

Martha Peterson Papers Donated to KU

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KU News

LAWRENCE -- A small-town Kansas girl who grew up to become a pioneer for women in higher education and corporate America has donated her extensive papers to the University of Kansas libraries. An exhibit about the life of Jamestown native Martha Peterson will open with a reception from 4 to 5:30 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 29, at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library on the KU campus. The public is invited to attend. The exhibit, which includes information about student life at KU in the 1930s to 1950s, will be on display for the rest of the year.

Peterson, the former president of two colleges and the first woman to serve on the board of directors of Exxon, Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. and Dry Dock Savings Bank, will attend the reception.

"She is truly a trailblazing leader," said Mary Hawkins, a librarian in KU's Kansas Collection who curated the Peterson exhibit.

Peterson, 82, began her career at KU, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in mathematics in 1937 and 1943. While working on her doctoral degree in educational psychology and counseling, which she completed in 1959, she was an instructor in the KU mathematics department (1942 to 1952), assistant dean of women (1947 to 1952), and dean of women (1952 to 1956.) During her tenure, she was credited with the installation of the dormitory system for freshmen women at KU.

She left KU in 1956 to become the dean of women at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which made her the highest-ranking woman to serve at the school. She became university dean of students for the 13-campus University of Wisconsin system in 1963.

Peterson was named president of Barnard College, the affiliated women's college of Columbia University, New York City, in 1967. She returned to Wisconsin in 1975 to become the first woman president of Beloit College, from which she retired in 1981.

During her career, she served as president of the American Council on Education, the Wisconsin Academy of Arts, Sciences and Letters, and the National Association of Women's Deans and Counselors. She also was chair of the Wisconsin Rhodes Scholar Committee.

She is a former trustee of Chatham, Barnard and Beloit colleges and a life trustee of the University of Notre Dame. She has received honorary degrees from more than 20 institutions.

Peterson, who was inducted into KU's Women's Hall of Fame in 1972, received KU's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Citation, in 1968. She also received the KU School of Education's Apple Award in 1993.