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Martha Peterson

Martha Peterson was the president of Barnard College for a nine-year span lasting from 1967 to 1975. As a Protestant and a single, college-educated woman, Peterson managed to fit into two of the most concrete molds in her appointment as the college’s seventh leader. However, in her time on the Morningside Heights campus, she proved that her unique approach to administering the institution—a result of her background in both the classroom and in two deanships—was what the college needed to survive an unstable political and social period.

Born June 22, 1916, Peterson grew up outside of Jamestown, Kansas, as the only child of a wheat farmer and a news reporter. Jamestown—a town sprung up as a stop along the then-called Missouri Pacific Railroad—was located in the northern part of the state and boasted a population of fewer than 300 people, and still does (*Biennial Report* 164).

Peterson didn’t go beyond a three-hour trek for her college education. She earned her AB from University of Kansas in 1937 and later her MA in 1943—both in mathematics. Soon after, she began teaching high school mathematics, and continued to do so until 1952 when—at the age of 36—she was offered the position of Dean of Women at her alma mater. Her impressive work there—which included the installation of freshman dorms for female students—gave her the opportunity to leave the state borders, and in 1957, the Kansas Jayhawk ventured north to become the Dean of Women at University of Wisconsin (Martha Peterson Biography, 2007). While there, she continued her education—and in 1967—received her PhD in education psychology. That same year, Peterson was offered a position that would take her out of the Midwest completely and into a new collegiate environment.

Upon the 1967 resignation of Rosemary Park—who had been at the helm for six years—Peterson was appointed President of Barnard College, a large step up from her prior experience. As Park moved west to be with her new husband at UCLA, Peterson packed up and headed east for a new career in Morningside Heights (McCaughey, 2015).

At 51 years old, Peterson was the oldest president at her time of appointment, and held that record until Judith Shapiro’s 1994 appointment at the age of 55. And as a native Kansan, she also was the first Barnard president/dean to hail from the Midwest. Her background of state schools kept her administrative skill set outside of the private school realm until her arrival at Barnard, and her limited experiences at the head table made her a very—in Midwestern speak—“different” selection for the Barnard presidency (Brusten, 2006).

Barnard’s nationwide search for a new president yielded someone a bit different from the typical Barnard presidential type. Peterson’s academic credentials, all coming from public Midwestern schools, varied greatly from the alma maters of earlier presidents, which included private institutions such as Johns Hopkins, Smith, Columbia, Radcliffe, and Barnard itself. Also, her Kansas roots kept her from having any connection to the Barnard-Columbia or New York City social groups. Peterson was an outsider to say the least, but her selection proved that Barnard was searching outside the norm with a purpose.

Peterson started in the fall of the 1967-68 academic year, and didn’t have much chance to settle in before the historical events of ’68 started to unfold (Hevesi, 2006). By that spring, the circumstances of Linda LeClair’s off-campus living arrangements were made public, and with that, a spark hit the highly flammable issue of Barnard’s housing policies, which relied heavily on an in loco parentis approach (Astor, 2008).

Within that same semester, Peterson was confronted with the issue of student marches and occupation of Columbia buildings. Just one day before 115 of her students were arrested, Peterson was formally inaugurated. However, rather than turning to a disciplinary plan of action, Peterson approached the demonstrations with the cool-headed approach she offered over the course of her tenure. “I’m not alarmed by student demonstrations. We better try to build bridges of understanding,” the newly-inaugurated president said of the situation (Barnard College, 2015).

Peterson’s approach was to neither stifle nor encourage the extreme behavior of the students, but rather to work with it. Implementing her experience in working directly with the student body, Peterson used a town hall to better understand the needs of the students.

Peterson proved her capability of dealing with students not only by her calm handling of the events of the spring of 1968, but also in her subsequent actions the following semester. By the fall, Plimpton Hall had been opened, greatly expanding the dormitory space available to Barnard students. Additionally—with parent approval—off-campus housing was deemed permissible by Barnard (McCaughey, 2015).

Peterson’s radical changes did not stop there. Her relationship with the administration across the street led to major change—as well as concern—for and from the Barnard community. By 1971, Peterson was deep in negotiations with the relatively new Columbia president, William McGill, over financial arrangements and curriculum opportunities for students on opposite sides of Broadway (McCaughey, 2003). This partnership proved to be a positive one for Barnard students and Peterson—Barnard girls were allowed unlimited access to cross-registration courses at Columbia, and Peterson was able to obtain a more formidable relationship with Columbia through a concrete financial setup for the use of the university’s facilities.

These actions may have made Peterson popular with her students and the Columbia administration, but they led to a strained relationship with the Barnard Board of Trustees. The board grew suspicious of her close connections with the institution across the street, and was also nervous of the deficit that the college had accrued under Peterson’s presidency.

The 1973 board elections saw the arrival of Eleanor Elliott, who was not a fan of the weak spots in Peterson’s presidency, and feared a possible merger with Columbia. She found an alliance in certain members of the Barnard History Department, who—unlike the majority of the faculty—did not appreciate the policies created under Peterson, especially the close ties she was forming with Columbia. Elliott obtained the title of chair by 1974, and was quick to take action in her new role. Despite the support of the Barnard faculty, President McGill, and board members such as Francis Plimpton and Wallace Jones, Elliott made the suggestion to Peterson in the fall of 1974 to start job hunting (McCaughey, 2015).

As the likelihood of Peterson’s termination grew, the faculty responded with a petition in May of 1975. This had little effect, though, and Peterson announced her resignation that spring. However, she held in her other hand an offer for the presidency of Beloit College, which she turned around and accepted almost immediately after. She accompanied that with the historic move of becoming the first woman on the board of Exxon (Martha Peterson papers, 2007). Despite the early downfall in the year, 1975 turned out to be a good time for Peterson. It marked the beginning of a very successful tenure at Beloit—back in her original Midwestern element—which lasted until her retirement in 1981 (Irrmann, 2015).

Though it may seem that New York pushed her back out, Peterson did make a lasting impact on Barnard College in her time there. By the time of her death in 2006, with over twenty honorary degrees to her name, Peterson proved that her educational background—once seen as humble for the Barnard presidency—was quite enough (Martha Peterson Biography, 2007).

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