

## WSU News

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# WSU graduate Peri Widener's gift will help develop global leaders, build a new home for Barton School of Business

By WSU Strategic Communications

Saying she wants to help build a new generation of business leaders with a world view, Wichita State alumna Peri Widener has pledged \$275,000 to her alma mater. A portion of the gift will launch a program to help develop students into global business leaders.

In addition to initiating the **Widener Global Leaders Program**, the gift from Widener and her mother, Luanne, includes a pledge of \$175,000 to the campaign to build Woolsey Hall, the new home for the W. Frank Barton School of Business. She said the gift celebrates the leadership of Larisa Genin, dean of the Barton School, and her vision for the school.

Widener graduated from Wichita State with a bachelor's degree in journalism and a minor in business. Her education served as a springboard to a nearly 40-year career with Boeing. She held successively more responsible positions spanning communication, business development, site leadership and, ultimately, a role as vice president/general manager leading profit and loss businesses around the world.

When she was selected for the executive development program in the early 1990s, Boeing had about 280,000 employees and 12 female executives.

"Throughout my career, I saw that a unique combination of education and experiences opened doors for growth in the organization," Widener said. "I believe such a multidisciplinary background – liberal arts and business schooling combined with acquired business skills and seasoned with a fine arts background – can be a fundamental differentiator in making graduates successful in today's complex world. This mix drives creative problem-solving, an ability to communicate effectively and flexibility – all keys to successful leadership."

That is why the Widener Global Leaders Program will emphasize a multidisciplinary education, with three WSU colleges participating: the Barton School, the College of Fine Arts and Fairmount College of Liberal

Arts and Sciences. Eight students a year from diverse backgrounds will be selected for the program. They will participate in activities designed to develop leadership, global acuity, business skills and cultural competence.

Widener developed the concept for the program, then worked with deans in each of the three colleges to flesh it out.

“We’ll know it’s successful if graduates take on meaningful and impactful jobs in successful global organizations,” Widener said. “And we’ll know it’s successful if it serves as a model for other colleges to develop multidisciplinary graduates who contribute meaningfully in a global business environment.”

Widener said she is supporting the campaign to build a new home for the Barton School because she believes an inspiring environment is linked to the learning experience. In recognition of her support, she received naming opportunities for two spaces in the new complex. A collaboration area in the building’s atrium will bear the names of her grandmother, Juanita Cadwallader Harris, her mother, Luanne Harris Widener, and herself.

“It will be a space where people can meet, exchange ideas, plan for the future, work on business plans – an area of high energy that reflects the ethos of my grandmother and parents,” Widener said.

The second naming opportunity, for an entry plaza on the building’s west side, will be called Peri’s Place.

“I see it as a place of inspiration and reflection. This special space could be used for lectures, readings, small performances and other activities that benefit their studies through these creative experiences.”

In making the gift, it was important to Widener to highlight the ways her grandmother and parents influenced her own life. Her grandmother, a teacher, began college in 1917 at a time when women often weren’t encouraged to pursue higher education. Her father, Wayne, pursued a business degree at Wichita University for 12 years, taking night classes while working full-time. He ended his career as Director of Contracts for Boeing’s operation in Huntsville, Alabama, which includes the International Space Station. Her mother was the longtime chief of staff for former Wichita Mayor A.E. Howse.

“I come from a family deeply committed to education of all kinds, formal and informal. Combined with hard work, it is the thing that provides the power for personal and professional growth,” Widener said.

Widener selected Wichita State as a place to make a philanthropic gift because she believes the education she received provided her with a running start on the future.

“WSU is part of my identity, a foundation I carry with me every day. I’ve crossed paths with Wichita State graduates around the world, so there’s been a constant connection.”

“No matter what you achieve, no one does it on their own. That’s why it’s important to remember where you came from, reflect on those who helped you and pay it forward to the next generation,” added

Widener, who lives in Nashville and Huntsville. “WSU has been the springboard for many people who went on to have successful lives. If you have a dream, Wichita State is a great place to start.”