

Margaret Gordon (by Carol Lee¹)

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Margaret S. Gordon's imprint on UC Berkeley is not limited to her role as lecturer for the School of Social Welfare from 1958 to 1971 and the Department of Economics from 1969 to 1978. Her most enduring roles on campus began in 1950 at the Institute of Industrial Relations, currently the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE). She was a prolific author and was granted the official title of Research Economist Emeritus at the Institute where she continued to publish until the late 1980s. She reinvested her numerous academic and professional experiences in future economists by serving on several Ph.D. thesis committees.

The history of women in the Department of Economics is complicated and it remains unclear whether Margaret Gordon preferred or pursued greater opportunities within the department. In the same field as her husband, Robert (Aaron) Gordon, she was ineligible for a ladder-faculty position due to former anti-nepotism rules. She prioritized her role at home when many young academics in her position would be establishing their careers. Highly educated and industrious, she remained active through civic leadership and research roles while juggling full-time responsibilities for her two children. Even when her children were young, she dove into party politics and later was elected to the Berkeley City Council from 1965 to 1969. She was a member of multiple federal advisory committees, including appointment by President Lyndon B. Johnson to the Commission of Income Maintenance Programs. To learn more about her personal qualities, we interviewed her eldest son, Robert (Bob) Gordon, a professor of economics at Northwestern University.

Margaret Gordon, née Shaughnessy, was born in 1910 in Wabasha, Minnesota. The daughter of a surgeon and homemaker, she grew up in a house that doubled as the town surgery in Framingham, Massachusetts. The Great Depression unfolded as she completed her undergraduate studies in economics at Bryn Mawr College.

I don't know anything about why she got interested in economics but for anyone going to college between 1928 and 1931 with the world collapsing around you, I would think it's a very natural thing that almost anybody would be interested in economics. After all, she turned eighteen in September 1928 at the peak of the stock market boom and would have been declaring her major just as the economy was collapsing in the fall of 1929 and the spring of 1930. And so what was going on outside in the real world was undoubtedly a major factor behind her choice of economics. (B. Gordon, pp. 2-3.)

Top of her class, she was awarded a scholarship that allowed her to spend the 1933-34 academic year working on her dissertation at the London School of Economics. During her graduate studies at Radcliffe

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College, she took the same courses and exams as her male Harvard counterparts and was socially integrated among a group of young economists including Aaron Gordon. The young couple observed the effects of racial segregation and were brought together by a shared concern for minorities.

I don't think it's unusual that as part of developing a liberal philosophy in the wake of the Great Depression and the enormous number of social problems that it unveiled, that both she and my father would be extremely interested in problems of minorities—both the black unemployment problem in Berkeley that she was concerned about on the city council and the problem of racial injustice in general ... I remember her and my father as much more involved in racial aspects of injustice than in gender equality. I hardly ever heard her express strong feelings about gender issues in the way that she did about racial issues. (B. Gordon, pp. 4-5.)

She obtained her Ph.D. in economics in 1935 and was married the following year. She entered the labor force as a postdoctoral researcher for the Bureau of International Research of Harvard University and Radcliffe College before moving to California.

The Gordons moved to Berkeley in 1938 when Aaron Gordon began his tenure track position at the Department of Economics. She gave birth to their first son, Robert, in 1940 and completed her first book *Barriers to World Trade* in 1941. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Gordons relocated to Washington, D.C. to contribute to the war effort—he worked at the War Production Board and she worked at the Office of Price Administration. After David, their second son, was born in 1944, Margaret Gordon decided to not hold a regular job while her children were young.

She managed the mother aspect of bringing us up pretty much by herself. I do not remember that we had a cleaning woman during the time when I was a child ... I have vivid memories of my mother with the old-fashioned wringer washing machine in the basement of [our] house, of her hanging clothes out on clothes pins on an outdoor line in the era before clothes dryers, so she was very much a housewife. She cooked every meal, every dinner, although my parents seemed to be going out to meetings all the time ... To the extent that they were going out for dinner and leaving the children alone, we were brought up on Swanson chicken pot pies and Hormel chili and other delicious processed foods in the era. (B. Gordon, p. 6.)

The Gordons returned to Berkeley in 1945 and she developed lifelong friendships and connections while she served on the board of directors for the local then state branches of the League of Women Voters. She later resigned to get involved in party politics and was appointed to the Democratic State Central Committee. She was active in the campaigns of 1948 and 1950 and during this time, she got to know civil rights leader Tarea Hall Pittman. Years later in 1953, she helped organize the Berkeley branch of the NAACP where she was elected to the board. During this time, along with the executive secretary of Stiles Hall, she organized one of the first surveys on employment opportunities for minority groups in Berkeley.

Despite holding a Ph.D. in economics from Radcliffe/Harvard, anti-nepotism rules in place during that period disqualified Margaret Gordon from a secure tenure track position at UC Berkeley.

She took the anti-nepotism fate that had cast her into this supporting role as a fait accompli. And she never complained about it and very rarely speculated. I cannot remember if I ever heard her say, "Oh, if only I had been able to join Aaron on the faculty of the Economics Department, here's how my life would have been different." ... At no time that I remember did she ever try to get a faculty position at nearby Mills College which would have been an option for a faculty wife back in that day because it was so close and so nearby. (B. Gordon, p. 5.)

Gordon found her home on campus at the Institute of Industrial Relations. Clark Kerr, the founding director, offered her a part-time research position in 1950. She was reluctant to accept the role because she was not trained as a labor economist, but Kerr assured her any good economist could fill the role. She quit Democratic Party politics to conform with the Institute's non-partisan stance and worked on a half-time basis to have time at home with her children. According to Clair Brown, professor emeritus at the Department of Economics and former director of IRLE, "Everybody I ever talked to said Peg used to run IRLE. Clark was way too busy doing all these other things. He truly did respect her and really let everybody know that." Gordon's first book for the Institute, *Employment Expansion and Population Growth*, was published in 1954. She assumed a full-time role when she was appointed Associate Director (1954-1969) where some of her research tasks continued to be performed from home. She wrote about aspects of unemployment, Social Security and the economic problems of aging. Her largest concern was youth unemployment.

Clark Kerr headed the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education shortly after his dismissal from the University of California system. In 1969, he invited Margaret Gordon to be Associate Director of the Carnegie Commission. Not wanting to seem ungrateful to the Institute which had treated her so well, she worked part-time for both organizations until she realized the demands of the Commission required her full attention. Over the next ten years, she drafted over a dozen reports for the Carnegie Commission and the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education. She was particularly instrumental in drafting a report that led to substantial increases in federal aid for medical and dental education. The report specifically recommended area health education centers to improve access to health care in underserved areas through education and training for healthcare professionals.

She was Clark Kerr's ghost writer. She uses the word 'draft' a report as if it doesn't somehow [mean] she was the author of the reports. That's what it should have said. Clark Kerr would get his name on the cover and then he would say in the acknowledgements, "I am grateful to Margaret Gordon for all her help." Well, Margaret Gordon had written the whole thing and as I remember, they were so good that there was very little Clark Kerr did to change them! (B. Gordon, p.10.)

This was an extremely busy period in her life while she drafted reports for the Commission, lectured for the Department of Economics and cared for Aaron Gordon as his health declined. Margaret Gordon retired in 1979.

Margaret Gordon was a woman aware of her capabilities and opportunity costs. She graciously accepted supporting roles yet distinguished herself as an economist when the field was dominated by men. During the interview with Bob Gordon, he shared stories about her devotion as a parent and shared his thoughts on how she might view the current climate for female academics.

I think she would have been quite concerned and probably surprised that there continues to be so much de facto discrimination against women in academics ... She would have been surprised at the difficulty young women have in getting tenure and arriving on the tenure track and in many cases having lower salaries than men at equivalent positions. She was basically not trying to play the double role of mother of a young child with a tenure-track pressure of trying to get articles published the way young women have to combine life today. So I think she would have had a great deal of sympathy and support for the double role that young women have to play while fully recognizing that she did not go through the same thing herself. (B. Gordon, pp. 10-11.)

Work Cited

Gordon, Robert G. Interview with the author. Evanston, IL and Berkeley, CA. 16 April 2020. Transcript archived at <https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Gordon%20Interview%20Transcript%20Apr%2016%202020.pdf>