CHAPTER III

CASE HISTORY OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

On April 13, 1930, the people of the city of Norfolk and surrounding area were informed that a new university was to be started at suburban Virginia Beach. According to the Norfolk Virginian Pilot on that date, the university was to be one of the largest in the United States and was to be supported by a number of leading financiers of the East and West. The university was to open in September, 1930 with ten departments and with ten full professors. Freshman and sophomore classes were to be taught the first year, and the newspaper indicated that other courses would be added if there was sufficient demand. No mention was made of the administrative personnel in the preliminary publicity except for the naming of the president. On April 15th the university had not received its charter, but application had been made, and the news article indicated that it was merely a matter of time before the charter would be granted. 21

Among the members of the board of trustees was a man who diagnosed physical ills by clairvoyance. There was apparently a tendency on the part of the public to

21 Local Dispatch, Norfolk Virginian Pilot, April 13, 1930.
associate the new university with the hospital which was used for treating his patients. In order to correct this impression in the public mind, the administration made the following statement to the press concerning the psychic division of the new university:

We shall try to discover the real facts about psychic phenomena in our laboratory. The approach will be scientific and the same general methods will be used as are utilized in all the other sciences. We are not interested in mediumism, clairvoyance, or any of the other known quackeries.

On April 18th another announcement appeared. It stated that the founders of the university expected to spent $500,000 during the first year. Plans called for two temporary buildings to be built at the cost of $200,000. This would appear to indicate that it was planned to use the remaining $300,000 for operational costs.

Along with the financial publicity came an initial statement concerning the educational philosophy of the school. One of the important financial backers stated that:

The new university is dedicated to the proposition that within each individual exists potential ability which if developed properly will give these individ-

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24 Local Dispatch, *Norfolk Virginian Pilot*, April 18, 1930.
uals their best expression for their greatest usefulness to the world and humanity. Every field of culture and learning will be taught.

Less than a month after the announcement in the newspaper of the founding of the new university it received its charter. The university was chartered as a non-profit corporation and was incorporated in the names of two board members and the president of the university. The aim set forth in the charter was as follows:

To establish and maintain an institution of learning in Princess Anne County, Virginia, for the instruction of students in the various branches of a thorough and liberal education, literary, scientific, professional and ornamental, with authority in the President and Trustees to confer any degrees in the arts, sciences, and professions, generally conferred upon persons in other colleges or universities, upon such persons as shall in their judgment merit the same, and in general to establish and conduct a college or university in all of the branches thereof.

In connection with the foregoing, the President and Trustees of the university shall have the authority to institute and conduct research courses in the arts and sciences and to conduct general extension courses.

The institution shall be forever maintained upon a most liberal plan for the benefit of the youth and other persons of both sexes and of every religious denomination, who shall be freely admitted to equal honors of the institution, according to their merit, and the President and Trustees of the institution shall be authorized to admit as students, all persons who in their judgment have proper moral and educational qualifications.

In connection with the foregoing and for the accom-

25 Ibid., April 16, 1930.
plishment of the purposes of the corporation, the Trustees hereinafter named shall have the power to acquire, hold and control such real and personal property as may be necessary, subject to the limitation of law, for the proper equipment of the institution.

To provide for the accomplishment of the purposes of the corporation and to carry on the educational institution conducted by it, the Board of Trustees shall have the power to prescribe, from time to time, the rates to be charged students for instruction at the institution, but such institution shall not be conducted in any respect for the profit of any person or persons, natural or corporate. 26

Written statements by the president of the University and by members of the board of trustees indicate that all were anxious to found a university that would be of service to humanity. 27

The ideals of the faculty in regard to education were progressive and forward looking. Many of the faculty group had come to Atlantic University because they felt that the four educational aims of the University were forward steps in education, and they wanted to participate in the enterprise. 28

In an interview with the writer Dr. Mina Kerr, formerly Dean of Women at Atlantic University, stated that

26 Atlantic University Charter (State Corporation Commission, Richmond, Virginia), May 30, 1930.

27 Atlantic University Bulletin, Catalog and Announcements 1931-32 (Virginia Beach, Virginia, August 1931, Volume II, #1), pp. 16-17.

28 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.
the educational objectives of Atlantic University, as understood by the faculty, were as follows: The first aim was to use wherever possible the progressive educational idea of learning by doing. Students were to learn good government by participating in good student government. They were to learn to write creatively by attempting to write creatively. They were to learn tolerance by living in an environment in which tolerance was accepted.

The second aim of Atlantic University, as understood by the faculty group, was to promote good international relations. This was to be done by exchanging students with other countries and encouraging American students to learn to get along with students of other nations. It was the hope of the faculty that this would be reflected in the international relations of the several nations.

The third aim was that the faculty was to think in terms of the innate worth of each individual. Individuals are very different in abilities. The faculty of Atlantic University felt that each individual had some area in which he could be successful. The faculty wanted to establish an educational institution in which each individual could capitalize upon the area of his greatest potentialities.

The fourth aim of the faculty of Atlantic University was to experiment in intelligent psychic research.
There have been many attempts to develop psychic research to the point of a science. Men continue to try, however, to develop it further, and they are not without good reasons for so trying. 29

The implication of these statements in the interview was that the point of view of the University in regard to psychic research was somewhat similar to that of Jastrow when he said,

The sources of our mental life are indeed complex and do not lie on the surface; there are hidden springs of motive, wayward losses and recoveries. There are daylight and twilight phenomena. The field of operations which prompted belief in transcendence is real and significant: that it can be brought within the range of accredited principles is the position of modern psychology. Its impress upon the story of belief through the ages gives it added interest. The episodes are so diverse that their reduction to a common plot is itself an application of the new psychology. 30

In summary, it may be pointed out that the objectives of Atlantic University were not as particular and specific as are the objectives of some colleges. Few colleges have accepted the progressive ideal of learning by doing as Atlantic University did. In general the objectives of Atlantic University were broad to the extent of recognizing the human worth of each individual and included the fostering of the ideal of world brotherhood.

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Atlantic University was located at Virginia Beach, on the Atlantic Ocean, eighteen miles from the city of Norfolk. The country surrounding it not only was one of great historic importance but also possessed one of the most healthful climates. The town of Virginia Beach was (and still is) a lovely summer resort, with a charm all of its own. In winter the situation remains pleasant; the surf bathing is discontinued, but oyster roasting, horseback riding, and other activities replace it. The choice of the Virginia Beach location appears to have been wise in view of the fact that housing which was used by resorters in the summer was available for occupancy by the University in the winter.

The factual history of Atlantic University began in May 1930. Two offices were opened at that time; one was located in Norfolk, while the other was located at Virginia Beach. By May 31st, the administration was able to announce that a portion of the faculty had been employed. A professor of modern languages, a professor of psychology, a professor of art, a professor of vocational guidance, a football coach, an instructor in physical education, and one administrative officer had been employed. The administration stated that it would be necessary to employ

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31 Atlantic University Bulletin, Preliminary Announcements (Virginia Beach, Virginia, August 1930, Volume I, #3), pp. 21-23.
several more department heads before the University would have a complete staff. 32

During the summer, the administration mailed out catalogues, registered students, and made plans for the opening of the University. Housing accommodations for the University proved to be a problem, because the temporary buildings that the administration had expected to be ready by September were not completed. It was decided, in consequence, to house the University in one of the large hotels at Virginia Beach. 33

The catalogue, sent out in August, appeared complete and detailed. It stated that two large hotels had been rented until the permanent building program could be completed. It was stated that provisions had been made for a library, laboratories, and other facilities necessary for instruction. A complete athletic program and most of the other, common college activities were said to be provided for the students. 34

The University was divided into three schools; the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Fine Arts,

32 Local Dispatch, Norfolk Virginian Pilot, May 31, 1930.

33 Ibid, May 31, 1930.

34 Atlantic University Bulletin, Preliminary Announcements, op. cit., pp. 27-32.
and the Graduate School. The degrees of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, and Master of Arts were offered, and the requirements for these degrees corresponded to the standard requirements of the average college.  

By August, one may assume, the college had taken detailed form in the mind of the administration, and the catalogue that was distributed at that time showed that most of the important details of organization had been attended to. Student government, change of courses, promotions, grades, absences, vacations, examinations were all discussed in detail.  

September 7th, the president of the University opened his office in the hotel that was to serve as the administration building. September 16th, two announcements were issued from his office. One concerned the new campus which was "about to be built," and the other concerned the faculty, the majority of whom had arrived.  

A picture of the faculty was printed in the Norfolk newspaper. Of twenty seven original faculty members nine held doctors' degrees, four masters' degrees, and the remainder special training for their teaching respons-

37 Local Dispatch, Norfolk Virginian Pilot, September 8, 1930.
sibilities. The educational qualifications of the group were high.

September 22nd, the University opened, and within the week, two hundred students had enrolled. The first convocation was held on September 24th in the Virginia Beach Presbyterian Church. Three speeches were made. One was made by an influential member of the board of trustees. Another speech was made by the mayor of Virginia Beach, and a third was made by the president of the University. The board member stated that the University was built on faith. The mayor was glad that the school was located at Virginia Beach, and the president stated that the mission of the University was to seek truth and produce creativeness.

In an editorial the following morning, the editor of the Virginian Pilot congratulated the founders on the lofty ideals they had expressed at the convocation. The editor expressed concern, however, over the lack of buildings and those permanent assets that are usually the attributes of a college.

The lack of permanent buildings was evident. The

38 Atlantic University Bulletin, op. cit., pp. 8-17.

39 Local Dispatch, Norfolk Virginian Pilot, September 23, 1930.

40 Editorial, Norfolk Virginian Pilot, September 24, 1930.
total physical plant in the fall of 1930 consisted of three hotels, an office building, a store building, and the Presbyterian Church which contained all the classrooms of the University. The College Shop, which sold supplies and textbooks, was located in the front of a store building about one block from the main building, and chemistry and physics' laboratories were located in the rear of this building. The hotels served both as dormitories and as classrooms, and the church and office building were used for classroom space only. Many physical changes were made in the buildings in order to give the students sufficient classroom space.

In addition to the usual bulletins, brochures, and news releases, it would appear that the University relied heavily upon the football team and the orchestra to give it favorable publicity among the clientele it wished to attract. Scholarships were provided for members of the football team and for accomplished musicians who played in the orchestra. A football schedule of eight games was arranged for the first session.

The orchestra was composed of experienced musicians who had come to Atlantic University after having played in other college dance orchestras. The orchestra became known throughout Tidewater Virginia as an outstanding college orchestra, and this reputation advertised the University.
The Saturday night dances that the orchestra sponsored were well attended both by the University students and outsiders.

Of the two hundred students enrolled in the first year, one hundred and twenty-two were freshmen, eighty-one were sophomores, eight were juniors, two were seniors, and eight were graduate students. Most of the students came from Virginia, but the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Alabama, Oklahoma, Connecticut, South Carolina, Kentucky, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Illinois, and Maryland were represented. The range of intelligence quotients revealed by the admissions testing program indicated that the student body ranged in ability from average to genius ratings.

The writer would judge the first week of the college’s existence as one with an outward appearance of great prosperity. The College Shop was well stocked with supplies. Many of the athletes and the musicians were in school at no expense to themselves, and the hotel rooms which were used as dormitory rooms still had the summer rates of $16 per day posted on the walls. All of these factors con-

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41 Atlantic University Bulletin, Catalog and Announcements 1931-32 (Virginia Beach, Virginia, August 1931, Volume II, #1), pp. 135-145.

42 Atlantic Log (School Publication, Virginia Beach, Virginia), October 21, 1930.
tributed to the impression that there was available to the institution an adequate amount of financial resources.

October 11th was an important date in the history of Atlantic University. It was the day on which the administration of Atlantic University and the first board of trustees ended their formal association. It was impossible for the investigator to ascertain the reasons which caused this parting. A contract was drawn up at that time, however, which seems to be indicative of certain controversies between the two parties. The administration apparently wanted complete freedom in operating the school. The board of trustees was not prepared to finance the expensive project that had developed and wanted to be relieved of its financial obligations. From a study of this document that divorced them it appears that the contract was between the president and the board. Some of the salient points of this contract are as follows: since there was some difference of opinion between the president and the board as to how the funds should be spent, the board member who had assumed major financial responsibility was to fulfil his entire obligation to the president, not the institution, giving a total of $60,000 at the rate of $5,000 a month for each of the following departments: philosophy, psychology, English, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and
ancient and modern languages. The dispensing of these funds was to be the responsibility of the president, while the board member, who was also a member of the faculty, was still to have the right to conduct his class in metaphysics at the University. 43

This contract was a secret agreement between the president and the first board of trustees. The faculty of the University knew nothing of it, and it did not appear until brought to light in the bankruptcy proceedings. Yet, it must have been satisfactory to the administration and to the board of trustees, since each party got what it desired. The board of trustees was relieved of its heavy financial responsibility, and the administration secured complete control of all the affairs of the University. 44

Thereafter, the administration reorganized the board of trustees and began trying to make the University into an entirely local project. The first board of trustees had included people from outside Virginia Beach and Norfolk, Virginia. The new board was entirely local in personnel. 45

43 Atlantic University Bankruptcy Proceedings, Federal Clerk's Office, Norfolk, Virginia, December 19, 1931.

44 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.

45 Atlantic University Bulletin, Catalog and Announcements 1931-32, op. cit., p. 5.
Student life in the institution appeared in the main to follow the traditional college pattern. There were pep rallies, dances, college songs, and student pranks. Some of the latter were destructive and undesirable, though in general student conduct was little different from that in other similar institutions.

Evidence that much of student life was not meaningless may be observed in several constructive activities. The musical production entitled "The Shoe String Revue" was produced by students of the University. The Atlantic University Players put on Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew". Both of these productions were enthusiastically received by the audience and were judged by the writer to be above the average of similar productions of college groups.

There apparently was no immediate effect upon life at the University as a result of the contract of October 11th. Effects were slowly felt, however. Food in the dining hall began to be scarce, and rumors began to circulate among the students that the University was not financially sound.

By Christmas the University was behind in paying all its obligations, and as indicated in the records of the bankruptcy proceedings, many of the creditors were anxious for their money. They were demanding payment of the University, and the administration was facing either the
closing of the University or the making of additional arrangements in order to continue. 46

Shortly after Christmas, a faculty meeting was called. About ten of the professors had letters from a member of the board of trustees personally guaranteeing their salaries for one year. These professors were the heads of their departments, and the October 11th contract provided for them. The twenty other people who had been employed by the administration appeared to have little chance of being paid. At this faculty meeting the financial situation at the University was made clear to all. The administration stated that ten of the professors had the legal right to their full salary, but in order for the University to continue, these professors would have to share their salaries with the other people employed by the University. The question placed before the group was this: would the professors having contracts share or would the University close? The other employees of the University had to live, so the faculty members who had a legal right to their salaries agreed to share with the others. 47

From February, 1931, everyone connected with the

46 Atlantic University Bankruptcy Proceedings, op. cit., December 19, 1931.

47 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.
University felt that its existence was doubtful. If every student had paid his tuition, there would have been only $15,000 a semester from this source. The $5,000 a month that was to be received during the current school year from the former board member could not be depended on the following year. In short, the school was heavily in debt, had no new financial supporters, and no buildings. Moreover, there was a decreasing student body. Practically everyone connected with the school felt that the first year would be the last.

This feeling persisted, but appeared to be modified when the administration issued the announcement of the summer session and at the same time announced that the University would operate for the session 1931-32.

In spite of evidence which indicated disaster, Atlantic University closed its first year as it had begun, with an air of grandeur. The first annual commencement

49 Atlantic University Bulletin, op. cit., pp. 135-144.
50 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.
51 The writer recalls that many students dropped out of school during the first academic year.
52 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.
53 Atlantic Log (School Publication, Virginia Beach, Virginia), May 8, 1931.
began May 22nd, and ended on June 1st. Excerpts from the
commencement program follow:

8:00 P. M. - Commencement Dramatic Production,
Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew", Maury High
School, Norfolk, May 22.

8:30 - 10:00 P. M. - Reception for trustees, faculty,
and students, May 30.

10:00 P. M. - Torchlight procession and celebration
by student body, Boardwalk and Beach, Saturday, May
30.

11:00 A. M. - Baccalaureate Exercises, First Presby-
terian Church, Sunday, May 31. Sermon - The
Rev. F. Roland Wagner, Pastor, Central Baptist
Church, Norfolk.

11:00 A. M. - First University Commencement, First
Presbyterian Church, Monday, June 1.

12:30 P. M. - Reception to graduates and their
friends, Waverley Hotel, Virginia Beach.

3:00 P. M. - Semi-Annual meeting of the Board of
Trustees, Waverley Hotel.

Candidates for Degrees: Bachelor of Science - One;
Bachelor of Arts - one; Master of Arts - One.54

The administration of Atlantic University decided
to have a summer school. The Oceana High School, a school
not far from Virginia Beach, had been made available for
classrooms and administrative offices, and the Virginia
State Board of Education had agreed to recognize the work
of the University in renewing teachers' certificates.55

54 Atlantic University's First Annual Commencement
Program, May 22 - June 1, 1931.

55 Atlantic University Bulletin, op. cit., p. 123.
Virginia Beach was an attractive location at which to attend summer school, and seventy-eight students availed themselves of the opportunity for summer study. 56

During the summer of 1931, most of the administration of Atlantic University was attempting to get money for the fall term. There is no record of the actual number of people contacted for this purpose or the offers and counter proposals that were made. Nineteen hundred and thirty-one was a difficult year in which to raise money for anything, for people were facing the worst depression in the country's history. People with money evidently were thinking in terms of preserving their fortunes rather than in terms of aiding educational institutions. Very little money was raised. 57

The catalogue for the 1931-32 session was issued and distributed in August. It contained about the same information that was contained in the catalogue published a year earlier. The catalogue indicated that the University definitely would continue. Indeed, a new school had been added, the school of optometry, and the number of people employed by the University had increased to thirty-seven. 58

56 Ibid, p. 143.
57 Interview, Dr. Mina Kerr, December 24, 1947.
58 Atlantic University Bulletin, op. cit. pp. 5-11.
The University began its second and final year in September, 1931. Classes were conducted and regularly attended, and students talked about the time that the University would move to a new location.

Ninety-three students had paid in a total of $7,437.12 during the second year of the school. The rent for the hotel building had to be paid out of this amount, as well as all other operational costs. The small balance had to be divided among the thirty-seven employees, allowing very little salary for each. 59

Some of the professors had large families, and because their salaries were not paid, they had run into financial difficulties. Many such families had exhausted their credit in the local stores, and they had no financial means. One day a fish market donated a truck load of fish, and the bursar paid the faculty members in fish. 60

Finally, everyone connected with the University had to face the fact that there was absolutely no money and there was no prospect of receiving money. On December 19th, 1931 Atlantic University went into voluntary bankruptcy. The University had gone in debt rapidly: the student body

59 Atlantic University Bankruptcy Proceedings, op. cit., December 19, 1931.

60 Thomas Sugrue, op. cit., p. 321.
had decreased, and the creditors had been trying to collect their money. Under the circumstances the University had not done what it was supposed to do for the students, community, or the faculty, and there seemed little reason to support its continuation.

There was some effort made to try to operate the University until the end of the semester in order to allow the students to get credit for their semester's work. The total lack of money or resources and the destitute condition of the faculty convinced the trustee in bankruptcy, however, that it was unwise to continue the school at all.

When the University finally was closed and the settlements were made, liabilities were heavy. Of the total $117,115.67 owed, $84,335.51 was due for salaries to the professors and $32,561.16 was due to other people. The bills filed in the bankruptcy proceedings include a wide variety of purchases, and they date from the beginning of the University. In a year and three months the University had cost approximately $254,000.

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61 Atlantic University Bankruptcy Proceedings, op. cit., December 19, 1931.

62 Ibid., December 19, 1931.