intolerance." Not only in hindsight, but to the students and colleagues of his own time, Dean Nicholson did not conduct the Office of Student Affairs in a manner that was consistent with those high ideals.

## **Section Two:**

**Edward E. Nicholson created a political surveillance system at the University of Minnesota and secretly shared information about students and faculty with local and national organizations, including operatives of the Minnesota Republican party, the FBI, members of the Board of Regents aligned with political organizations that conducted political surveillance, the Citizen's Alliance, and other Minneapolis anti-labor organizations.**

This section describes Nicholson's alliance and quid pro quo relationship with partisan political operative Ray P. Chase, which includes Nicholson's on-campus surveillance of students, and his secretly sharing information with Chase, the FBI, and Twin Cities organizations about students and faculty that violated his duties as Dean of Student Affairs.

We argue in this section that Nicholson's conducting political surveillance throughout his tenure as dean of student affairs was inconsistent with the University's mission and guiding principles

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Nicholson to L.D. Coffman, November 18, 1933, Dean of Students, Box 12, Folder President 1925-1935, University of Minnesota Archives.

then and now, bringing harm to the reputation of the University when made public. He violated a key “Guiding Principle” of the University of Minnesota identified by the Board of Regents. This Guiding Principle holds that,

**In all of its activities, the University strives to sustain an open exchange of ideas in an environment that:**

- **embodies the values of academic freedom, responsibility, integrity, and cooperation;**
- **provides an atmosphere of mutual respect, free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and intolerance;**
- **assists individuals, institutions, and communities in responding to a continuously changing world;**
- **is conscious of and responsive to the needs of the many communities it is committed to serving.**

The potential impact of giving names of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty to private organizations and governmental agencies in the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, during a period of profound political repression, was grave.

## **Historical Background**

As noted above, the rise of extensive surveillance in the United States grew out of political changes that began with the nation’s entry into WWI. The expansion of surveillance efforts developed in tandem with a successful United States movement of organized labor and the Russian Revolution and expanded during the Great Depression as industries sought to control their workforces. As early as the 1920s, and throughout the 1930s and the 1940s, university administrators across the country used surveillance not only to monitor but to punish student activists. Charges of disloyalty were leveled at faculty and students at universities throughout the United States, including the University of Minnesota. The student movement was committed to ameliorating economic inequality, to the rights of all students to an education and to fairly paid labor, as well as equality for Black Americans. It was caught in the webs of surveillance that were woven together on and off-campus by administrators and leaders of anti-labor groups.

Historians have brought to light university administrators’ cooperation with the FBI during this period in their research since the Freedom of Information Act gave them and others access to some of these records. The surveillance and punishment of students and faculty, and the violation of their rights to hold a variety of political views and express them peacefully, were no more acceptable in that period than it would be today; both violate the vision for higher education to which the University of Minnesota is and was committed.<sup>29</sup>

We will discuss below what our research uncovered. Dean Edward Nicholson, in contrast to most other administrators, did not simply respond to FBI inquiries about students the agency had identified as “radicals,” but actively corresponded with agents. He passed information to secret political

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

surveillance organizations in Minnesota, as well as individual partisan operatives, that they shared with employers as well as the FBI.

Tightly-knit organizations of employers created by the most powerful industries in Minneapolis were a critical feature of political, economic, and business life in this era. They offered the most powerful opposition to workers' attempts to form unions. They were created by the leaders of grain, milling, and banking companies, as well as smaller businesses. Around WWI, as labor protested working conditions, the employers' groups created the Citizen's Alliance (CA) of Minneapolis that aggressively blocked labor activism. Alongside it, the same powerful leaders of industry created the Minneapolis Civic and Commercial Association (CCA) that took on the work of defeating unions using surveillance and the employment of paramilitary units that crushed efforts at protest. William Millikan documents their activities and the central place of surveillance in every branch and iteration of these organizations.<sup>30</sup> As Millikan demonstrates in his award-winning research, efforts to curtail the power of unions involved the courts, the legislature, the National Guard, an independent surveillance system, banking, and "educational" efforts to encourage "law and order."

After the Citizen's Alliance resumed its work of fostering political repression in the 1920s, they continued until the mid-1930s the pattern of spying on unions and "suspected Communists," the use of propaganda, court cases, boycotts of unionized businesses, and special deputies, all of which suppressed unions until the mid 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Successful labor strikes in the mid 1930s in Minneapolis, in combination with Farmer-Labor elected officials, brought renewed strength to the labor movement and even more aggressive efforts to dismantle it. The large organizations of employers were augmented by many other civic associations, all funded and headed by the same networks of the major owners of business who fought back against pro-labor, pro-taxation policies, usually brutally, but not always successfully.<sup>32</sup>

The era of the first "Red Scare" from 1920-1921 was, as noted above, a period of extensive attacks on Americans' civil liberties that originated but did not end with WWI. It also involved unprecedented persecution of Jews and overt antisemitism in the United States. Some Jews' involvement in the labor movement and in radical organizations made this immigrant group (together with Italians) constant FBI targets, which often led to their deportations without due process. Men and women, both Jews and non-Jews, who fought for unions and their civil liberties lost jobs and endured violence across the country.

In this era "Jew," "Bolshevik," "radical," and "communist" became nearly synonymous in all but liberal parlance, which is apparent in Nicholson's surveillance, which he shared both in and beyond the University with politically like-minded allies. "Jew" was a "racial" category in this period in the United States, and by no means solely or even necessarily a religious one. Anti-immigration debates that dominated this period consistently emphasized Jews as not only a race, but as racial "others" who would undermine and pollute "true Americans." An immense and outstanding historical literature of

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<sup>30</sup> William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>31</sup> William Millikan, "Defenders of Business: The Minneapolis Civic and Commercial Association Versus Labor during W.W.I," *Minnesota History*, 50, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 4-10,17; William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001). Lois Quam and Peter J. Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town: The Citizen's Alliance in the 1930s." *Minnesota History*. 50, no. 3 (Fall 1986), 105-117.

<sup>32</sup> William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 143-243.

the past decade most recently demonstrates the critical place of antisemitism and racialization of Jews in the anti-immigrant, anti-labor, and eugenics movements.<sup>33</sup>

### **Dean Nicholson initiated antidemocratic activity and surveillance.**

Dean Edward Nicholson, more than any other senior administrator at the University of Minnesota, played a key role in weaving a web of connections with those who fostered repressive and authoritarian attacks on student organizations, attacks which inevitably had threads connecting them to the antisemitism of the period, and which caught up students and faculty at the University of Minnesota. His surveillance began during the Red Scare of 1920-1921, continued through the mid 1930s, and ramped up further in 1941.

Nicholson's surveillance was part of a political economy built on information, including especially the names of those labeled as "enemies," "dangerous," or "un-American" by reactionary political actors and pundits. These forces believed that compiling the names of activists, at whatever cost, or seeking deep knowledge of every organization that some people in law enforcement or business claimed undermined America, was viewed as crucial to the nation's security. The names that were gathered were carefully guarded and constantly updated by agencies to assure their leaders that such people could be swooped up at a moment's notice in a net of arrests, deportations, or possibly detention.<sup>34</sup> It appears that Nicholson collected and transmitted the names of students and faculty for precisely this reason. He was willing to risk the reputations of any activist student at the University of Minnesota with whom he disagreed in service of his political views. He politicized his position and threatened the integrity and futures of dozens of people.

**Dean of Student Affairs Edward E. Nicholson conducted this surveillance at the behest of no one at the University of Minnesota.** In the archive of the Office of the University President no requests exist to Nicholson that he or his employees spy on these sanctioned organizations. Lacking any evidence to the contrary, Edward Nicholson created a system of on-campus surveillance on his own initiative using university employees under his direction.

Archival evidence reveals, however, that President Coffman, Board of Regents Chair Fred B. Snyder and Regent Pierce Butler were aware that Nicholson sent his employees to record what occurred at meetings of a group that Nicholson had approved to meet on campus in 1920 and

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<sup>33</sup> Morris U. Schappes, "The Jews and the Post War Reaction After 1918," *Jewish Life*, (April 1955): 23-26; Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Fake Threat of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); Adam Hochschild, *American Midnight: The Great War, A Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis* (New York: Mariner Press, 2022); Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Daniel Okrent, *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law that Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians and other European Immigrants Out of America* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking Press, 2022), 61-75.

1921. They were also aware that Nicholson sought out information about students who attended political meetings outside of the University of Minnesota.<sup>35</sup>

*Nicholson's first known surveillance project: the Seekers Club, 1920-1921*

Dean Nicholson identified the beginning of radicalism at the University of Minnesota with the arrival on campus from New York of two students, who he identified in parentheses as "Jews" in a report drafted for his own files but which he also shared with Regents and a partisan political operative.<sup>36</sup> These two students and others petitioned Nicholson's office to begin a group in 1920 called the Seekers, which the dean approved. The Seekers' weekly meetings attracted 70-80 students in the fall and well over 100 by 1921, and then their numbers dwindled by the end of that academic year.

Nicholson's file on the organization consists of weekly reports sent to him by people who worked within the Student Affairs office who he assigned to spy on the group.<sup>37</sup> Most reports were written by E.V. (Eunice V.) Nielsen, an employee of the Service Department, which was part of Dean Nicholson's office. Each of her reports, written on University of Minnesota stationery, listed every name of those who attended that she could learn, and speakers' names and the details of lectures and conversations. The file also includes Nicholson's reports to President Coffman and correspondence with Fred B. Snyder, chair of the Board of Regents from 1914-1950 and a politically conservative Republican politician and anti-labor activist.<sup>38</sup>

In the early months, Nicholson's spy referred to the Seekers as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, also founded in 1920. The national organization subsequently called itself the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). The Seekers was identical in intent and conduct with the LID, and thus most likely was affiliated with the group in some way or was inspired by it. Its purpose was to educate students about the political and economic issues of the day.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Nicholson to Fred B. Snyder, June 3, 1940, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 4 Folder Radicalism, Correspondence, Miscellaneous 1938-1941, University of Minnesota Archives; Fred Snyder to Pierce Butler, December 22, 1920, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives; Edward Nicholson to Lotus Coffman, July 7, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>36</sup> "Radical Organizations," Undated, p.1, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10 folder 1935 Radical Organizations and Activities, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>37</sup> All the spy reports are in the folder Seekers Club, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>38</sup> Snyder was a founder of the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association and was closely aligned with the Citizens Alliance, the organization founded by the city's most powerful industries to stop workers from unionization. Snyder also headed the Minneapolis loyalty campaign during WWI, which was a full-throated attack on any citizen viewed as disloyal to the cause of WWI, a national campaign that was ultimately repudiated for its excesses by Congress and President Warren G. Harding. William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 22, 119.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32-35.

Nicholson's own reports emphasized that the group adhered to his rules and brought no speaker without his permission. Each meeting, held in Folwell Hall 9, featured speakers, often faculty members. Nevertheless, Nicholson viewed them as a threat and sent spies to the group who gathered names and reported to him, as he did to every student activist campus group throughout the 1930s until his retirement. Nicholson paid lip service to tolerance for student involvement in these organizations, but he shared information about them to groups external to the campus.

Miss Nielsen's reports sent directly to Dean Nicholson reeked of antisemitism as she commented repeatedly on the presence of people she presumed to be Jews in the group. Not only did she count them and name them, but she also commented on their appearances and lack of cleanliness. In one report she caricatured the accent of Bessie Kasherman for paragraphs, explaining that "tone and inflection of the voice plays an extremely important part in giving the meaning of what one is saying." She never explained what that meaning was.<sup>40</sup> The following October, Nielsen grew increasingly anxious at the interactions between what she described as "Gentile girls," (not Jewish, she explained) who sat by "Jewish men and allowed them to speak rather freely to them." She noted that some of those girls let "them" take them home. Miss Nielsen opined that it is up to the girl "if she wants such a dirty (her emphasis) looking Jew to take her home." Another girl she observed was waiting at the same time as she was at the "car-line." A man named "Jacobson" (an obviously Jewish name) "seems too friendly and too extremely 'nice' to her." Nicholson's spy recommended giving the girl's name to Dean Ladd (Tessie S. Ladd was acting Dean of Women).<sup>41</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 3)

Nielsen subsequently explained to Nicholson and his assistant Mr. Poucher that she could not attend the next meeting where people would sign up to be members. Her mother considered it "too big a risk...since there are such a large number of Jews that are members." Nielsen suggested "academic students or faculty should take over spying."<sup>42</sup> One of the last spy reports on the Seekers was filed the next month by a man. He concluded: "Attendance: Thirty. Majority Jewish, foreign accents. One colored man."<sup>43</sup>

Dean Nicholson valued these weekly reports that detailed the presence of Jewish students, and that like him, conflated Jewish, Russian Jew and communist (despite a range of political perspectives in the group). The obvious antisemitism of these reports extended to comments on the dating habits and personal appearances of students. For more than a year, Nicholson made no objection to the linkages drawn between race and politics by those he sent to spy on the group.

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<sup>40</sup> *Report of the Seekers Club*. Eunice V. Nielsen to Dean Edward Nicholson, May 9, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>41</sup> *Report of the Seekers Club*. Eunice V. Nielsen to Dean Edward Nicholson, October 17, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs Box 14: Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>42</sup> *Report of the Seekers Club*. Eunice V. Nielsen to Dean Edward Nicholson, October 18, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>43</sup> *Report of the Seekers Club*, James P. Patterson to J.C. Poucher, November 8, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.



*Dean Nicholson used his staff's antisemitic spy reports on the Seekers Club to provide information about student activists to surveillance organizations outside the University of Minnesota.*

Nicholson communicated information about the Seekers Club to people in power. He appeared to be in regular communication about the Seekers Club with Fred B. Snyder, chair of the Board of Regents. Snyder was a Republican politician who served in many political offices and was a founder of the Civic and Commerce Association and active in its many related organizations. In turn, Snyder shared information with Pierce Butler, also a Regent who was soon to become an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>44</sup> Snyder praised Nicholson for putting the group “under constant surveillance.” Snyder named two student names as the “worst,” noting that one is “a Russian Jew with anarchistic tendencies.”<sup>45</sup> Nicholson also sent a report on the Seekers to President Coffman.

In these reports, in addition to listing speakers, Nicholson explained that he was “able to place” people who attended meetings of the University of Minnesota Seekers Club at meetings of groups without University ties, including the Industrial Workers of the World, the Non-Partisan League, and groups he referred to as “socialist party” and “communist party,” again identifying “Jews” as communists. Nicholson was able to do this thanks to his ties to organizations involved in spying on the Left throughout the Twin Cities.<sup>46</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 4)

Fred Snyder’s letter to Pierce Butler underlined Nicholson’s tactics. He wrote, “certain members have been reported for investigation to the organization in this city constantly at work on ferreting out people who do not believe in our government.” His reference is to the extensive intelligence operations which grew under the Citizens Alliance and the Civic and Commerce Association. At the end of WWI, these organizations created a new surveillance unit to replace the one in use during the war. On the cusp of the Red Scare, the organization employed agents and empowered them to look for “Red Radicals of Minneapolis.” A second organization, The Committee of Thirteen Inc., used intelligence agents to report to public officials on “disobedience” to “American laws and institutions.” Historian William Millikan explains,

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<sup>44</sup> Three years prior to this exchange of letters, Regent Pierce Butler demanded that University of Minnesota President Marion L. Burton immediately assemble the Board of Regents in order to question Professor William Schaper, a distinguished political scientist and faculty member for seventeen years. Lacking any formal charges or an opportunity to respond to accusations, Schaper was fired for his “attitude,” and Butler’s apparent anger that Schaper supported “public ownership of street railways.” “Education: Monument to Freedom,” *Time Magazine* February 7, 1938.

<sup>45</sup> Fred Snyder to Pierce Butler, December 22, 1920, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Nicholson to Lotus Coffman, July 7, 1921, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives; William Millikan, “Maintaining Law and Order: The Minneapolis Citizen’s Alliance in the 1920s.” *Minnesota History* 51 No.6 (Summer, 1989): 228-229; William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001) 213-243.

By 1920 the Civic and Commerce Association's intelligence network...had Governmental authority and was well connected with all other law enforcement agencies. Every radical meeting, whether of Socialists organizing unions or Bolsheviks plotting revolution would be watched.<sup>47</sup>

Millikan's work is focused primarily on the history of the conflict over the rights of labor to organize unions, particularly from the 1920s to the 1930s. Some of the settings where Nicholson "placed" those who attended the Seekers Club, such as the IWW and the Non-Partisan League, fought for workers' right to unionize.

What Snyder obliquely explained to Pierce in his letter was that Nicholson had links to these organizations. Some years later Nicholson was appointed to the leadership of the Hennepin County Law and Order League, which existed under the umbrella of the same organizations of major manufacturers and bankers such as the Citizen's Alliance. Nicholson gave and received information about students within this broad intelligence apparatus.

Snyder was careful not to name who precisely sent the students' names to intelligence sources. Edward Nicholson, however, was the only person who worked with BOTH off-campus organizations that spied on the very organizations listed in Snyder's letter and had his own employees conducting surveillance at the Seekers Club. Nicholson explained to Coffman that he "placed" student members of the Seekers Club at every organization under the surveillance apparatus of the Citizen's Alliance and other related organizations. Evidently Dean Nicholson was deeply embedded in surveillance well beyond the University of Minnesota.

Nicholson sent his employees to spy on these meetings in order to gather student names which he planned to send to those who maintained lists of people viewed as politically problematic by various Twin Cities organizations. Indeed, Nicholson's handwritten note to Coffman on his report cautioned him that "The information relative to outsiders should not be given any publicity as it would probably enable interested parties to locate my sources of information," referring to the network of spies who infiltrated the left-wing organizations Snyder described to Butler.<sup>48</sup>

*Dean Nicholson's political surveillance of campus political activists, 1934-1941.*

Edward Nicholson's pattern of recruiting spies from those who worked for him, and then sharing the names he harvested from their reports with Regents and politicians who shared his ideas, was already in place by the era of the Red Scare and would continue until his retirement. Dean Nicholson enhanced the surveillance of students and faculty throughout the years of the

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<sup>47</sup> William Millikan, "Maintaining Law and Order: The Minneapolis Citizen's Alliance in the 1920s." *Minnesota History* 51 No.6 (Summer, 1989): 228-229; William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 143-145.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Nicholson to Lotus Coffman, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 14 Folder Seekers Club, University of Minnesota Archives.

student movement, even continuing contact with the FBI after his retirement in 1941. Many of the members of student groups that Nicholson approved, and most faculty members who agreed to serve as group advisors, were subject to his reporting to politicians and agencies beyond the campus.

It did not matter that the organizations Nicholson surveilled were perfectly legal. No laws existed outlawing Communist or Socialist organizations during Nicholson's tenure as dean, although they could not call for the overthrow of the government. Nicholson targeted these groups at his discretion and, on several occasions, labeled student activists as "Communist," "Socialist," or "Trotskyite" based on nothing other than his own ideas about what they did or did not believe. An oral history, memoirs, and even articles written at the time by these students define their own ideas differently, ideas to which they were entitled. Many students that Nicholson insisted were communists rejected those ideas at the time, as well as in memoirs decades later.<sup>49</sup>

*Dean Nicholson sent names of faculty and students to people and organizations external to the University of Minnesota for their political and punitive use, endangering members of the University of Minnesota community.*

Ray P. Chase had a long career as a Republican State Auditor, Member of Congress, and party operative. Most important, Chase never had any official role within the University at any time and never was authorized to receive or act on information Nicholson provided to him in violation of his duties as Dean of Student Affairs.

After several defeats for elected office Chase opened the Ray Chase Research Institute in 1936, which was devoted to providing "information" about his political opponents to Republican campaigns, private companies, and the University of Minnesota, which did not accept his offer. Chase sought and offered information to attack the people with whom he disagreed, painting with a thick red brush virtually all of them as Communists.

Ray Chase and his "Institute" gathered information about organizations and individuals that they deemed "dangerous" for the explicit purpose of suppressing social movements for change and human rights that they insisted were Un-American. In Chase's case, Edward Nicholson could provide information about the students, faculty, and events at the University of Minnesota that he could use to "prove" that communists were in "control" of student life, or of the selection of outside speakers, or which faculty members taught "dangerous" ideas. This information allowed Chase to seek the financial support of wealthy patrons who led industries in Minnesota. Chase built his propaganda and wild accusations about the University of Minnesota's domination by dangerous forces on the information he sought and received from Nicholson. Chase's interests

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<sup>49</sup> Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Oral history interview with Rosalind Matusow Belmont, April 4, 1982, pp 6-7, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/oh30.xml>, accessed February 22, 2024; Lester Breslow and Robert Scammon, "One Front in Minnesota." *Student Review*, January 11, 1934, 14-15.

went well beyond the University of Minnesota. He worked on city, state and national Republican campaigns for public office but he frequently referred to the University in his speeches and writings.

Chase and Nicholson shared a quid pro quo relationship built around information and influence. Chase's papers included ten letters directly exchanged between himself and Nicholson. They dealt with their shared efforts to advance candidates for members of the Board of Regents, and Chase's requests for information about speakers invited to the campus and what payment they received. Chase sent suggested speakers to Nicholson and criticized some who had been invited.<sup>50</sup>

Not only did Nicholson consistently oblige Chase with information, but his letters to Chase included names of faculty and students, which Chase used in a variety of ways, including bolstering his claims in print about communism at the University of Minnesota and sharing those names with surveillance organizations in Minnesota and the FBI. Nicholson wrote to Chase that the names "might be of interest to you." For example, on March 15, 1941, Nicholson offered "a suggestive list" for Chase's files. He included six faculty members' names and one physician in Student Health Services. Handwritten, the names are often only last names. They included Benjamin Lippincott (Political Science), Joseph Warren Beach (English), Ernest Staples Osgood (History), and Clifford Kilpatrick (Sociology) among others. The other faculty names were from the departments of philosophy, electrical engineering, and he listed the College of Education. Many of these names appear in documents in Chase's files that he kept for use in his political work. Lippincott and Beach had appeared before Nicholson's Senate Committee on Student Affairs several years before as advisors for student political clubs.<sup>51</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 5a and Exhibit 5b)

Nicholson's eagerness to collaborate with Chase is further illustrated by his subsequent letter to Chase on April 7, 1941, in which the dean wrote,

I would suggest the name of Beatrice Riedel solely on the ground similar to Rosalind Matosow (misspelled), whom you have on your list. I would also suggest the name of Mr. Anthony Calaguri, Hibbing Minnesota, who is in the law school. I have suggested his name because he is an individual about whom the FBI has been making inquiries. He is one that associates with that group and has been very active in trying to get special recognition for the colored people even to the point of lying and trying to get a room for his sister. It turned out he was engaging it for a negress (sic).

Nicholson went on to promise another name of a person he appeared to be tracking on the grounds that the student was registered under different names and was receiving mail

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<sup>50</sup> Forum Schedule University of Minnesota Fall Quarter 1935, Undated, Ray P. Chase, Box 40, Folder 1935, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Nicholson to Ray P. Chase, March 15, 1941, Ray P. Chase, Box 44 Folder January-May 1941, Minnesota Historical Society.

addressed to those names. Nicholson fully understood that Chase wanted these names to share with other organizations and individuals who engaged in surveillance to monitor and possibly punish those Americans with whom they disagreed.<sup>52</sup>

Nicholson's brief note to Chase demonstrates at least four disturbing realities.

- Meetings of approved groups remained under surveillance by Nicholson. The Communist Club, which is likely the group to which he refers because Matusow sought approval for it, was under surveillance, despite the dean's claim the club could exist provisionally by that point.
- Nicholson's surveillance of students went far beyond his spies (often his employees) simply sitting in left-wing club and organization meetings to report names to him. Rather, he delved into many other parts of their lives, such as activism for racial equality, which he considered a problem.
- He had student mail monitored.
- At least some students' movements were being constantly watched.

Finally, this information for the years 1934-1936 and beyond was sent to a Republican political operative for his political use. There is no correspondence between Nicholson and a University of Minnesota president about students on whom he spied after 1921. When he instead directed names of students and faculty and information about the University of Minnesota to Ray Chase, he created a partnership that allowed him to step onto a larger stage in the information economy. Nicholson contributed to a local and national effort to identify and monitor those he defined as "dangerous" to society.

As was the practice at every surveillance organization of the time, whether private or public, names were collected for many uses. The FBI collected names to prepare for round-ups of radicals for any reason deemed necessary by them, as well as to keep those named from government employment. Some surveillance organizations used them to sell to employers to avoid hiring people defined as left-wing. Others, like the Ray P. Chase Institute, used them as part of political campaigns to smear their opponents, and others to keep tabs on those they deemed dangerous. Nicholson's ongoing references to providing "useful names" to Chase suggests that the Dean's goal was to contribute to many, if not all, uses of surveillance.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Edward Nicholson to Ray P. Chase, April 7, 1941, Ray P. Chase, Box 44 Folder January-May 1941, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>53</sup> There is little extant scholarship on the links between off-campus organizations providing information to universities about student activists. Edward Nicholson is unique in the scholarship on student surveillance of the period. While many university administrators provided information to the FBI, disseminating student names to an entire framework of organizations conducting surveillance is unprecedented. Robert Cohen has only one example of the University of California receiving information about students through a broad intelligence network of corporations' surveillance, law enforcement and "patriotic groups." Nicholson was uniquely aggressive in sharing student and faculty names with a parallel set of organizations. Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100-102.

*Dean Nicholson provided information used by Ray Chase in 1938 to create openly antisemitic and racist propaganda in the Minnesota governor's race.*

Ray Chase used information provided to him by Edward Nicholson in 1937 in the first openly antisemitic, as well as racist, campaign literature in the state's history. Chase provided support for Republican nominee Harold Stassen in his race against Governor Elmer Benson.

Unquestionably, one of Chase's important contributions to the effort was to produce a slick and dishonest booklet, *Are They Communists or Catspaws: A Redbaiting Pamphlet*. It was an aggressive attack on Benson and the Farmer-Labor party that asserted that Benson was a Communist and included a section entitled "Communists Infiltrate University." Chase claimed that Communists controlled the Governor, and included photographs that were altered to mislead citizens about Benson's associates and place him at events he had not attended.<sup>54</sup>

Chase bolstered his claim that the University of Minnesota supported communism with material, in part, provided by Nicholson. Chase introduced his fifteen-page attack on the University writing, "We did investigate and were advised by university authorities..." What followed was a list of political figures who had spoken on the campus. Chase then accused two highly respected Regents, Lewis Lohmann and Albert Pfander, of being Communists because they were members of the Farmer-Labor Party. Chase bolstered his claim for the "Communist invasion" of the University with six pages devoted to the fall semester opening convocation lecture by Black poet Langston Hughes, which was broadcast by radio and attended by thousands in Northrop Auditorium. Rather than viewing the event as the University honoring a distinguished poet, Chase termed it "an example of how communists infiltrate a college campus." He attacked Hughes in the pamphlet section entitled "Communist on Campus," as a member of the Communist Party (which he was not) and as an atheist, for his support of the 1929 Loray Mill strike in Gastonia, Alabama, and the 1931 landmark legal case that wrongfully convicted and imprisoned nine young Black men of rape. He reprinted poetry by Hughes and castigated it for its strong imagery, and for Hughes' impoliteness about Southerners.<sup>55</sup> Chase provided the invoice for the payment made to Langston Hughes, which he had requested from Dean Nicholson.<sup>56</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 6)

In addition, *Are They Communists or Catspaws* focused on four Jewish men who Chase claimed "controlled" Governor Benson, while ignoring some of those people closest and most central to

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<sup>54</sup> *Are They Communists or Catspaws: A Redbaiting Pamphlet*, Ray P. Chase (self-published, 1938). <https://acampusdivided.umn.edu/text/are-they-communists-or-catspaws-a-red-baiting-pamphlet/>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> *Are They Communists or Catspaws: A Redbaiting Pamphlet*, Ray P. Chase (self-published, 1938) 46-61. These pages can be directly accessed at the website noted in footnote 49. The *Minneapolis Spokesman*, a Black newspaper, covered Harold Stassen's only gathering with Black voters where he was asked about the publication. "Stassen Blames Race-Baiting Book on State Republican 'Old Guard,' Stassen Disclaims All Responsibility for Race-Baiting Chase Book," *Minneapolis Spokesman*, October 14, 1938. <https://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/lccn/sn83025247/1938-10-14/ed-1/seq-1>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Ray P. Chase to Edward Nicholson, March 18, 1938, Ray P. Chase, Box 42, Folder March-April, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society.

the administration who were not Jewish. Chase devoted pages to Sherman Dryer, who had a minor role in the governor's administration as an occasional speechwriter for Benson and campus activist who tangled repeatedly with Nicholson over censorship of the mail, the control of student life, and supported ending mandatory military drills.<sup>57</sup>

Chase sent the inflammatory and false *Are They Communists or Catspaws* to 13,000 Christian clergy and every candidate for the Minnesota Legislature. The publication was debated in the press. Jewish Republicans pleaded with their candidate, Harold Stassen, to repudiate it, which he never did directly. Jews in Minnesota were so unsettled by the publication that they formed their first defense organization to combat antisemitism, the Anti-Defamation Council of Minnesota, headed by Samuel Scheiner.<sup>58</sup> In the wake of this racist and antisemitic publication, Dean Nicholson never broke ties with Ray Chase. To the contrary, Nicholson worked even more closely with Chase on political surveillance and the election of Regents, which continued to his retirement in 1941. Nothing deterred Nicholson from his alliance with one of the state's most notorious antisemites, Republican Party extremists, and racists.

*Dean Nicholson worked with the FBI.*

Two brief reports reveal that Nicholson provided names when asked, and that he actively corresponded with the FBI about students. It also reveals that Nicholson had several young men in his office who appeared to focus on students involved with the important political issues on the campus, such as ROTC and the peace movement in the 1930s. Nicholson built strong ties to ROTC on campus as well as the FBI and was viewed as a reliable and active source to provide information about students.

At least one report exists of Dean Nicholson providing an FBI agent who contacted him with the name of the president of the American Student Union in 1941. The ASU, already in significant decline, was pursued by the FBI for disloyalty and possibly urging young people not to enlist, despite being on record supporting the U.S. entry into the war. Esther Leah Medalie, whose

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<sup>57</sup> Notes on Radicalism at the University of Minnesota, Undated, Ray P. Chase, Box 38 Folder Corr and Miscellaneous Radicalism, Minnesota Historical Society. (The document notes "Radical Leaders 1934-1937.")

<sup>58</sup> Chase does not use the word "Jew" in this document. However, no scholar of this period in Minnesota politics or about American antisemitism has viewed it as anything other than antisemitic propaganda. Discussions of the pamphlet and its impact on the 1938 election may be found in Arthur Naftalin, *A History of the Farmer Labor Party of Minnesota*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1945) 375-376; Richard Valelly, *State-Level Radicalism and the Nationalization of American Politics: The Case of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party* (Harvard University Dissertation. University Microfilms International: Ann Arbor, Michigan 1985) 260-261; Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1987) 164-167; William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 344; Riv-Ellen Prell, "Antisemitism Without Quotas at the University of Minnesota in the 1930s and 1940s: Anticomunist Politics, the Surveillance of Jewish Students and American Antisemitism," *American Jewish History* 105 nos ½ (January/April 2021): 157-188. The Jewish response to Chase is discussed in Samuel G. Freedman, *Into the Bright Sunshine: Young Hubert Humphrey and the Fight for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023) 130-133. The lists of recipients for *Are They Communists or Catspaws* is in Ray Chase, Box 42, Folder Undated 1938, Minnesota Historical Society.

name was misspelled, was an outstanding Jewish student and she was in the leadership of the *Minnesota Daily*. Nicholson provided her name to the FBI.<sup>59</sup>

In 1957, the FBI investigated whether Dr. Lester Breslow, a former University of Minnesota undergraduate political activist, had actively worked to discourage mandatory ROTC at the University of Minnesota in the 1930s. Breslow's FBI file reveals that in 1942 (after Nicholson retired), Nicholson had been in contact with the SAC (special agent in charge) in the FBI regarding Breslow.<sup>60</sup> The file notes that their Minneapolis office received a letter from Edward Nicholson on April 9, 1942 in which he sent information about an article that appeared in 1937 in *Harper's Magazine*. Nicholson explained that "following is the information I promised you when I visited you last." The article, written under a pseudonym, is entitled "Why I quit Communism." There was no proof that the author was Breslow and he was then in Washington DC working for the Public Health Service. Years after Breslow left campus and served his country during the war, Nicholson continued to pursue him because of his activism as a student opposing ROTC, supporting integrated student housing, and students' rights. Nicholson continued to define him as "the real brains behind the scenes" in student activism, a belief that can be found in the dean's own papers and did not reflect the student activists' views of their own political work.<sup>61</sup>

The file also reveals that in October and December of 1957 the FBI SAC made contact with people who had worked for Nicholson, hoping they might have information about Breslow.<sup>62</sup> The notes in the FBI file state that Nicholson employed in his office and worked with men now in the Air Force who might have known about Breslow. One person they mentioned was Col. Porter P. Wiggins, who was described as a close confidant of the Dean's Office and interested in the student "peace" (their quotes) movement. Wiggins was an Assistant Professor of Military Science and Tactics. The FBI report quoted Col. Geddes, US Air Force, who stated that "he was formerly a student at the University and following his student days was employed in the office of EDWARD E NICHOLSON, former dean of students, University of Minnesota."<sup>63</sup>

*Dean Nicholson sent correspondence and spy reports concerning student and faculty activists to Ray Chase, which exist in Chase's archived files.*

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 329. A copy of the FBI report may be viewed at <https://acampusdivided.umn.edu/text/fbi-report-on-american-students-union/>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>60</sup> <https://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/fbifiles/historical/lesterbreslow.pdf>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Radical Organizations, April 16, 1935, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10, Folder Organizations and Activities Re Communism, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>62</sup> By this point in his career, Breslow had already been appointed by President Truman to head the President's Commission on Human Health Needs and served as Chief of Chronic Disease Control in the California Department of Public Health.

<sup>63</sup> Accessed through The Black Vault Document Archive, Lester Breslow. The site provides, among other documents, FBI files on scientists and physicians as an open source. FBI files are not continuous by date or page numbers.



Nicholson's signed letters to Chase mention that he is sending information, names, and publications. Indeed, some of Nicholson's materials about radical students and organizations appear in Ray Chase's files. Nicholson's name does not appear on all of them, but many are identical to ones in his own files, written by himself.<sup>64</sup> In addition, details in the spy reports about organizations appear only in the documents in the Dean of Student Affairs papers, *Reflections on radicalism at the University of Minnesota*, which were sent to regents and, unsigned, to Ray Chase. Dean Nicholson clearly sent the unsigned spy reports to Ray Chase, with one exception to be noted below.

Ray Chase's files contain reports whose source was often unclear. For example, his files include lists of students who participated in peace demonstrations in 1934 and a 1939 list of members of the Socialist Club.<sup>65</sup> How spy reports were transmitted to him, or where information about the University of Minnesota came from was not always attributed to a person. However, at the Minnesota Historical Society, Chase's papers include voluminous files about the University of Minnesota, many in folders labeled as "correspondence and Misc," by dates, for example, January-May 1941. These folders include reports drawn from surveillance of political groups on campus. The reports are sometimes signed by the people who acted as spies. The reports were in most instances likely created by people who worked in Dean Nicholson's office, such as Vern Mohns, who held a variety of positions under him. Others were not named.<sup>66</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 7)

Chase's files contain no evidence that University of Minnesota-based people who provided intelligence reports, at least one of which reported to Dean Nicholson, corresponded directly with Chase. As the archives reveal, only two people corresponded directly with Chase about this type of information from the University of Minnesota: Nicholson, and Colonel Adam E. Potts, the head of ROTC. Potts sent one report and received a letter back from Chase requesting that

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<sup>64</sup> Radical Organizations (File Copy), April 16, 1935, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10 Folder: Organizations and Activities Re Communism, University of Minnesota Archives. A similar document is dated April 8, 1935 as a "File Copy"; Edward Nicholson to Fred B. Snyder, June 3, 1940, Dean of Students Affairs, Box 4, Folder Correspondence, Miscellaneous 1938-1941.

Ray Chase has a document in his files that is undated and unsigned entitled "Radicalism in the University." It is virtually identical to the documents written by Dean Edward Nicholson in his own files. It also discusses the author's ideas about students who may be influenced by radicals and Communists. It seems evident that Nicholson sent this document to Chase. Ray P. Chase, Undated, Box 38, Folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers Communism and Radicalism. Minnesota Historical Society.

Ray Chase created his own document about the University of Minnesota, Notes on Radicalism at the University of Minnesota (Confidential), that includes Radical Leaders from 1934-1937 and Radical Organizations. He notes that publications of some groups were given to the Dean of Student Affairs, and many of his discussions of groups echo Nicholson's descriptions. Ray P. Chase, Undated, Box 38, Folder Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>65</sup> Ray P. Chase, Box 39, Folder May 1934; Box 43 Folder Undated, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>66</sup> Socialist Club, Ray P. Chase, January 31, 1941, Box 44, Folder Correspondence and miscellaneous file, January-May, 1941, Minnesota History Center.

he be given more information about those named.<sup>67</sup> Nicholson evidently sent the others that exist in the Chase archive. Chase's papers related to the University of Minnesota contain no evidence of any correspondence with Mohns, no exchange of letters as there was between him and Potts, for example. The only person who promised more information was Nicholson. Mohns worked for Nicholson and surveilled this meeting precisely as others of Nicholson's employees did.

A reasonable inference from the files is that a great deal of the unsigned material in Chase's files in regard to the University of Minnesota could only have been sent to him by Edward Nicholson. This observation is further supported by the similar format and contents in both men's files. The student organizations about which Chase's files included reports were the Social Problems Club (1935), the Socialist Club (1941), and the Marxist Club (1941). The reports follow the same format used by Nicholson when his staff person Miss Nielsen provided information about names of those in attendance and what was discussed for the Seekers Club. For example, the 1935 "Confidential" report on the meeting of the Social Problems Club contains an analysis of the links between activist groups, their publications, and information about individuals. These connections are identical to those laid out in a report Nicholson wrote. In addition, the final sentence is the only one written in the first person, "Please be careful how this information is used. We do not want to uncover our informant in the Social Problems Club."<sup>68</sup> This phrasing was nearly identical to an admonishment made by Nicholson to President Coffman in a report on members of the Seekers Club who were surveilled at meetings of Minneapolis groups.

Another example is the report on the Social Problems Club in Chase's file dated February 27, 1935. (See Appendix: Exhibit 8) The report describes a member who was teaching students about communism at a settlement house for Blacks on the North Side of Minneapolis. Nicholson's own memorandum, "Radical Organizations," is dated April 16, 1935, and discusses the Social Problems Club and reports the identical incident. It includes his observation that its members are "all of the radicals known to me (sic) faculty, as well as students." He continues, "from my knowledge of some of their meetings...one in particular has made his brag of teaching Communism to pupils under his direction." In another, he writes "It (the Social Problems Club) furnishes student teachers for Communistic schools, and furnishes at least one teacher for very young students who brags of teaching these pupils Communism." Nicholson received the report and evidently sent it to Chase and subsequently used it to create his own file copies of his report, which he entitled "Radical Organizations," as well.<sup>69</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 9)

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<sup>67</sup> Colonel Potts to Ray P. Chase, March 5, 1939, Ray P. Chase, Box 43 Folder March-June 1939. Minnesota Historical Society; Ray P. Chase to Adam Potts, May 3, 1939, Ray P. Chase, Box 43 Folder March-June 1939, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>68</sup> Confidential: Partial Report of Meeting of Social Problems Club, Ray P. Chase File, Box 40, Folder Correspondence and miscellaneous file, January-July 1935.

<sup>69</sup> Radical Organizations, undated and April 16, 1935, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10 Folder Organizations and Activities Re: Communism, University of Minnesota Archives. The person Nicholson mentioned was identified by the spy as "negro (uncapitalized) John F. Thomas. His biography is listed in the African American Registry <https://aaregistry.org/story/administrator-of-humanity-john-thomas/>, accessed February 25, 2024. Already a person of considerable accomplishment, he is another example of the disturbing ways that Black students were treated and represented at the University of Minnesota at the time.

Another parallel may be found in Dean Nicholson's own reflections on radicalism, in which he referred to Lester Breslow as the "brains" of student activism. Ray Chase described him in a speculative memo about radicals as "the brains" of what he labeled as communistic groups. The memo reflects many of Nicholson's observations on activists which he likely provided to Chase, such as about Matusow and Lippincott. Chase also mentioned Esther Leah Medalie, whose name Nicholson gave to the FBI because of her affiliation with the American Student Union.<sup>70</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 9 and Exhibit 10)

In addition to surveillance, Ray Chase's files include abstracts of meetings of the Senate Committee on Student Affairs. These abstracts were written by an individual and combined into a single report that covers 1934 to 1936, which was evidently sent to Ray Chase. The University archives have the actual minutes of these meetings. The abstracts are taken directly from them. The Senate minutes include the names of every person present at the meetings. None corresponded with Chase, and thus it is unlikely that those who attended could have been a source. These abstracts from the meetings, as noted in Section One, provide the names of every student Nicholson refers to as radical, and names of faculty who were willing to serve as advisors, some of whose names Nicholson sent to Chase. They list the groups that students were seeking recognition for, groups that Nicholson refers to in his reports on radicalism. They provide Chase information about students for the "lists" Chase kept and to which Nicholson refers. One of the student names who is questioned at the meeting, Rosalind Matusow, was sent separately by Nicholson to Chase.<sup>71</sup>

To summarize, Nicholson, who was the Dean of Student Affairs, sent both signed letters and unsigned documents transmitting names of students and faculty to an extremist political operative who was in a position to use those names in service of his own partisan ends. Nicholson was willing to risk the reputations of any activist student at the University of Minnesota in service of his political views. He politicized his position and put at risk the futures of dozens of people.

*Dean Nicholson dismissed Black student leadership in the struggle for equal housing and attributed all activism to white "troublemakers."*

Advocacy for Black people's rights was an important component of the student movements of the 1930s and early 1940s. National student organizations included the issue in their platforms and activism, often with reference to Southern experience. Black students organized protests across the South in Historically Black Colleges and Universities.<sup>72</sup> Locally, a struggle took place in

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<sup>70</sup> Untitled, Ray P. Chase, Box 38. Folder corr and misc papers comm and radicalism, Minnesota Historical Society; Radical Organizations, April 20, 1935, Box 10, Folder organizations and activities, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>71</sup> Abstract of Student Affairs on Left Wing Groups, Ray P. Chase, Box 42 Folder October 1-24, 1938, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>72</sup> Sarajane Davis, *Black Student Activism in the 1920s and 1930s*. <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/black-student-activism-1920s-1930s>, accessed February 22, 2024.

the 1930s to integrate taxpayer-funded student housing on the University of Minnesota campus, led primarily by Black students and with the support of some white students.

A crisis over segregated housing was created in 1931 when President Coffman barred a Black male student from moving into the newly built Pioneer Hall, the first men's dormitory, when he arrived from Washington DC to begin his freshman year. A second Black student who attended the University of Minnesota on a federal aid grant requiring an on-campus residence was similarly barred from moving into Pioneer Hall in the fall of 1934. The refusal to house Black men and women students on the campus continued for several years, leading to a movement for change.<sup>73</sup>

President Coffman's refusal to allow a Black student to live in Pioneer Hall in 1934 led student leaders to propose a resolution to require that the University assure "all citizens, including those of all races, be admitted to the same official University privileges." On April 16, 1934, Nicholson moved to table this resolution when the student who chaired the Board of Publications introduced it at a regular meeting of the student government, the All-University Council. Eventually, Nicholson rescinded his effort to table the resolution because the All-University Council elected only to study housing for Black students.<sup>74</sup>

None of the names of Black students who led these efforts were placed on lists of the radicals that can be found in Chase's files, or included in Nicholson's letters sent to Chase. However, white students, many of them Jewish, did appear on those lists and were described as trying to "induce a negro (sic) or negros (sic) to start a fight for equal privileges in the dormitories." He falsely claimed that there was "no action yet," and also falsely claimed that efforts were solely initiated by white students to whom he referred as "troublemakers" because of their alliance with Black students who led the effort to integrate housing.<sup>75</sup>

The absence of Black student names on Nicholson's and Chase's lists is puzzling, unless one recognizes it as a racism so deeply embedded that it cannot even conceive of Black student leadership and authority. And it appears that Black leadership remained invisible to Nicholson. For example, in his own files his April 20, 1936 memo on radicalism lays out all of the radical organizations on campus and the movement for student reform, as well as their activism around ending mandatory ROTC. He adds, "Efforts have been made this year to induce a negro or negros (never capitalized) to start a fight for equal privileges in the dormitories. Two or three

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<sup>73</sup> This history is recounted in a report written by Warren Grissom, a Black undergraduate, at the request of Professor Benjamin Lippincott. Grissom Report on Housing, Benjamin Lippincott Papers, Box 1 Folder 6, 1937, University of Minnesota Archives. The report may be accessed at <https://acampusdivided.umn.edu/text/warren-grissom-report-on-housing/>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>74</sup> "Student Leader Hits 'U' Racial Discrimination," *Minneapolis Spokesman*, November 30, 1934.

<sup>75</sup> Radical Organizations, April 20, 1935, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10, folder Organizations and Activities Re Communism, University of Minnesota Archives.

colored students have been approached with the request to start action, with no action as yet (sic).”<sup>76</sup>

The year *before* Nicholson penned his radicalism memo, moreover, the All-University Council Committee on Negro Discrimination produced a report calling on President Coffman to integrate Pioneer Hall. The document was signed by three students. One was Arnold Walker, a Black graduate student in sociology, who was one of the most important leaders in all aspects of the fight for equality. A few months after Nicholson’s radicalism memo, Black students founded the Negro Student Council, the first organization of Black students, with dozens of members who played several leadership roles in student activism.<sup>77</sup> There was abundant public evidence of Black activism unfolding in the very places that the Dean of Student Affairs oversaw.

If historical research has enabled us to learn that years of “action to integrate student housing” were well under way by April 1936, it is highly unlikely that the Dean of Student Affairs was unaware of this fact. He chose to ignore it in his reflections, literally refusing to see Black student leadership and allyship with a variety of white and Jewish students. He saw only activist white students as “troublemakers,” activists and radicals in the critical fight for access to housing for all students, a fight that disturbingly continued past WWII at the University of Minnesota. In his private memos, Nicholson clearly opposed integrated taxpayer-funded student housing and believed, as he regularly noted, contrary to evidence around him, that Black students were uninterested in integrated housing. His refusal to see, acknowledge, or respect Black students was a particular and pernicious form of racism.

## Conclusion

In an era marked by repression, authoritarianism, and opposition to civil and workers’ rights, Edward Nicholson took advantage of his role as Dean of Student Affairs not only to undermine the rights of students and faculty to hold diverse opinions, to fight for their visions of America, and to pursue a truly liberal education, but also to monitor and surveil students and faculty. Nicholson not only exercised control over students’ lives, but he also undermined the organizations that he allowed them to form by planting spies in their midst to gather participants’ names and to monitor, as it became clear, their movements, their mail, and their off-campus activities. He proactively provided the names, activities, and what he believed their ideas were to organizations and individuals whose explicit purpose was to use them in their own political propaganda and to turn them over to agencies of government if leaders deemed them dangers to society. Instead of seeing a multiracial democratic civil society at work on the campus of the University of Minnesota—a clear ideal for many Americans in the 1930s—

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<sup>76</sup> Radical Organizations, April 20, 1935, Dean of Student Affairs, Box 10, folder Organizations and Activities Re Communism, University of Minnesota Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Crump, “This Free North,” *Literary Review of Minnesota Daily*, April 4, 1937, Dean of Women, Box 1, Folder 16 Negro, University of Minnesota Archives. This story offers an account of the struggle for integrating housing, the experiences of Black students, and the organization that they created.

Nicholson provided his own labels and accusations as he passed their names blithely to those who could do them harm.

Nicholson went well beyond simply answering questions from the FBI about specific students or replying to requests for names of student radicals; policies that were problematic in and of themselves in this period. Not only did he send University employees to spy on student groups, but his correspondence in his own files and in the papers of Ray P. Chase reveal that he maintained relationships with other political organizations that had their own spy networks in the Twin Cities. When he gave names and information to, for example, Regent Fred Snyder, he was providing information that could be passed on to a network of anti-union and law and order associations. When he gave names of faculty and students to Ray Chase or offered him information about who spoke on the campus, how much they were paid, or offered to get him information about faculty activities, he provided information to someone he knew had partisan intentions to paint the University of Minnesota as financially irresponsible and dominated by Communists.

Nicholson exposed the students and faculty upon whom he spied to harm. Interviews with family members of some of those tracked by Nicholson revealed that the former students, now deceased, had told their spouses and children that they had been fearful of reprisals for their activism. Lester Breslow was concerned that, in a time of quotas, as both a Jew and an antiwar activist, he might never get into medical school. He chose to remain an activist because of his principles.<sup>78</sup> Others were concerned that they were accused of being communists when they were not. Unbeknownst to most, often distorted accusations about them followed them for decades even as they entered highly successful careers, affecting whether they could travel to conferences overseas or receive high level government appointments during the second Red Scare of the post war period.

Nicholson's politicization of the office of the Dean of Student Affairs meets the criteria for revocation of names on University assets; It "is inconsistent with the University's mission and guiding principles." It certainly harms the reputation of the University of Minnesota. Edward Nicholson's name on a University of Minnesota building does no honor to the institution.

### **Section Three:**

#### **Dean Nicholson brought disrepute to the University by using his stature as a highly visible University of Minnesota administrator to advance partisan political ends outside of the University.**

This section documents the controversy Edward Nicholson created in 1937 as a result of his misconduct in his role as Chairman of the Former Grand Jury Foremen, which led to calls for his removal as dean of student affairs by the Minneapolis City Council. The widespread attention

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<sup>78</sup> Personal communication, Devra Breslow by email and phone, September 16-18, 2017.

his actions brought in Minneapolis, St. Paul and at the University made public many questions about his role in political life in the Twin Cities and how he conducted himself as dean. President Coffman apparently quashed any further discussion, thus ending a full public assessment of the conduct of Nicholson and the office of student affairs.

The University of Minnesota's Mission Statement opens with its commitment to "the search for truth." When its Dean of Student Affairs compromised the Hennepin County judicial system, he compromised the search for truth and with it the reputation of the university he served. Dean Nicholson's politicization of his office as Dean of Student Affairs and the grand jury system jeopardized the integrity of the University.

## Historical Background

Dean Edward Nicholson led an active political life in Minnesota. He was highly engaged in the Minnesota Law and Order League and was a leader of the Hennepin County Law and Order League and the Association of Former Grand Jury Foremen. These organizations took shape following the reemergence of a vigorous union movement in Minneapolis during the 1930s. Successful labor strikes, in combination with the election of Farmer-Labor party officials, brought renewed strength to the labor movement and in reaction more aggressive responses from the organized business community. The large organizations of employers such as the Citizen's Alliance were augmented by many other civic associations, all funded and headed by the same network of the major owners of business.<sup>79</sup>

In this roiling and contested era in the nation and in Minnesota, Nicholson, sometimes publicly and most often secretly, aligned himself with these employer organizations and their many offshoots that rose to prominence in the era of union successes. Their goal, in the face of labor activism, was "to resell the capitalist system of government to Hennepin County voters." Along with other like-minded groups their plan was to serve as "the policy making body for all the conservatives of the city."<sup>80</sup>

An important node in this powerful network was Hennepin County's grand jury system and its connections with the politically conservative forces in Minneapolis. The American grand jury system appoints citizens to juries to determine whether there is probable cause to believe that one or more persons committed federal offenses that should be charged for trial. From the beginning of the Citizen's Alliance, one of the organizations of businesses committed to keeping Minneapolis free of union representation for workers, its leaders saw the importance of grand juries to avoid the prosecution of their members and to keep labor cases against them out of the courts.

Judges chose members of grand juries randomly from a relatively small pool of about 200 people for the county. And that group was made up almost exclusively of business leaders and their wives who created the Commercial and Civic Association, which existed in parallel with the Citizen's Alliance.<sup>81</sup> Edward Nicholson not only served as a member of grand juries, but also as a jury foreman. Eventually he faced a crisis resulting from his role as chair of the Association of Past Foremen. Misconduct in

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<sup>79</sup> William Millikan. *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 206.

<sup>80</sup> William Millikan. *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 324, 328.

<sup>81</sup> William Millikan. *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 206-207.

handling grand juries forced Charles W. Drew, head of the Minnesota Law and Order League, to resign in 1937. Drew's actions implicated Nicholson and in turn initiated accusations against him.

### **Dean Nicholson was accused of undue influence over an unseated grand jury.**

In 1937, while Dean Nicholson was in protracted conflict with activists on campus, he found himself under scrutiny on a much larger stage, the Hennepin County court system. The dean was accused of interference with a grand jury. In his role as head of the Former Grand Jury Foremen's Association, Nicholson and his associate Charles W. Drew invited several grand jurors over a period of time to meet with Nicholson for dinner, prior to their formal seating on the jury. Invitations went out on the official stationery of the Grand Jury Association. One of these dinners involved jurors who were to serve for November-December 1937, but were not yet sworn.<sup>82</sup>

As reported in the press, Alderman J.G. Scott of the Minneapolis City Council called for the Board of Regents to demand Edward Nicholson's resignation as dean. District Court Judge Vince Day went on the record to condemn the "interference of any super-legal organization, whether it be a law and order league or any other lawful or unlawful organization." The State Federation of Labor called on Governor Hjalmar Petersen to investigate an attempt to control Hennepin County Grand Juries. At that point, Charles Drew had no choice but to resign as secretary of the Minnesota League for Law and Order because he had evidently compromised his office.<sup>83</sup>

The City Council vote to call for Nicholson's resignation passed 13-11. It followed a heated and protracted discussion about him. Council members and others, many of whom had been students at the University of Minnesota, testified in detail about Nicholson's conduct of his office, much of it highly critical of his control over student life and freedom of expression.<sup>84</sup>

After the Council vote, editorials and campus debate continued. The Hennepin Country Farmer-Labor Party and the Bear Cat Veteran's Association supported the resolution for his removal. On campus, the Practical Pacifists, a moderate pro-ROTC organization, supported Nicholson. However, the on-campus Farmer-Labor Club and the Student Alliance passed a resolution that called for an open discussion of Dean Nicholson's role as Dean of Student Affairs, where he would be invited to speak at an open hearing.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> William Millikan. *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001), 329-330.

<sup>83</sup> William Millikan. *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001) 330; "State Federation Asks Probe of Grand Jury: Drew Secretary Law and Order League Quits," *The Minneapolis Labor Review*, December 11, 1936.

<sup>84</sup> "Council Asks Ouster of Nicholson, 'U' Dean." *The Minneapolis Star*, January 8, 1937, 1-2.

<sup>85</sup> "Student Groups Echo Nicholson Ouster Views," *Minnesota Daily*, January 12, 1937.



No hearings were held. The minutes of the Board of Regents meeting include no discussion or action regarding the resolution. Neither President Coffman nor the Regents made any statement of support for Dean Nicholson. Evidently, Coffman made the matter disappear.<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Historical sources do not report what was discussed at dinners for grand jurors, nor what was the nature of Dean Nicholson's statements or instructions there. Neither do they provide a single written statement of support for informal get-togethers or meals that evidently violated the impartiality of the jury system. The resignation of Charles W. Drew, an important figure in politically conservative circles in Minneapolis, was a remarkable repudiation of the work that he and Nicholson did together. Neither President Coffman nor the Regents removed him from his office, but neither did they defend him publicly. Clearly though, his actions were entirely contrary to ethical standards of public service and antithetical to the University's public mission. They tarnished the University's reputation.

## **Section Four:**

### **Dean Edward Nicholson actively and surreptitiously worked to influence the selection of members of the Board of Regents.**

This section documents Nicholson's behind-the-scenes campaigns from 1936 to 1941 to block the selection of Regents with whom he disagreed politically. It describes his partnership with Ray Chase to recruit and build political allies to advance nominees who embraced an anti-Farmer-Labor agenda in Minnesota, despite the party's strong support among Minnesota citizens. Nicholson jeopardized the reputation of the University by risking discovery that one of its senior administrators attempted to influence the selection of Regents. In this political work with Chase, moreover, Nicholson actively engaged with a political actor who was known for his extreme anti-communism, advocacy for repression of political dissent, incessant attacks on the University of Minnesota as fiscally irresponsible and a hotbed of communism, and, by 1938, overt antisemitism and racism.

Edward Nicholson violated the Mission Statement and Guiding Principles of the Board of Regents not because of the politics he practiced, but because of his efforts to secretly influence the outcome of a legislative process to elect Regents. His Dean of Student Affairs' papers include none of his correspondence about the choice of Regents. No exchange of letters with President Coffman exists, no permission can be found to act on these matters from administrators senior to him. Had his machinations come to light, the University of Minnesota

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<sup>86</sup> Minutes: Board of Regents Meeting and Committee Meetings: January 19, 1937. University of Minnesota. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/45507>, accessed February 22, 2024.

would have appeared to be seeking special relationships with elected officials who funded the institution.

Nicholson's efforts to influence the selection of members of the Board of Regents while he served as a senior administrator constituted a significant conflict of interest and stood to compromise the University's standing as an independent organization. Nicholson's attempt to align the University's students, faculty, and leadership with his own political agenda represented a violation of what we understand as the guiding principles and the mission of the University, which are the criteria by which to judge a person for whom a University of Minnesota building is named.

## Historical Background

The autonomy of the Board of Regents as the final authority over the governance of the University of Minnesota was the result of a 1928 lawsuit brought by the University against then State Auditor, Ray P. Chase. The case of *University of Minnesota v Ray P. Chase, State Auditor*, was settled by the Minnesota Supreme Court in the University's favor. At issue in the case was that Chase and then Governor Theodore Christianson sought to stop the University of Minnesota from expending funds for insurance for faculty and to maintain the power of the state over the University. The University of Minnesota sued them for the right to allocate its funds as it deemed best for the institution. The court's decision gave the University financial autonomy and ruled that it was not an agency of the state.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, the governance of the University of Minnesota could not be isolated from state politics. The intersection of the two spheres remained and remains evident in the powers of the Minnesota Legislature to appropriate funds and to elect members of the Board of Regents, which governs the University. In the 1930s, under the Minnesota State Constitution the Governor had the right to nominate candidates for the Board of Regents for six-year terms and the State Legislature had (and continues to have) the power to appoint them. The ideological divide between the era's two dominant political parties, Farmer-Laborites and Republicans, often led to deadlocks between the parties, and between the Governor and the Legislature, over who would be chosen as a regent. In this era neither party controlled both houses of the Legislature.

### **Dean Nicholson advanced a political agenda to covertly influence the selection of new university regents that was inappropriate for a senior University of Minnesota administrator.**

In 1937, four new Regents were to be elected by the Minnesota Legislature. The conservative Republican Party questioned expanding state funding of the University and called for a tight check on student activism. The Farmer-Labor Party, then led by Elmer Benson, the third governor from that party during the decade, supported raises for lower paid employees and academic freedom. In fact, Governor Benson initiated the request to the Board of Regents to reverse its shocking decision to dismiss the distinguished political scientist and past department chair Professor William Schaper in 1917 on the charge of disloyalty. In 1937, the Regents

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<sup>87</sup> Supreme Court of Minnesota July 27, 1928. <https://casetext.com/case/state-ex-rel-university-of-minnesota-v-chase>, accessed February 22, 2024.

rescinded the vote. Regent Fred Snyder cast the only dissent. The minutes note that a policy on academic freedom, as well as Schaper's reinstatement, both passed.<sup>88</sup>

Nicholson and Chase exchanged three letters in December 1936 and January 1937, and one in February that demonstrated that they were active political allies. Under the banner of "Keep America American," Chase's "Research Institute" sought to demonstrate communist domination of the University of Minnesota.<sup>89</sup> Based on this perspective, their correspondence revealed a strategy to nominate candidates for the Board of Regents. In December 1936, Chase wrote to Nicholson to offer to "reciprocate" for Nicholson's "help with other matters." Chase mentioned the question of appropriations for the University in the upcoming legislative session as a way he might reciprocate Nicholson's aid, although he never mentioned what his position was about funding.<sup>90</sup> He further offered to contact Minnesota's United States Senator Ernie Lundeen, using his nickname, on behalf of their plan.<sup>91</sup> Even though Chase was offering to reciprocate because of favors provided to him by Nicholson in 1936, he still requested, as he regularly did in his

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<sup>88</sup> "Education: Monument to Freedom," *Time Magazine*, February 7, 1938; "The Reinstatement of Professor Schaper," *Science*, 87 issue 2250; Minutes of the Board of Regents, January 28, 1938, 163-166 <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/45535/1938-01-137.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>89</sup> "Keep America American," Undated, Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder undated Circa 1937, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>90</sup> It is unclear precisely what the question of appropriations means in this context. Chase was an extreme fiscal conservative and opposed to most public funding. There are a number of names and references in this letter. It is unclear who Alexander Wolcott is and what courtesy Nicholson had extended. It seems unlikely that Chase means the well-known critic Alexander Woollcott. E.B. Pierce was the second president of the University of Minnesota Alumni Association who served from 1920-1948. Several of Chase's letters mention his concern that Nicholson is favoring others with, for example, a photograph. There are clearly many types of exchanges between these men for information, access, and attention, including humor about "Reds." We have not identified John Lucey.

<sup>91</sup> Ernest Lundeen (1878-1940) was a Minnesota politician, first a Republican and later in his career a Farmer-Laborite. Lundeen was an isolationist who opposed the US entering WWI against Germany, after which he lost his seat. He likely joined the Farmer-Labor Party because of its opposition to the war. However, the Farmer-Labor Party opposed the draft because of the high cost to the sons of workers and farmers who were most likely to be drafted. The party also opposed the economic windfall of war to manufacturers. Lundeen was elected to the Senate in a special election in 1937 on the Farmer-Labor ticket. Lundeen's motives were likely quite different from Farmer-Labor, as his ultimate cooperation with Nazi agents demonstrated his deep support for Germany. Lundeen became a key tool of Nazi agent George Sylvester Viereck, an American citizen. Viereck was the most effective agent for recruiting Nazi sympathizers, and successfully recruited Lundeen during his first year in the Senate in 1937 when he began delivering anti Great Britain speeches on radio, and then on the floor of the United States Senate. These speeches, largely written by Viereck, pursued the Nazi propaganda plan; to keep the United States neutral during the war, to marginalize Great Britain, and to maintain trade relations. Viereck promised Lundeen that their collaboration would lead to his political and financial profit. Lundeen was under investigation by the FBI for his Nazi work when he died in a plane crash in 1940. Chase and Nicholson turned to Lundeen the same year he worked for Viereck and continued that relationship until Lundeen's death. As a former Republican, Chase likely saw him as his only contact to the Farmer-Labor party. Given Nicholson's strong commitment to militarism and ROTC, and his abhorrence of the Farmer-Labor Party, his eagerness to work with Lundeen demonstrated his opportunism. Bradley W. Hart's *Hitler's American Friends, The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books: 2018), 98-110.

correspondence with Nicholson, “facts or information” that would help advance his conservative agenda.<sup>92</sup> (See Appendix: Exhibit 11a, Exhibit 11b, Exhibit 11c, and Exhibit 11d)

Nicholson replied to Chase the day before the Minnesota Legislature convened in early January. He asserted to Chase that the most “vital thing in connection with the University is at the present time the appointment of the Regents.” He assured Chase that it was premature to focus on “the matter of appropriations.” Nicholson stated that he was indifferent to what the party affiliation of the “men” nominated might be. He wrote that he only wanted them to do what was best for the state and the University, and that they (the legislators) not make it a “tool of the Farmer-Labor Party.”<sup>93</sup>

Nicholson’s assertion of the importance of selecting a Regent without regard to his or her political affiliation belies his previous seventeen years of cooperation with politically conservative and even reactionary forces. Then as now, the nomination and selection of Regents was a political matter, and one that was shaped by a contested view of “what is best for the state and the University.” In Nicholson’s case, what he thought was “best” linked him to local and national movements committed to political repression, and to a political actor the University had already established through a successful lawsuit as someone not representing University interests.

Edward Nicholson had reason to seek Regents who shared his point of view. Not much time had passed since the Board of Regents voted to defeat Nicholson’s multi-year campaign to keep ROTC and the requirement for drilling mandatory. He was not alone in attributing the shift in the Regents’ position on this issue to a Farmer-Labor appointee who, like the governor of the time, Floyd Olson, opposed intervention in war and was critical of American involvement in WWI.

In addition, it could only have rankled Nicholson that the Regents’ vote handed a victory to many student leaders who were the targets of his surveillance activities, students who opposed ROTC and were leaders in student government, student journalism, advocates for reform to give students more autonomy in student life, and left-wing political activists from 1933-1936, as discussed in Section One. Nicholson’s own files on student radicalism and the information he sent to Chase often focused on precisely this group of activist students, whose names he also sent to the FBI.

Nicholson concluded his letter to Chase stating, “I do feel that if there is any way in which we can bring influence to bear in the matter of appointment of Regents, it is exceedingly vital that we do so.” “Would it be possible, in your judgement,” Nicholson wrote, “to use him (Senator Ernest Lundeen) in any way so that the matter of appointment of regents might be controlled to some extent?” Nicholson concluded, “I will keep as well posted on the situation as I possibly can, and contact you whenever I feel that there is some matter in which you can help. In fact, I

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<sup>92</sup> Ray P. Chase to Edward Nicholson, December 10, 1936, Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder 1937, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>93</sup> Edward Nicholson to Ray P. Chase, January 4, 1937. Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder 1937, Minnesota Historical Society.

think you can help in all matters, but it would be unfair to call on you to put your time in on non-essentials.”<sup>94</sup>

Chase responded on January 13, 1937, praising the Dean of Student Affairs. He compared him to Glenn Frank, recently removed as President of the University of Wisconsin, adding that “If you are not careful you and Glenn Frank will find yourselves heading a Conservative ticket in the coming campaign. Compared to the two of you the rest of us are all amateurs in politics.” Chase likely referred to the upcoming race for Governor of Minnesota in 1938. Chase dismissed Nicholson’s statement that he was indifferent to the party affiliation of candidates for membership on the Board of Regents. He made explicit that the two men were avowed political conservatives, that they advanced a specific agenda for the University of Minnesota, and they sought political influence to realize their ends.<sup>95</sup> Chase wrote again the following month to assure Nicholson that he had “laid the foundation per our discussion” during extended conversations “with my friends in the United States Senate.”<sup>96</sup>

In fact, Chase and Nicholson failed to have conservative Regents selected in 1936. Despite efforts at compromise, the Republican State Senate and Farmer-Labor State House could not agree on appointments. Farmer-Labor Governor Benson then had the right to appoint the Regents, but only for two-year terms. Governor Benson said of his appointees, “They will bring to the University knowledge of conditions among all classes and a point of view in keeping with the spirit and needs of the times.”<sup>97</sup> His philosophy directly challenged the politics for which Chase praised Nicholson.

## Conclusion

The 2008 Board of Regents statement of “Guiding Principles” states the following:

**In all of its activities, the University strives to sustain an open exchange of ideas in an environment that:**

- **embodies the values of academic freedom, responsibility, integrity, and cooperation;**
- **provides an atmosphere of mutual respect, free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and intolerance;**
- **assists individuals, institutions, and communities in responding to a continuously changing world;**

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<sup>94</sup> Edward Nicholson to Ray P. Chase, January 4, 1937, Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder January-February, 1937, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>95</sup> Glenn Frank biography <https://www.library.wisc.edu/archives/exhibits/campus-history-projects/chancellors-and-presidents-of-the-university-of-wisconsin-madison/glenn-frank-president-1925-1937/>, accessed February 22, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Ray P. Chase to Edward Nicholson, January 13, 1937, Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder January-February, 1937, Minnesota Historical Society; Ray P. Chase to Edward Nicholson, February 13, 1937, Ray P. Chase, Box 41, Folder January-February, 1937, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>97</sup> “Governor Benson Names Four New Men as U Regents: Leonard, Lohman, Olson, Dubois Are Appointed,” *Minneapolis Star*, August 18, 1937, 1-2.

- **is conscious of and responsive to the needs of the many communities it is committed to serving.**

These 21<sup>st</sup> century principles comported with the ideas, aspirations, and values of many sectors of the University of Minnesota in the 1930s, certainly to be found among many of its students and faculty and some of its administrators.

Edward Nicholson advanced a political agenda that rejected virtually all of these principles. No one can question Nicholson's commitment to the Hennepin County Law and Order League or his work for the Citizens' Alliance or other organizations outside of his position as the University's Dean of Student Affairs. Nevertheless, his secretive work to influence the selection of Regents as an avowed conservative committed to attacking the open exchange of ideas was a political action inappropriate for a University of Minnesota administrator who was formally appointed by the Board of Regents, whatever their point of view. His quest to manipulate the outcome of who served on that board to accomplish his own political ends was a conflict of interest, at a minimum.

In a political alliance with Ray Chase, who continuously attacked the University of Minnesota as a communist hotbed, he brought their shared anti-union, anti-government, and pro-militarist politics into his vision for the University and his work on its behalf. When he aligned with a champion of antisemitism, an established opponent to the University's autonomy, and a public antagonist to the University's reputation, and was furthermore a constant conduit of information for him, Nicholson's biases had far-reaching effects on the lives of people within and outside of the University.

## **Final Summary**

The Board of Regents' revocation policy is based primarily on three principles:

1. Individuals named on University of Minnesota buildings and assets are honored in the present because their work and achievements in the past represent and reflect the principles, values and goals enshrined in the Regents' 2008 Mission Statement and Guiding Principles. Otherwise, their names should be removed.
2. The policies, values, and leadership that constitute the record of achievement of individuals named on University of Minnesota buildings must reflect the University of Minnesota's unwavering commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.
3. The full knowledge of the career of individuals named on University of Minnesota buildings must not jeopardize the integrity of the University or "present risk or harm" to its reputation.

We bring this case forward because Edward E. Nicholson conducted himself publicly and in secret as a senior University of Minnesota administrator in ways that were wholly inconsistent with the Mission Statement and Guiding Principle of our institution.

1. He politicized the office of Dean of Student Affairs through policies that suppressed the University's first multicultural and multiracial public sphere in the 1930s. In the face of a vibrant activist student life broadly shared on campuses throughout the United States, he contained and controlled speech, assembly, the right to circulate information, and debate, including interfering with first class mail. He not only administered but expanded the Regents' guidelines for the control of students' rights on campus, indifferent to the significant diversity of ideas and visions of activists in the student movement of the period. He rationalized these controls as his best method to defeat communism, which was not illegal in the United States. While students avidly debated these issues among themselves, Dean Nicholson's approach was to contain, shut down, and censor if he deemed it appropriate. Faculty and administrators who were Nicholson's contemporaries rejected these approaches and policies but were unable to reverse them until his retirement.
2. Dean Nicholson politicized his role in a way that was invisible to most of the University of Minnesota community. He approved some student groups identified with the student movement, only to send his own employees to spy on them. Most shockingly, he shared those reports, along with his own reports on radicalism written over a decade, with Minneapolis organizations that had their own surveillance apparatuses in the service of destroying unions and monitoring those perceived as "dangerous," such as professors. He also sent names to the FBI, and to partisan political operative Ray P. Chase, whose open antisemitism and racism gave Nicholson no pause. Chase evidently received from him dozens of University documents and names of faculty and students who Nicholson deemed dangerous or radical.

It has been barely two decades since scholars have learned how willingly university administrators provided the FBI with names of student activists who attended their institutions in the 1930s. Yet, Nicholson did far more than that. He played important roles in the large network of organizations in Minneapolis and Hennepin County that were funded by major businesses to whom he gave and received information about University of Minnesota students and faculty and sought out opportunities to provide the FBI with information. No known evidence exists that Edward Nicholson undertook his political surveillance at the request of any University of Minnesota administrator senior to him. After 1921, he sent no information about students he and his staff spied on to a president of the University. He answered questions from members of the Board of Regents about student activists. He received no directives from them asking him to do this work.

3. In contrast to his secret political work, he also had an active public life as a citizen. In 1938, his role in the grand jury system led to calls for his dismissal from the University of Minnesota and protracted debate about how he conducted the Student Affairs Office. He was never exonerated or defended by President Coffman or the Board of Regents. That stain harmed the University of Minnesota's reputation.

4. Nicholson secretly worked with Ray P. Chase to influence the selection of members of the Board of Regents in 1938, avowedly to keep Farmer-Labor party appointees from confirmation. He jeopardized the independence of the University of Minnesota and the Board of Regents, had his machinations come to light.

Beginning in 1920, Edward Nicholson politicized the office of Dean of Student Affairs in ways that harmed students and faculty. Few knew the extent of his secret work in surveillance. Some of his closest colleagues rejected his public approach to student life. Dean Nicholson's record jeopardizes the integrity of the University of Minnesota and does harm to its reputation. As we have demonstrated, his actions as Dean of Student Affairs fundamentally violated the Board of Regents Mission Statement.