On a March day in 1965, Emily Taylor sat at her wide wooden desk reading a thank you note from two KU students, Linda Cook and Carol Borg. Notes of appreciation frequently crossed her desk as a matter of etiquette, an expected courtesy reflective of the formality of the time. Most letters expressed gratitude for a speech by Taylor or for her help arranging classes. This note, though, was different. The two women thanked the dean of women for not suspending them—despite Chancellor W. Clarke Wescoe’s directive to do so.¹

Less than a week before, the two women joined over 150 students who held a sit-in in Wescoe’s office to protest racial discrimination at KU. Borg and Cook must have been nervous sitting on the floor in Strong Hall as Chancellor Wescoe politely told the group that anyone remaining when the building closed at 5 p.m. would be taken into police custody for trespassing. Some students, fearing arrest, left. Acting under Wescoe’s direction, the Douglas County sheriff jailed over 100 protestors. The chancellor offered to bail them out, but also directed the dean of men and dean of women to suspend each activist. Don Alderson complied, immediately issuing telegrams to male students’ parents announcing their suspensions. Taylor waited—stalling because she believed the chancellor would change his mind once he had time to put the events into perspective. Her instinct proved correct, and within a week Wescoe rescinded the suspensions and agreed to significant change in how KU operated regarding black students, removing housing and career placement discriminatory practices, along with banning racial segregation in student organizations, or in campus newspaper job advertisements. Borg and Cook thanked Taylor for her prescience, noting “this saved many long distance calls, explanations, visits, tension, and conflict [with parents].” Eventually the dean of men’s office “unsuspended” the male protestors.²

The sit-in became one of the most effective racial protests ever on the KU campus. As KU civil rights historian Rusty Monhollon noted, “[W]ith a rush of student government resolutions, administrative orders, and a stroke of Wescoe’s pen, racial exclusion had been banned from the campus of the University of Kansas.”³ Within that “rush” of activity, however, sat the
interwoven links between the dean of women’s office, student activism, and civil rights at KU. These links allowed Taylor and her staff to use the feminist activist features long established in her office to benefit black students, and New Left activists as well. She relied on her close relationships with students and staff, her astute understanding of maneuvering within the university setting—skills she learned from her mentors Grace S. M. Zorbaugh and Kate Hevner Mueller—and her own force of personality.

Few liked to challenge Taylor. She was well informed, quick with responses, and had few qualms about embarrassing someone if it served her ends. While other administrators may not have liked Taylor, she cultivated a strong relationship with each chancellor, and by the mid 1960s she amassed a large, loyal staff and significant student support from her position on the margin of the university. By 1964 when the federal Civil Rights Act passed, Taylor had expanded her network to over thirty employees connected to her office, and she had several long-time staffers invested in her approach—Kala Stroup and Donna Shavlik among them. The staff was diverse and included lesbian women, and both black and Hispanic women. Taylor implemented Mueller’s practice of staffing each woman’s group with an advisor, bringing the staff into close connection with students at the KU YWCA, the African American sororities, and even radical feminist groups. The office ran well, the Associated Women Students (AWS) operation tied women together as a single interest group, and Taylor used these organizational elements to wield significant influence. While sex discrimination sat at the top of Taylor’s priority list, she and her staff also supported the inclusion of other marginalized students as well. This caused both male and female students active in racial equality efforts, the New Left, and even the gay and lesbian students of the last chapter to frequent her office for advice on their initiatives.

With a large, loyal staff connected to all women’s groups across campus, Taylor was well positioned to advocate for change as the student protests for civil rights, antiwar sentiments, and feminism escalated during the 1960s on the KU campus. Her office assisted civil rights advocates and defused violence during student protests while also fostering radical feminists. These efforts to support racial equity and student autonomy were not new in deans of women’s offices. Taylor belonged to a tradition of feminist deans of women who used their influence to broaden racial equality and student autonomy. Taylor drew on this legacy in “deaning” during the challenging times of student protest and violence that rocked the KU campus.

In the 1960s, KU experienced the same protests and tensions reverberating nationwide in the post-World War II United States. Kansas germinated the well-known 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, which mandated the desegregation of public schools, and the state also generated desegregation protest sit-ins at a Wichita, Kansas drug store that predated those in Greensboro, North Carolina. Located on Interstate 70 in the middle of the nation, KU functioned as a stopping point for New Left activists traveling between the east and west coasts, infusing radical student ideas into the KU community. By 1971, KU had experienced