



From 1993 through 2014, **Karin Wittenborg** oversaw the UVA Library system's 12 facilities and staff of more than 230. Her tenure was defined by her innovative approach and commitment to supporting students, faculty, and the University community. Some of her changes were unconventional

(aquariums in Clemons Library and the Alderman Cafe) and some were temporarily unpopular (Google Books, which digitized 450,000 books in the library's collection). Others were wildly successful, such as the Scholars' Lab, an incubator for digital humanities and methodological training of graduate students in the humanities, and the development of a staff known for its creativity and customer service.

She led fundraising efforts to create the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library and the

Mary and David Harrison Institute for American History, Literature, and Culture. The library's endowment rose from \$9 million in 1993 to \$63 million by the time Wittenborg retired.

She retired at the end of 2014 after launching a broad review of the entire UVA Library system, part of the planning process for overhauling Alderman Library, the well-loved but well-worn facility built in 1938. Work began in 2019, and an Alderman Library for the 21st century is expected to open in 2024.

### WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

It was clearly a university that was on track to rise among the US public universities, and I thought that was a great opportunity. I was also familiar with UVA's incredibly strong rare book and manuscript collections, which were mostly unsung. The library was a front runner in digital initiatives when only two other research libraries were exploring their potential.

When I got there, I asked whether there was a brochure about Special Collections that would show why the collections were so important, since one of my topmost goals was to raise money for a new building. And they said there was no such publication because it would be bragging.

I also knew of two librarians at UVA who were doing cutting edge work in creating and using digital resources, and that was a great interest of mine. And I was intrigued by the possibility of being UVA's first, and still only, woman University Librarian.

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

I had been at Stanford and UCLA, so when I arrived in fall 1993 at UVA, I was surprised by the lack of diversity among students and faculty. But I was impressed with how many people in various parts of the University, not just upper administration, were deeply committed to increasing diversity. I'm impressed with how much progress has been made, although much remains to be done.

I also felt that I had entered a time warp – the men still wore blazers and ties to football games and the women wore dresses. The students were incredibly polite, and I soon became tired of being called “ma'am.” However, I think the student body impressed me incredibly, not only for their intelligence and flexibility, but their devotion. They believe that they own UVA and they're very effective in driving change.

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

I was at Carr's Hill for a pre-football game reception, and an elderly gentleman came up and asked me what I did at the University. I told him I was the University Librarian. He said, oh, no, that can't be true. You're the assistant to the University Librarian. And I said, no, I'm the actual University Librarian. He just kept shaking his head.

What's interesting to me is I don't think my gender was as important as not having a UVA pedigree. So many people got undergraduate degrees or graduate degrees or one of their parents were on the faculty. Also, not being a lifelong Virginian, I knew that things would be different in Virginia than they were in California, but I didn't know how different. There was some prejudice, since I was told more than once, that I couldn't do the job if I didn't understand the culture of Virginia. But I had a number of people around me who could educate me quickly.

continued

## In Her Word | Karin Wittenborg

### WHAT SUPPORT DID YOU HAVE? WHAT KEPT YOU GOING IN MOMENTS OF ADVERSITY?

There are so many people who enriched my time at UVA. I was fortunate to have Kendon Stubbs, who became deputy University librarian after I arrived. His intelligence and decades of experience at the library allowed me to get off to a quick start. I would've figured it out eventually, but Kendon filled me in on the academic culture and also identified those faculty who were either supportive of the Library or critics.

He was also the driving force behind the library's rising prominence in digital arenas. And he won the Jefferson Award in 1997, only the second librarian ever. He had a wicked had sense of humor. Anytime I was a little bit down, he could just cheer me up in a minute. I'm still in touch with him.

The Library was a priority for President Casteen. The Harrison Institute and the Small Special Collections Library would not exist without Mr. Casteen's support and major role in fundraising.

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### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A WOMAN IN A SIMILAR POSITION TODAY?

I would say be bold – almost nothing important is accomplished by being timid. Be persuasive in both speech and in writing. Focus on the institution's highest priorities and contribute to them.

Network intensely, not only within your own area of responsibility, but beyond. It is also important to share credit. Almost nothing I did was done alone. I had a great staff, and I could delegate with a lot of confidence.

Find ways to have a little fun almost every day. For me, it might have been having an absolutely delicious meal or going for a really good, long run in the country. These jobs can wear you down, and if you don't make sure you're going to have some fun, your energy will be sapped.

Then I would say: Don't take things personally. Almost anything that's negative might be just a blunder, not an attack on you.

Listen to dissenting opinions because you really want to know the other side of the story. And you won't know, unless you seek those opinions out and really listen to them. Now, that doesn't mean I accepted all of them, but on more than one occasion, I was convinced to change course because of what I heard from students, faculty, or library staff.

Keep things in perspective. Keep a sense of humor. Get lots of exercise.

## WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP MEAN TO YOU, ESPECIALLY WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP?

I've seen exceptionally strong women leaders and exceptionally poor women leaders. The really good ones do more listening than talking, which isn't necessarily true of male leadership. I think women focus much more on building relationships. I'm not sure, but I think they network better than men do because there's less ego involved. Women are more likely to share credit for things accomplished, and they tend to be more inclusive of other people. I didn't care if somebody was a professional librarian or staff member or student – they were all the same to me in terms wanting to hear from them.

## HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY DID YOU LEAVE?

Putting the Library in better financial condition. When I arrived, I was naive about how underfunded and under-endowed the library was. So, I set out to significantly increase the value of the endowments, and also to increase the base of the budget. I loved doing development work and was successful at it. Shortly before I retired, I learned of a \$11 million bequest to Special Collections that could be used for anything from acquisitions to preservation, to processing, to cataloging, to digitizing, or as the anonymous donor said, whatever libraries are doing in the future. It was so broadly described as to be the most useful gift possible.

Making the physical spaces more accessible and comfortable. The library when I arrived had some pretty ugly physical spaces. There was significant deferred maintenance, and not a lot of thought had been given to how could we make the libraries more comfortable and functional for students.

We also received Albert Small's massive collection of materials relating to the Declaration of Independence. And, finally, the William Faulkner family papers, because we had lots of Faulkner manuscripts, some of which had been given to us by collectors, some of which we purchased, but the family still had a just amazing wealth of papers relating to Faulkner. Countless faculty gave the Library their own collections and manuscripts.

I expanded what was a fledgling preservation program. I am still impressed with the leaders and staff whose expertise and passionate devotion made it a first-class operation. I mentored a number of women who became university librarians, and I'm very proud of that. Overall, the men were less receptive.



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