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Charles Van Doren Quiz Show Letters 12110314

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Description is written in: English.

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Butler Library, 6th Floor
Columbia University, Mail Code 1127
535 W. 114th St.
New York, NY 10027
Business Number: (212) 854-5153
Fax Number: (212) 854-1365
rbml@libraries.cul.columbia.edu
URL: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/rbml/index.html>

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Summary Information

Repository:	Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Creator:	Columbia University
Title:	Charles Van Doren Quiz Show Letters
ID:	12110314
ID:	UA#0033
Date [inclusive]:	1959
Physical Description:	1 linear feet 2 document boxes
Language of the Material:	English .
Abstract:	This collection consists primarily of letters sent to Columbia University President Grayson Kirk following the Board of Trustees' acceptance of the resignation of Assistant Professor Charles Van Doren from the Department of English on November 2, 1959.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Charles Van Doren Quiz Show Letters, 1959, Box and Folder; University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

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Biographical / Historical

This collection primarily consists of letters sent to Columbia University President Grayson Kirk following the Board of Trustees' controversial acceptance of the resignation of Assistant Professor Charles Van Doren from the Department of English on November 2, 1959. Van Doren's resignation was prompted by his admission to having lied about accepting money for his staged appearances as a contestant on the rigged television quiz show Twenty One. This collection also includes Van Doren's public statement announcing his resignation after the revelations of his perjury as well as President Kirk's personal and form letter responses to the numerous letters the University received.

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Biographical / Historical

The public's overwhelming response to the University's acceptance of Van Doren's resignation illustrates his status as a nationwide celebrity after his long-running appearance on Twenty One. Letter-writers included alumni but were primarily members of the public. While the majority of the letters argue against the University's decision, a significant number offer support. The prevalence of anti-communist rhetoric among the support letters is of particular note and illustrates one of the public concerns surrounding higher education during this era. Also noteworthy is the volume of letters composed for and against a petition organized by some Columbia University students calling for the reinstatement of Charles Van Doren as professor. The letter-writers' frequent inclusion of clippings from newspapers as well as the public's awareness of the student petition demonstrates the widespread publicity surrounding the Twenty One quiz show scandal.

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Biographical / Historical

The incident was the inspiration for the 1994 movie Quiz Show, directed by Robert Redford and written by Paul Attanasio.

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Biographical / Historical

Charles Lincoln Van Doren was the son of famed poet Mark Van Doren, Mark having been one of Merton's professors at Columbia University. Charles became an scholar and professor at Columbia University, as well, but his legacy was later overshadowed by scandal. He was a long-term contestant on the game show Twenty-One. His winning streak was later revealed as a fraud.

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Scope and Content

This collection consists primarily of letters sent to Columbia University President Grayson Kirk following the Board of Trustees' acceptance of the resignation of Assistant Professor Charles Van Doren from the Department of English on November 2, 1959.

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Scope and Content

These letters were counted and answered by administrative staff via form letters "A" and "B," with some exceptions for anonymous or unanswerable letters and letters to which President Kirk personally responded. Richard Herpers, the Secretary of the University, signed both form letters on behalf of the President. Form letter "A" answered letters in support of the University's action. Form letter "B" responded to letters of support for Van Doren. The University's analysis of the letters as of November 17, 1959 is as follows: 826 letters (133 in support of the Trustees and 693 against in a ratio of 554 women to 225 men and 47 unsigned). A sample number of envelopes was retained, showing that some letters were addressed only to "Columbia University, New York." A transcript of Van Doren's public statement of November 2, 1959, as well as a photocopy of his faculty appointment card, have been retained.

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Scope and Content

Incoming letters to President Kirk were initially sorted for response by the administrative staff into three sections. The sorting most likely corresponded to the number of staff members and has not been retained. Some of the letters were seen by other administrators, and at least one was answered by Provost Jacques Barzun.

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Scope and Content

The letters have been sorted according to the date and the response given--form letter "A," form letter "B," unanswerable "C," and personal letters from President Kirk; undated letters are placed at the rear of each folder. Envelopes were discarded except for a sample, and return addresses and date of postmark were recorded as necessary, found on the back, bottom edge, in pencil. The letters are arranged in alphabetical order within each folder. Staples and paper clips have been removed; news clippings were photocopied and discarded, though a number of letters have already suffered from acid migration. A few clippings were retained, buffered by acid-free leaves.

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Arrangement

This collection is arranged in one series. It is comprised primarily of letters from the public, which have been arranged according to which form letter they were sent in response. Letters filed under Correspondence "A" received form letter "A," letters under Correspondence "B" received form letter "B," and unanswerable letters fall under Correspondence "C." These letters are followed by a file of letters receiving personal correspondence from President Kirk, and include his response. Additional materials, such as the Office of the President's analysis of the letters as well as Van Doren's statement of resignation, are located at the beginning of the collection.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Revision Description

xml document instance created by Carolyn Smith EAD was imported spring 2019 as part of the ArchivesSpace Phase II migration. Access note changed. Collection now stored offsite. (JR) 2016-10-26 2019-05-20 2022-02-11

Restrictions on Access

This collection is located offsite. You will need to request this material at least three business days in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library reading room.

Restrictions on Access

This collection has no restrictions.

Accrual

No additions are expected

Processing Information

Collection, processed by Marilyn H. Pettit.

Processing Information

Finding aid written by Marilyn H. Pettit, December 2003.

Processing Information

Finding aid revised by Jocelyn Wilk, 2013.

Processing Information

2016-10-26 XML document instance edited by Carolyn Smith.

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Related Materials

Related Material

[Central Files, 1890-1984](#), University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

Related Material

[Historical Biographical Files \[18--?\]-2012](#), University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

Related Material

[Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Records, 1939-2006](#), University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Scandals
- Television game shows
- Correspondence
- Quiz show (Motion picture)
- Van Doren, Charles Lincoln, 1926-
- Kirk, Grayson L. (Grayson Louis), 1903-1997
- Barry, Jack, 1918-1984
- Columbia University -- History

Collection Inventory

Charles Van Doren Quiz Show Files, 1959

Title/Description	Instances	
Analysis of Correspondence, 1959	box 1	folder 1
Charles Van Doren's Public Statement, 1959 November 2, 1959	box 1	folder 2

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Form Letter Response A, 1959	box 1	folder 3
Correspondence A, 1959 October-December (2 folders), 1959	box 1	folder 4-5
Form Letter Response B, 1959	box 1	folder 6
Correspondence B, 1959 October-November 14, 1959 <u>Physical Description:</u> (7 folders)	box 1	folder 7-14
Correspondence B, 1959 November (5 folders), 1959	box 2	folder 1-5
Correspondence C, 1959	box 2	folder 6
Personalized Response from President Kirk, 1959	box 2	folder 7
Sample Envelopes Addressed to President Kirk, 1959	box 2	folder 8

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