

YEAR OF AWARD: 2018

## Deborah McDowell

Alice Griffin Professor of English  
former Director and  
Founding Chair of the  
Carter G. Woodson Institute  
for African-American and  
African Studies

Years of service at UVA:  
1987-present



**Deborah McDowell**, who joined the English department faculty in fall 1987 as an Associate Professor, became a full professor in 1991 and currently holds the Alice Griffin Professorship. As Director of the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies from 2008 until 2021, she worked to elevate and expand African American and African studies

on Grounds through courses and programs for the University and surrounding communities.

Under her leadership, the Institute – which observed its 40th anniversary in 2021 – gained departmental status in 2017, with the support of Provost Ian Baucom, who was then Arts & Sciences Dean.

Hailed as a “trailblazer,” McDowell has worked to increase faculty diversity, promote inclusion and collaboration on programmatic and institutional levels, and enhance the institute’s outreach to the wider community. She has distinguished herself as an author and major scholar in the field of African American literature, while emerging as a leading

figure in the development of black feminist critical theory in the early 1990s.

McDowell has written widely for both academic and general audiences. Her publications include *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995) and *Leaving Pipe Shop: Memories of Kin* (1997), as well as numerous articles, book chapters, and scholarly editions.

She founded the African-American Women Writers Series for Beacon Press and served as its editor from 1985-93, overseeing the re-publication of 14 novels from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

It was a time in my career when one either moves to the next level or stays put. I was at a small liberal arts college in Maine, Colby College, where I mainly taught undergraduates. As my own research was developing, I thought at the time that I might want to teach graduate students. This opportunity came along and that's how I got here.

### WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED? HOW HAS IT CHANGED AND/OR STAYED THE SAME?

I have always been interested in the diversification of US higher education, and when I came to the English department, there were only two African American faculty members. But the year that I arrived was kind of a banner year for the presence of women, at least in the English department. I came at the same time four other women scholars arrived.

So, in matters concerning equity and inclusion, diversity, gender, and race, to say nothing of class, UVA had a lot of ground to cover. While it has covered a good deal of ground since I arrived in 1987, there is still no cause to take these gains for granted.

### HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUR IDENTITY, INCLUDING BEING A WOMAN, IMPACTED HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO YOU IN YOUR POSITION?

These are the kinds of questions that you can't ever answer simply ... you take a little bite from the apple because there are so many ways that you can respond.

I think my position and my identity as a Black woman is very generalized. But there are many more granularities and particulars within that identity, perhaps far more than can be elaborated here. There are always people inclined to question the authority of those who are most marginalized in the orbit of the university's landscape, and so with women being marginalized and minoritized, with Black people being marginalized and minoritized, to be sure my actual presence raised questions occasionally, at least for some, about my authority.

But, in my time here, I have trained dozens and dozens of graduate students, to say nothing of undergraduates. The fact that I have trained so many graduate students who are themselves now tenured faculty members in universities across the nation and the world indicates that at least they did not question my authority; otherwise, I would not have been entrusted with conducting training and seeing these students through to completing their various degrees.

Perhaps I could say to sum things up by saying that my experiences here were fairly consistent with those of people of color and women of color, in particular, who are minoritized within predominantly white institutions. I prefer "minoritized" to "minority," to underscore the fact that exclusionary policies and practices that universities have employed for generations have produced "minorities."

### IN MOMENTS OF ADVERSITY, WHAT WERE YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEMS?

Obviously, whoever enters a university and expects to thrive within it, especially one that is as conservative as UVA, should think of supports far beyond the walls of the university. You must think of your family, colleagues, your friends. Many of us in academia depend on each other, not always within a particular university, but in other

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## In Her Words | Deborah McDowell

universities: people who read your work, people who you may call on days when you may have experienced a difficult incident and needs a neutral ear, one outside the university environs. One has to tread very carefully with certain revelations, because you never know how some confidences will be treated where you live and work. Often, it's the better part of wisdom to trust, among the most confidential matters, with colleagues from other institutions.

**I have often said to people, “I am in the University, but I serve something much larger than the University.” Find that “much larger thing.” What is it that you serve over and above the University? That for which the University might serve as a conduit? That the University might help facilitate? I always insist that I serve a larger purpose.**

### **WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR WOMEN TODAY WHO FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES?**

The advice I would give is to seek or build relationships with mentors, really build a support network and mentoring network. Reach out to people, ask colleagues to read your work, become immersed in the life of the university.

Something that always helped me was that I saw myself as someone who was in the University, but not of it. I don't mean that to be construed in a negative light. When I say I was not “of the University,” I had to extract myself, if only in my mind, from policies and practices and even the history of this University with regard to women and people of color.

For example, for a number of years, I directed the Carter G. Woodson Institute. The larger function I served there was to advance knowledge in the interdisciplinary field of African diaspora studies. So, that meant I was deeply invested in the pre- and post-doctoral scholars we brought into the University for two-year residencies, assisting them in completing their dissertations, assisting them in turning those dissertations into monographs, and those monographs, in turn, would allow them to make

competitive bids for promotion and tenure. So that was the larger purpose I served.

Obviously, that also worked within the requirements within the University. It also enabled me to see that whatever aggravation and whatever discomfiting experiences I had were not to be dismissed or overlooked, by any means. But, if I kept my eye on that larger prize, as people in the classic civil rights movement used to say, I would be better able to function and function with fewer distractions.

### **IS THERE SOMEONE YOU ARE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF HAVING SUPPORTED OR HAVE ENJOYED A MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH?**

In the aggregate, my students – the graduate students I trained in English and the graduate students who have come to UVA from other universities to take up residencies in the Woodson Institute – because they have also supported me. As much as I think I teach my students, they teach me, if not equally as much then a significant

amount. To be in a long-term supportive relationship, it has to be mutual.

If I could single out a few other persons, though, I would name Professors Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton (from the Religious Studies department), Gertrude Fraser (from the anthropology department), and Professor Emerita of Anthropology, Ellen Contini Morava. I worked closely with Cindy at the start of my term at Woodson; she served as Associate Director and, with her, I began to build the faculty from 1.25 FTEs to what it is now, as well as to expand the fellowship program. I could call on Gertrude and Ellen at any given moment for whatever needed doing to advance my work at the Institute. They were both reliable and generous with their time and talents. The work I conducted as director depended on a great number of generous souls, but I single out these three from among the many others for their service at every stage of the journey.

### WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU LEAVING? WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

I would point to the institutional work I did. What people call “institution building” is a term often used in academia to refer to those who tend to sacrifice the production of scholarship under their own name in order to build something that needs building in the university. I have always lamented that distinction, believing that building and fortifying institution is not a “lesser” calling. I see it as a wonderful calling, a different kind of intellectual labor, one fully compatible with traditional understanding of scholarly productivity.

The accomplishment at UVA of which I am proudest is the time that I served as director of the Woodson Institute. When I began my term there, which lasted far longer than I had anticipated – 12 years – there were only three faculty members. We didn’t even have what is considered, in the parlance of the University, one FTE. We had one faculty member with half of an appointment, a second one with half, and a third one with a quarter. That amounts to 1.25 faculty members spread over three bodies.

When I stepped down from the Institute last year, we had 17. Some of them were joint appointments, but the majority of our recent hires, about seven in all, were appointed solely within the Institute.

They were appointed solely because of the second thing I am proudest of: building a program in African American, African Diaspora Studies into a department. We became a department in 2017. That is called institution building, and I am very proud of that work and of that legacy because it comports with that part of my working life that coincides with the foundations of my socialization as a young person who came of age during segregation in the South. I grew up in a home of four generations, and my siblings and I worked hard and were socialized to serve, to leave wherever you were privileged to work better than you found it.

I left the Woodson Institute better than I found it. And that is a part of my legacy of which I am deeply proud.



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