



Dr. T.K. Martin
1915-1994

“Mississippi State University will provide equal opportunities for all students. We will do what is right.”

Dr. T.K. Martin: The Father of Accessibility at MSU

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Mississippi State University (MSU) has had many outstanding leaders that have made significant contributions to the institution, the Starkville community, and the national as a whole. However, there has only been one person, Dr. T.K. Martin, the first and last vice president of MSU, who was intelligent enough to be content in his position so he could accomplish goals effectively without the scrutiny a higher power would attract. He preferred working behind the scenes and accomplished more than we will ever know, promoting the value of diversity and a sense of fairness and sensitivity along the way.

Dr. Martin, a native of Blue Mountain, MS, was the son of a Latin teacher and a Baptist evangelist and had three older sisters and one older half brother. He and his wife, Lorene, met while Dr. Martin was pursuing his doctorate in school administration at Peabody College. The Martins moved to Starkville in 1949 where they reared three children, four grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

Dr. Martin was an avid hunter, fisherman, and gardener, often loading his wheelbarrow with fruits and vegetables to distribute to his neighbors. He also served on the Oktibbeha County Hospital board of trustees and volunteered to teach English at Mississippi Valley College 2-3 times a week, requesting the “experience” be his only compensation (L. Martin, personal communication, January 7, 2007). During his retirement years Dr. Martin became a self-taught woodworker, hand-making little red wagons filled with small wooden animals he referred to as “critters” and donating them to the Salvation Army so they could be distributed to children at Christmas (“Santa’s Look-alike,” 1989).

Although Dr. Martin was a leader in the community of Starkville, his primary leadership contributions were developed during the 35 years he dedicated to Mississippi State

University. During this time he served in a variety of roles: administrative assistant, executive assistant to the president, registrar, dean of the College of Education, and finally vice president to Ben F. Hilbun, Dean W. Colvard, William L. Giles, and James D. McComas (Ball, 1984). Dr. Martin was a humble man who shunned public recognition for his accomplishments and jokingly referred to himself as the “vice president for nothing,” striving to be seen more as an equal to his peers (Ball, 1984). Although his importance to the university may never be fully known due to his reluctance to talk about his achievements, all three living former presidents he served under mentioned Dr. Martin’s “selfless devotion to MSU” and spoke well of him when he retired in 1984:

Colvard- “He never hesitated to disagree with me if he didn’t agree with the direction I was moving. But, when the decision was made- even if it went counter to his preference- it was his decision too. He was the ultimate team player.”

Giles- “He handled problems for the president and his loyalty, insight, and problem-solving abilities made my life a great deal less complicated.”

McComas- “He is very adept at making hard decisions. He has demonstrated that decisiveness on many occasions and in different capacities. His primary concern is for the institution and he has done everything he could do to enhance the institution.”
(Ball, 1984)

Dr. Martin’s most recognized achievement at MSU was his effort to take the first steps to make the campus accessible to students with disabilities when a student who used a wheelchair appeared on campus in 1972. According to Mike White, former director for Student Support Services, “it was not Section 504 that unlocked the doors at MSU for disabled students, but the compassion, insight, and sense of fairness of T.K. Martin” (White & Maxson, ?). Under Dr. Martin’s leadership MSU became a national leader in accommodating and assimilating for students with disabilities and now enrolls more than 200 students with disabilities (Geuder, 1998). The institution’s success is due in part to Dr. Martin’s far-sightedness in seeing leadership potential in Mike White who eventually conducted the

federally mandated accessibility self evaluation of MSU's campus in 1978 and wrote a grant proposal to start Student Support Services. When Dr. Martin retired Student Support Services was the only department he allowed to throw him a retirement party.

In 1981, the Association of Disabled Students honored Dr. Martin by providing a luncheon and presenting him with a plaque quoting Sigmund Freud which read, "If any man sees farther or with more insight it is only because they are standing on his shoulders" (Patton, 1981). Dr. Martin told the group, "...you are better off than many of us, in that you know what your handicap is. Many of us don't realize what our handicap is" (Patton, 1981). A few years later Dr. Martin's revolutionary insight had inspired Mike White to take his attitude a step further with his statement, "Environment and attitudes handicap us; disabilities do not" (Magee, 1984).

Dr. Martin was honored again in 1997 when a \$3 million vocational rehabilitation center providing assistive technology services to individuals with disabilities across the state, the only one of its kind on an American college campus, was dedicated to his name ("Unique Center," 1997). The T.K. Martin Center for Technology and Disability offers expertise in adaptive driving, vehicle modification, seating and mobility, home and job accommodations, augmentative and alternative communication, and computer access along with services for people with brain trauma and visual or hearing impairments.

Dr. Martin's vision is also celebrated for his work within the field of education. His leadership abilities and education background allowed him to establish a cooperative education program in 1954 ("Theodore K.," 1995). MSU's Co-op Program, ranked among the elite academic programs in the country, fosters "hands-on" experience in "real world" settings and has been successful in helping to set Co-op students apart from others, receiving higher salaries as they enter the job market and increasing their chance to be leaders in their

field (“*What is co-op?*,” 2007). The Cooperative Education Program has grown from only two students in 1954 to over 10,000 in 2005 (“Cooperative Education,” 2005). Giles stated that Dr. Martin’s work at MSU also, “elevated the academic standards and standings of the university” and McComas acknowledged his contributions by naming the academic scholarships awarded to entering freshmen with ACT tests scores of 28 and higher after him (Ball, 1984).

Dr. Martin’s dedication to the civil rights of minorities justifies overdue recognition. Not only did he start MSU’s Affirmative Action Compliance Program, but he is credited by McComas as “the lead role in recruiting some of the institution’s top quality minority faculty” (Ball, 1984). Dr. Martin hired the first black administrator of a high position, Dr. Sebetha Jenkins, to be his assistant in making sure the campus had equal employment and educational opportunities (S. Jenkins, personal communication, January 18, 2007). Dr. Jenkins role as Affirmative Action Officer was a precursor to MSU being the first predominantly white university to have an office of minority affairs (S. Jenkins, personal communication, January 18, 2007). Giles once said Dr. Martin was the one person whose advice and counsel he valued most during his presidency and that “he did some monumental things during the time of integration in foreseeing problems that could arise, and in talking with students and faculty members” (Snow, 2006). Dr. Martin’s wife, Lorene, remembers her husband making many personal trips to the home of the godfather of Richard Holmes, the first African-American student enrolled at MSU during the summer of 1965 (L. Martin, personal communication, January 7, 2007).

Dr. Martin was also an advocate for women’s rights and helped arrange MSU’s first program for women’s affairs, now known as the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, under former president McComas (S. Jenkins, personal communication, January 18,

2007). His efforts helped to establish “Woman’s Week” on campus, now known for its annual banquet where Outstanding Women awards are presented to women deserving recognition. Dr. Martin received the first award given to a male, “Friend of Women,” from the President’s Commission on the Status of Women for actively recruiting women faculty, especially in the sciences (M. White, personal communication, October 4, 2006). Dr. Jenkins reminisced, “Striving to meet his expectations helped me grow and I would have never become a college president without the values Dr. Martin instilled in me long ago...He saw more in me than I ever saw in myself” (S. Jenkins, personal communication, January 18, 2007). Dr. Jeane Lee commented, “Dr. Martin was not only welcoming, but gracious to newcomers...and I was flattered when he asked me to chair the President’s Commission on the Status of Women only a few years after I arrived” (J. Lee, personal communication, January 17, 2007). Both single mothers felt honored he was so inclusive and cultivated relationships with them, inviting them into his and his wife’s home and lives.

Dr. Martin’s most prominent achievements at the university were his leadership in making the campus accessible to students with disabilities and establishing the Cooperative Education Program. However, he also deserves recognition for starting MSU’s Affirmative Action Compliance Program, recruiting some of MSU’s top quality minority faculty, promoting women’s rights, and elevating the academic standards and standing of the university. None of these accomplishments could have been successful without the true leadership skills of Dr. Martin. His former superiors, co-workers, and employees have described him as having a revolutionary vision and the gift of fostering leadership potential in others along with being a good team-player, conflict manager, and decision maker. He lived by his motto to “work like everyday is my last to make a difference in the lives of people at MSU.”

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*Note: I apologize that my references are so choppy. Many of my resources came from family, scrapbooks, or special archives at the MSU library and where they originally came from were not documented well.