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STUDIES IN ADMINISTRATION No. 35

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PUBLIC PERSONNEL PROBLEMS
FROM THE STANDPOINT OF
THE OPERATING OFFICER

PUBLIC PERSONNEL PROBLEMS

FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE OPERATING OFFICER

BY
LEWIS MERIAM

Supplied by-
DECCAN BOOK STALL,
POONA 4.

WASHINGTON, D.C.
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1938

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Set up and printed
Published August 1938

Printed in the United States of America

George Banta Publishing Company

Menasha, Wisconsin

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A few years after the writer entered the United States Census Bureau in 1905, as the result of an open competitive examination, he was given an assignment to prepare a bulletin on statistics of employees in the executive civil service of the national government. The specific interest in public personnel administration thus aroused has continued and made him particularly interested in personnel while he was directly concerned with operations within the national service. His work, both within and without the service, has brought contacts and associations with operating officers, civil service commissions and their staffs, personnel specialists in research and educational institutions, and in some instances with legislative committees and commissions and with political officers. Co-operation with associations of government employees, civic organizations interested in public personnel, and organizations interested in the standards of particular classes of government work has been a delightful part of the experience. The writer's obligation to the many persons who have given him of their experience and discussed personnel problems with him is thus great, but unfortunately it is impracticable either to catalogue them or to select a few for special mention. He can only express generally his appreciation and indebtedness.

To the late Arnold Bennett Hall, director of the Institute for Government Research of the Brookings Institution from 1932 to 1935, he is particularly grateful, because the scope of the book and the approach to the subject became definite in conferences with him. Dr. Hall had an enthusiasm which was contagious.

To the writer's colleagues at the Institute for Govern-

viii AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ment Research who have read this manuscript and given him the benefit of their suggestions, Fred W. Powell, the acting director while the book was taking form, and the members of his advisory committee, Laurence F. Schmeckebier, Arthur C. Millspaugh, and Daniel T. Selko, he is especially indebted. He wishes also to thank Charles A. H. Thomson, who worked with the Brookings staff during the recent government reorganization study, for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions.

LEWIS MERIAM

CONTENTS

	PAGE
AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION	3
Public Personnel Administration Defined	3
The Standpoint of the Operating Officer	6
The Attempt to Secure Simplicity and Realism	11
CHAPTER	
I. ANALYSIS OF POSITIONS AND EMPLOYEES	15
Three Types of Administrators Described ...	15
Analyzing Positions	20
Classifying Positions	28
Determining Efficiency or Value of Employees	35
Uniform Efficiency Rating Systems	47
II. SELECTION OF EMPLOYEES	57
Three Methods of Filling Vacancies	57
Three Types of Vacancies	69
III. CIVIL SERVICE TESTS	88
IV. SALARIES AND SALARY FIXING	108
Qualifications Required	109
What the Government Is Now Paying	110
What Other Employers Pay for Like Work ..	112
The Problem of Salaries for Upper Positions ..	113
Cost of Living	122
Geographical Variations in Living Costs	129
Allowances	132
Salary Ranges for the Class and Salary Ad- vances	136

V. HOURS OF WORK, VACATION LEAVE, AND HOLIDAYS	144
Hours of Work	146
Overtime	147
Vacation Leave	150
Special Leave	155
VI. SICKNESS AND SICK LEAVE	161
The Amount of Sick Leave	164
Insurance against Costs of Illness	166
Government Participation in Medical Care ..	167
Absence Due to Illness or Death in Family ...	172
VII. SAFETY	173
Agencies Concerned with Safety	173
Personnel Selection and Safety	175
Buildings and Equipment and Safety	178
Special Water Supplies and Safety	183
Necessity for Employee Cooperation to Secure Safety	184
Agencies with Special Safety Problems	186
Fatigue as a Factor in Safety and Efficiency ..	188
VIII. RETIREMENT	191
Objectives of a Retirement System from the Administrator's Standpoint	191
Objectives of a Retirement System from the Employees' Standpoint	193
Objectives of a Retirement System from the Public Standpoint	196
IX. MORALE AND DISCIPLINE	225
The Strict Disciplinarian	228
The Leader	231
Petty Penalties	240
Disciplinary Dismissals	245
The Need for Personnel Officers as Investigators	249

X. EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION: UNIONS OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES	260
Employee Representation	261
Unions of Government Employees	266
XI. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS	283
Prohibition of Political Activity and Levying of Assessments	284
Difficulties under Political Activity Rules	286
Enforcement of Laws against Political Activity	290
XII. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POLITICAL OFFICERS AND CIVIL SERVANTS	292
Advantages of the British System	292
Where Is Policy Made?	294
The Distinction between Deciding Policy and Formulating Policy	296
Policy Formulation in Controversial Matters .	300
Summary of Existing Situation	303
Possible Improvements in Present Situation ..	305
XIII. CAREERS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE AND UNIVERSITY TRAINING FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE	311
Existing Career Services	311
Proposals for a Career Service for General Administrators	314
XIV. ORGANIZATION FOR PUBLIC PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION	339
Organization of a Central Control Agency ..	345
Organization for Personnel Administration under Management	368
Developmental Personnel Administration ...	381
APPENDIXES	
A. EXECUTIVE ORDER No. 7915 OF JUNE 24, 1938 AMENDING CIVIL SERVICE RULES	391

CONTENTS

B. EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 7916 OF JUNE 24, 1938 EXTENDING THE COMPETITIVE CLASSIFIED CIVIL SERVICE	407
C. A PLAN FOR A PERSONNEL CLASSIFICATION SUR- VEY INCLUDING QUESTIONNAIRE AND INSTRUC- TIONS	410
INDEX	435

PUBLIC PERSONNEL PROBLEMS
FROM THE STANDPOINT OF
THE OPERATING OFFICER

INTRODUCTION

Three objectives have been sought in the preparation of the present book: (1) to attempt to see public personnel administration as a whole; (2) to view it primarily, although by no means exclusively, from the standpoint of an operating officer immediately responsible for getting a certain specific task done or for rendering a specific governmental service; and (3) to deal with the subject as simply and as realistically as possible, making free use of illustrative cases. Each of these objectives deserves some introductory comment.

PUBLIC PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION DEFINED

If public personnel administration is to be viewed as a whole it must be broadly and inclusively defined to include all the relationships between the government as an employer and its employees. For the purposes of definition this broad field may be divided into three main branches: (1) operating personnel administration; (2) control personnel administration; (3) developmental personnel administration.

Operating personnel administration is that part of personnel administration which has not been separated, and perhaps cannot be separated from the rest of day-to-day management of an operating agency and thus remains in the hands of the responsible operating officers.

Control personnel administration is that part of personnel administration which has been separated out and centralized in a special personnel agency that exercises control over the regular operating officers with respect to these personnel matters. The United States Civil Service Commission is such an agency, controlling adminis-

trative officers with respect to initial appointments to positions within the classified civil service and with respect to salaries in agencies that are under the Classification Act of 1923 as amended.

Developmental personnel administration is that part of personnel administration which is educational and promotional in character and designed to discover better practices and procedures and to encourage their adoption. This type of work may be found anywhere in the administrative structure or entirely outside it. Associations or unions of government employees, agencies such as the National Civil Service Reform League, governmental research agencies, the Civil Service Assembly of the United States and Canada, professional organizations such as the American Association of Social Workers, and individual university teachers and research workers may play an important part in it. At times legislative bodies such as the United States Congress may make material contributions in this field through their investigations preparatory to the adoption or amendment of personnel laws, as in the case of the Congressional Joint Commission on Reclassification of Salaries.

Operating personnel administration that has not been separated and perhaps cannot be separated from the rest of the day-to-day management of an operating agency is, in turn, divisible into two broad categories: (1) functionalized operating personnel administration; (2) non-functionalized operating personnel administration.

Functionalized operating personnel administration is carried on by a specialized personnel division or specialized personnel officers within the operating unit. Such divisions in the national government conduct relationships with the Civil Service Commission, apply certain

personnel techniques such as classification of positions according to duties and responsibilities, and efficiency rating, maintain the necessary personnel records, deal with individual personnel cases, and often engage extensively in developmental personnel administration.

Non-functionalized operating personnel administration includes the day-to-day and possibly even minute-to-minute relationships between an employee and his immediate supervisor. The personnel duties of the immediate supervisor are in the main inseparable from his other duties. He may or may not have had any special training in personnel administration. This type of personnel administration is of course the oldest. Much has been written regarding its defects, and these defects have given rise to control personnel administration and to functionalized operating personnel administration. In private personnel administration the importance of this branch is receiving increasing attention because experience has demonstrated that foremen have to be educated to handle well those matters of personnel administration that are inseparably intertwined with their other duties. In this connection it should be pointed out that the number of positions in the control personnel field is rather limited; the number in the functionalized operating personnel field will doubtless be materially larger but none the less limited. The number of supervisory positions in the non-functionalized operating personnel field, from the lowest supervisor to the highest administrator, is large. This part of personnel administration therefore deserves special consideration, especially by those who do not expect to become, or perhaps even desire to become, personnel technicians but expect to do some other kind of work or practice some other profession.

THE STANDPOINT OF THE OPERATING OFFICER

The attempt to view public personnel administration primarily from the standpoint of an operating officer is something of a departure from the historical approach. Because the spoils system and rotation in office were introduced into the national government of the United States in the Jackson administration and ultimately became a sort of cancer of the body politic, many writers on public personnel administration have taken up the subject from the standpoint of the merit system and a central controlling personnel agency, usually called a civil service commission, as these were the devices introduced to eradicate the disease of the spoils system. In recent years techniques and procedures in the application of the merit system and the administration of central controlling personnel agencies have been given increasing attention. They are frequently spoken of as the positive aspects of civil service administration, as distinguished from the older activities for the elimination of the spoils system, which are called the negative aspects. Yet in the literature most of the discussion of even the newer positive techniques and procedures is still written from the standpoint of the central controlling personnel agency.

Anyone who has himself been an operating officer in a federal agency which comes under the Civil Service Act of 1883 is keenly aware of the fact that only a relatively small part of the real personnel work of his office falls within the jurisdiction of the United States Civil Service Commission. The bulk of the real personnel administration, which determines the efficiency of his office as a going concern, remains his own responsibility, and rami-fies down through the entire hierarchy of his organization.

Under the civil service rules in effect prior to the

President's executive order of June 24, 1938, the United States Civil Service Commission came into the administrator's field mainly at two points: (1) when new appointments were to be made from outside the service; and (2) when his salary classifications for positions in the District of Columbia had to be approved by the Civil Service Commission under the Classification Act of 1923.¹

¹ Under the old rules, when an administrative officer in the national civil service proposed to promote a classified employee to a position of a higher class, the recommendation was referred to the Civil Service Commission. If the position to which the employee was to be promoted lay within the normal line of advancement from the competitive gate through which the employee entered the service, the Commission customarily approved the recommendation. It only exercised its control if the administrative officer proposed to move the employee into another line for which he had never demonstrated his qualifications before the Commission. Then it might refuse its approval, or order a non-competitive examination requiring the employee to demonstrate his qualifications. Since most promotions are in the normal line of advancement, the reference of the case to the Civil Service Commission was ordinarily routine procedure, done by transmitting the necessary forms. So far as the writer's knowledge and experience go, it would be a mistake to include this promotion procedure as a major contact between the Civil Service Commission and the operating officers, because it was important only when the administrator proposed an unusual, or one might even say an irregular, transaction. So long as the administrator kept within normal lines, the Commission allowed him practically complete freedom.

While the writer was in the classified civil service, dealing with personnel as an operating man, he had in several years only one case in which the Commission did not approve promotion papers as a matter of routine. In that case the employee had been covered into the classified service when the Bureau of the Census was made permanent and she was carried on the civil service records as a clerk. When it was proposed to transfer the employee to a position as special agent or field investigator in the Children's Bureau, the Commission very properly investigated. The Commission's representative was satisfied that the employee's successful experience as a field worker in social investigation had been demonstrated and had proved her capacity for original field investigation, but he felt that the capacity to organize and present the results of the investigations should be demonstrated by written tests. The bureau officers were pleased rather than put out by the Commission's ruling. They knew that the candidate could easily pass the eminently fair but searching tests proposed by the Commission, and they saw that the procedure would

The new rules promulgated by the order of June 24, 1938, to become effective February 1, 1939, are presented in Appendix A. Under these rules the control of the Commission will probably be somewhat extended.

In some of the states and municipalities that have a general merit system law the civil service commission has greater power and authority, but even under the most far-reaching merit system statutes most of the responsibility for real personnel administration remains in the operating officers. In federal agencies which are not under the Civil Service Act of 1883 and in governments which have not adopted a general merit system, practically all personnel administration remains in the operating officers.

A distinct difference in point of view often emerges in conversations, conferences, and committee hearings between the operating officers on the one hand and the representatives of the central controlling personnel officers on the other. When a merit system law is first introduced and the problem is to stamp out the evils of the spoils system, civil service commissions and the champions of the merit system generally and properly feel that politically selected appointing officers are not to be trusted; they are the very ones to be curbed and controlled. Thus may creep into the habits of mind of the staff of the central personnel agency a distrust of all operating officers. After a merit system has been in effect for some years, the upper positions in many of the operating units may be occupied by career men and women who are just as interested as are any representatives of the civil service commission in developing and maintaining high personnel standards. The equals of representatives of the civil serv-

help block certain requests for undesirable transfers that were being pressed in behalf of civil service employees with more political influence than ability for the work in hand.

ice commission in ideals and objectives, these career men may be superior to them in knowledge of the concrete problems faced by the operating agencies. If these agencies have scientific, professional, or specialized technical duties, the career men in the operating agencies are generally superior with respect to scientific, professional, and technical knowledge; familiarity with the colleges, universities, and professional schools where such knowledge may be obtained; and familiarity with other agencies and professional organizations dealing with similar problems. They are as a rule specialists in their particular fields, whereas the representatives of the central personnel agencies are often at best excellent general men with a specialized knowledge of civil service techniques.

Good recruiting for entrance positions in such circumstances calls for cooperation between the career men from the operating departments and the representatives of the civil service commission skilled in the specialized techniques of examining. Not infrequently the fixed idea of the representatives of the civil service commission that no operating officer is to be trusted arises to prevent that cooperation. Civil service commissions may go ahead by themselves and later present to the responsible operating officers lists of eligibles for appointment that the operating officers regard as eminently unsatisfactory for reasons that they are perfectly willing to expound with some heat and often with no little light. Some of them may even go so far as to maintain that the civil service system as it is actually administered does them more harm than good, though in making such statements they may fail to appreciate that it was the civil service system that made permanency of tenure and something of a career service an actuality. Were it not for the civil service law, able scientific, technical, and professional workers might not

have replaced the spoilsmen in the controlling positions and they themselves would not be concerned with high standards of agency operation.

In view of the fact that so much of the existing literature on public personnel has been written mainly from the standpoint of the central personnel agency, that even in jurisdictions having a strong central personnel agency most of the real personnel work remains the responsibility of the operating officers, and that there is frequently a distinct difference in point of view between representatives of the central personnel agency and the operating officers, the decision has been reached here to approach the entire subject mainly from the standpoint of the operating officers. That does not mean that the central personnel agency will be ignored, but merely that it will be brought in from time to time just as it comes into the personnel work of the operating officers. The main thing that will be omitted is the history of the spoils system and the rise of the civil service system. That history is readily available in many other books.

Another reason has prompted the approach to public personnel administration from the standpoint of operating officers. Many colleges and universities are now giving courses in public administration and are training for the public service. Persons who are familiar with the public service know that the number of positions in operating agencies vastly exceeds the number in the central staff agencies. Hence more college graduates who enter the public service find themselves in operating units than in central staff agencies. Some complaints have been heard from operating officers that students from the universities trained in public administration know a lot about the overhead controls and the staff agencies but they do not know much about the work in hand. Conceivably this

difficulty might in part be overcome if more books on public administration were written not about staff agencies and overhead controls but about work in the operating units. In a sense, therefore, the present book will be an experiment to test the practical utility of a different approach.

THE ATTEMPT TO SECURE SIMPLICITY AND REALISM

The decision to deal with the subject as simply and as realistically as possible was arrived at in conferences with the late Arnold Bennett Hall while he was the director of the Institute for Government Research of the Brookings Institution. It was agreed that the book should be written more on the basis of personal observation and experience than on the basis of a study of the literature, and that it should not attempt any detailed discussion of personnel techniques. It should not be designed to make, or to attempt to make, personnel technicians but rather to promote better understanding of the broad problems of personnel in American governments. The effort has therefore been made not to carry discussions of techniques and technical problems further than is necessary to give that general understanding.

Since simplicity and realism were objectives an effort has been made to avoid academic and abstract language and to give preference to the more colloquial words in common use in government offices. In some of the illustrations and in the cases, words actually used are reproduced to the best of recollection, although the dictionary may mark them colloquial, if indeed it includes them at all.

The use of illustrative cases demands some explanation. In actual administration, personnel matters generally arise as particular cases or special problems. In fact

most of the worth-while efforts to arrive at principles of public administration are attempts to generalize from specific cases. On entering the public service those who have learned principles from books thus have to reverse the normal administrative process and attempt to apply the principle to the specific case or problem. Teachers of public administration would be materially helped if more case material were readily available so that the students could at least see the application of the principle in a concrete situation if not deduce the principles for themselves from a study of cases. Unfortunately case material is not readily available, as it is in the legal field; and practical administrators are often too busy to reduce cases to writing. Some of the most illuminating cases are, moreover, so highly confidential that they are skeletons in the official closet and the administrator must be close-mouthed about them. In the present book an effort will be made, sometimes in the main text but perhaps more often in the footnotes, to supply some illustrative cases. Of necessity these cases will in the main be drawn from the writer's personal experience, because such material from other sources is not readily available.

The presentation of actual cases, particularly in footnotes, has raised a rather interesting question regarding form of presentation. Should the statement of the case be strictly confined to the points that are germane to the main text to which the footnote is subordinate, or should the case be presented more or less as a whole, including material which may be fairly remote from the subject being discussed in the main text, although within the scope of the book as a whole? Despite the fact that the inclusion of collateral material in a case presented in a footnote may distract attention from the main point in the text, the decision has been reached to put it in, so

that the case is reasonably complete in itself. Actual cases often are not focused sharply on a single point: they may involve several other points. Sometime students of public administration may be able to study real cases and get from them not a single principle distilled in some writer's mind but an understanding of the complex of factors that are ordinarily involved in actual administration. Then they may get the idea that they are dealing not so much with fixed major principles but with significant factors the weight of which varies in different situations. Something is to be said in favor of the inclusion of much that is irrelevant and beside the point, because in an actual personnel case much that is irrelevant and beside the point is frequently presented, and the administrator has to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Since the writer's experience and contacts have been mainly in the national service, what he has written on the basis of personal observation and the cases he has presented relate mainly to that service. Only on a few occasions has he worked in a state or a municipal government and been close enough to it to know what was really going on. He has, of course, read about personnel administration in those areas and discussed problems with others who have worked mainly in such governments. Far from agreeing with those who contend that the principles are the same regardless of the level of government, he believes that very real differences explain the wide variations in opinion between persons whose experience has been with different levels of government. In fact, experience has led him away from the idea that there are principles of public administration everywhere applicable and toward the view that at most there are common factors in public administration. Although the factors may be much the same in the several levels of government, their weight

is generally different. Such factors as size, geographic distribution, nature of activities, degree of specialization and professionalization, extent of division of labor, and the extent of improper political interference with administration play a vital part. Thus, because of differences in the weight of the several factors, the equations differ and necessarily the answers differ.

The writer subscribes to the ideal that research workers in the field of public administration should strive for scientific objectivity, yet he rarely feels any confidence in having achieved it. In the present undertaking he has been acutely aware of the fact that when one writes in part on the basis of experience and observation, one has extreme difficulty in being objective. Although one may have had a fair amount of actual experience and a reasonably good opportunity to observe and to discuss problems with persons who have had long service, an essential element remains fairly constant: one's own point of view. The leopard cannot change his spots. One cannot escape certain personal convictions or, perhaps, prejudices.

INDEX

INDEX

- Accrued liabilities under a retirement system, 223-24
- Achievement tests, 92
- Actuarial basis, necessary for retirement systems, 220-23
- Administrative service or division, proposals for considered, 314-26
- Advances in salary within salary range for a class, 136-43
- Affiliation of government unions with general labor organizations, 276-82
- Age,
at entrance into service, 210
for retirement, 200-05
- Allowances for quarters, subsistence, etc. in salary fixing, 132-36
- American Federation of Government Employees, 267
- American Federation of Labor, 267, 276
- Anderson, William, acknowledgment for the University of Minnesota Conference on University Training for the National Service, 117n
- Annual leave, 144-46, 150-55
- Appeals in personnel cases, 258
- Appointments, new, initial, or original, 69-87
- Apportionment, U. S. rule on, 399
- Aptitude tests, 90-91
- Assessments, political, 283
- Athletic services, age at retirement from, 203
- Baruch, Ismar, acknowledgment, 25n
- Battery of tests, development of, 95-98
- Boards of examiners, U. S. rule on, 394
- Board *vs.* one man administrator in civil service, 339-68
- British administrative class, adaptability to American conditions considered, 314-17
recruiting for, 322
- British civil service, relationship between civil servants and political officers, 292
use of broad divisions in classification, 31n
- Building inspectors, necessity for qualified, independent, 177
- Buildings and safety, 173, 178-84
- Career service,
effect of an early retirement age, 203-05
element of salary in, 120
entrance ages, 210
general discussion of, 311-38
relationship to retirement systems, 198-200
- Certification, U. S. rule on, 397
- Character examination, 105-06
- Classification of positions, 20-35
analysis of positions and responsibilities, 15-28
definition of class, 28
major uses of, 29-35
procedure, plan for Hawaii made by U. S. Civil Service Commission, 410-31
questionnaire for, sample with instructions, 414-29; history of sample, 25n
- Committee for Industrial Organization, 267, 276
- Committees,
ad hoc, employee representation on, 261
educational value of, 383-86
- Contributions, political, 283-91
- Control personnel administration, defined, 3
vs. responsibility, 339-43

- Controls necessary in public personnel administration, 343
- Cooperation between control agency and operating officers, necessity for, 9, 72-75
U. S. rule on, 394
- Cornell, Herbert W., case of young physicist testing thermometers, 335n
- Cost of living as an element in salary fixing, 122-32
- Court of appeals in civil service, 259
- Daily News, Washington*, letter contest on effects of salary cuts, 127
- Death in employee's family, leave for, 172
- Decentralization of power, desirability of, 341
- Deming, William C., letter to Gov. W. F. Farrington outlining classification study, 410-13
- Dependents,
benefits for, under retirement system, 196
consideration of, in salary fixing, 123-25
- Developmental personnel administration, 381-87
defined, 4
- Discipline, 225-82. *See also* Dismissal
- Dismissal, benefit in event of, under retirement system, 195, 354n
for disciplinary reasons, 242-49, 353
- Duties and responsibilities, analysis of, 15-28
classification based on, 28-35
plan for survey of, 410-31
- Economy acts, federal, adjustment of salaries under, 127-28
- Education,
danger in pre-entry for monopolistic services, 329
grading of, 76-78
higher, for positions that do not demand it, 330
system of, in United States, as factor in developing an administrative class, 322-26
- Educational leave, 155-58
- Efficiency,
as a determinant of salary advances, 136-43
rating and development of individual employees, 35-56
- Eligibility, U. S. rule on, 396
- Employee representation, 260-66
- Employees' compensation, medical care resulting from, 167-72
- Examinations. *See* Tests
- Extension of U. S. competitive classified service, 407-09
- Experience,
grading of, 76-81
performance tests, 88-90
- Family wage, 123-25
- Fatigue, as a factor in safety and efficiency, 188
- Federal Reserve, efficiency of building employees, 206n
- Fines, value of, as disciplinary measure questioned, 242
- Finger prints, use of, in selection, 106
- Foreman, importance of, 370-72
- Functionalized operating personnel administration,
defined, 4
organization for, 368-381
- Furloughs without pay, value of, as disciplinary measure questioned, 242
- Gardener, Mrs. Helen H., as representative of women on Civil Service Commission, 357
- Geographical variations in living costs, 129-32
- Goddard, Oscar F., the Hawaii classification, 25n

- Grievances, Civil Service Commission investigation of, 256, 273
due to bad supervision, 248
- Hall, Arnold Bennett, acknowledgment of indebtedness to, vii, 11
- Hamlin, Courtney W., working his problems in his own way, 385n
- Health insurance, 166
- Health requirements for entrance, 211-13
- Hill, Joseph A., method of training young statisticians, 238
- Holidays, 144-46
- Hours of work, 144-50
- Instructions for filling classification questionnaire, 427-29
- Intelligence tests, 91
- Interviews as part of selective process, 103
- Knowledge as distinguished from skill, 93
- Lambie, Morris B., acknowledgment for the University of Minnesota Conference on University Training for the National Service, 117n
- Lathrop, Julia C.,
bulletin board for official secrets, 302n
use of facts in opposing bad appointments, 359n
- Leave,
for illness or death in employee's family, 172
sick, 164-66
special, educational, military, etc., 155-58
vacation or annual, 144-46
- Lehlbach, Frederick R., reaction to proposal for one man personnel administrator competitively chosen, 346n
- Length of service for retirement, 200
- Line and staff in organization, 372-80
- Medical care, 167-72
- Medical examinations, 106
- Merit system, classification under, U. S. rule on, 391
- Military leave, 157
- Millspaugh, Arthur C., acknowledgment of indebtedness to, vii
- Minimum wage in salary fixing, 122-25
- Moffett, Guy, memorandum on informative material to supplement questionnaires, 430-31
- Morale, 225-82
- Myers case, 259
- National Federation of Federal Employees, 267, 281
- Non-functionalized operating personnel administration defined, 5
- North, S. N. D.,
his genius for wide personal contact, 45n
practice in dealing with employees against whom an adverse efficiency report had been made, 43
- Offenses, practicability of code of penalties for, 353
- Old age benefits. *See* Retirement
- One man personnel administrator, proposals considered, 345-68
- Operating personnel administration,
defined, 3
organization for, 368-81
- Organization for public personnel administration, 339-87
- Oral examinations as part of selective process, 103-05
- O'Rourke, L. J., development of scientific tests, 98n
- Overtime work, 147-49

- Penalties,
 possibility of code of, for, 353
 value of, questioned, 240
See also Retirement
- Performance tests, 88-89
- Personnel officers,
 as a corrective for the possible
 bias of line supervisors, 46
 general discussion of place in or-
 ganization of, 368-81
 need for, as investigators, 249-59
- Physical examination, 106, 211-13
- Police, officers, exercise of adminis-
 trative discretion by, 298
 unions, affiliation with organized
 labor, 277
- Policy-making positions, 292-309
- Political activities and contribu-
 tions, 283-91
- Political officers, relationship to
 permanent civil servants, 292-
 310
- Political pressure on civil service
 commissioners, 350-51
- Politics, U. S. rule on, 391
- Powell, Fred W., acknowledgment
 of indebtedness to, viii
- Pressure groups, employee alliance
 with, 278
- Problem employees, 249-56, 257n
- Professional positions,
 grading education and experience
 for, 76-83
 incumbents of, as administrators,
 119, 316-20
 recruiting for, may require co-
 operation between personnel
 control agency and operating
 agency, 72-76
 salaries for, 113-22
- Probationary appointments, U. S.
 rule on, 398
- Promotion, 57-63
 methods of selecting for, 63-69
 U. S. Civil Service procedure
 under old rules, 7n
 U. S. rule on, 404
- Psychiatric cases, 252-53
- Publications,
 evaluating and grading of, 81-82
 importance of credit for con-
 tributions to, 236n
- Qualifications,
 necessity for consideration of, in
 salary fixing, 109
 uses of classification of duties, re-
 sponsibilities, and, 29-30
 U. S. rule on, 395
- Quarantine, leave because of, 172
- Questionnaire,
 personnel classification sample,
 with instructions, 414-29;
 history of sample, 25n
 use of, in survey of positions, 25
- Ratings and eligibility, U. S. rule
 on, 396
- Recruiting for an administrative
 class, the American problem,
 322-26
See also Testing
- Reductions, U. S. rule on, 404
- Reinstatement, U. S. rule on, 401
- Religion,
 as a factor in civil service or-
 ganization, 357
 U. S. rule on, 391
- Removals, U. S. rule on, 404
- Reports of changes, U. S. rule on,
 405
- Representation on civil service con-
 trol agencies, 355-58
- Responsibilities and duties,
 analysis of, 15-28
 classification based on, 28-35
- Responsibility *vs.* control, 339-43
- Retirement, 191-224
 accrued liabilities, 23
 benefits,
 for disability, 192, 194
 for higher paid employees, 213
 for low paid employees, 214
 for old age, 191, 194
 on reductions of force, 195
 on reorganization, 192
 on voluntary withdrawal, 194

- contributory system *vs.* straight pension system, 217-20
 cost as a factor in, 206
 dismissal wage, 195
 effect of service requirement on entrance age, 210-11
 forfeitures contrary to public interest, 197
 health requirements for entrance, 211-13
 length of service requirement, 209
 necessity for actuarial basis, 220-23
 relation to careers in public service, 198-200, 327
 small systems on an actuarial reserve basis, 222-23
- Rules, U. S. Civil Service, as amended June 24, 1938, 391-406
- Safety, 173-90
- Saint Paul, Minnesota, adjustment of salaries to cost of living, 127
- Salary,
 increases, withholding for disciplinary purposes, 242
 paid by other employers as factor in salary fixing, 112
 present, as an element in salary fixing, 110
 ranges for the employees in a given class, 136-43
 reduction of, value as disciplinary measure questioned, 242
 relationship to retirement benefits, 213-17
 and salary fixing, 108-43
 union activities with respect to, 278-82
 withholding, U. S. rule on, 406
- Schmeckebier, Laurence F., acknowledgment of indebtedness to, viii, 25n
- Scientific positions. *See* Professional positions
- Scripps-Howard *Washington Daily News*, letter contest on effect of salary cuts, 127
- Selection of employees, 57-87
 for an administrative class, the American problem, 322-26
 civil service testing for, 88-107
 and safety, 175-78
- Selko, Daniel T., acknowledgment of indebtedness to, viii
- Short answer tests, 98-103. *See also* Skill
- Sickness and sick leave, 161-72
- Skill,
 defects of short answer tests as device for measuring, 101-03
 as distinguished from knowledge, 93
- Social security legislation, an expression of public opinion affecting retirement systems, 196
- Special leave, 155-58
- Spillman, W. J., performance of, as illustrating intelligent or informed guess, 100n
- Staff and line in organization, 372-80
- Staff conferences,
 for establishing work standards, 44
 for letting employees know what is expected of them, 239
- Stockberger, W. W.,
 grievances due to bad supervision, 248
 the X or luck factor in careers, 204
- Strike, the right to, in the public service, 274-76
- Tardiness, 232
- Technical positions. *See* Professional positions
- Temporary appointments, U. S. rule on, 399
- Testimony, U. S. rule on, 406
- Tests, 88-107; U. S. rule on, 393
- Thomson, Charles A. H., acknowledgment of indebtedness to, viii

440 PUBLIC PERSONNEL PROBLEMS

- Transfers, 63-69
in disciplinary cases, 242
in the old census plan of maintaining efficiency, 43
U. S. rule on, 402
- Turn-over,
as an element in considering salary levels, 111
as a factor in promotion, 333
- Unemployment insurance, 195, 198
- Unions of employees, 266-82
- United Federal Workers of America, 267
- University of Minnesota, Conference on University Training for the National Service, 117
- University training for the public service, 329
- Vacation leave, 144-46, 150-55
administrative control over, 158-60
- Wales, George R.,
on participation in technical work, 364
on value of a board, 359
- Washington Daily News*, letter contest on effect of salary cuts, 127
- Water supplies and safety, 183
- White, William Alanson, on human variables, 201
- Wilson, George S., 125n
- Women, representation of, on Civil Service Commission, 357
- Workmen's compensation, medical care resulting from, 167-72