



YEAR OF AWARD: 2021

## Kimberley Bassett

former Associate Dean of African American Affairs

Currently, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Academic Advising, Johns Hopkins' Whiting School of Engineering

Years of service at UVA:  
2007-2021

In her 14 years at the University of Virginia, **Kimberley Bassett** touched the lives of many students, helping them to claim their place at UVA and welcoming them to the UVA community Bassett joined the Office of African-American Affairs shortly after earning her PhD in chemistry from

the University of Virginia in 2007. She served in various roles at the University, including instructor in chemistry and assistant dean. In 2009, she became director of the Office of African-American Affairs' nationally recognized Peer Advisor Program. From 2015 until her departure in 2021 for Johns Hopkins University, she served as associate dean in the OAAA.

In a typical year, Bassett would oversee four senior peer advisors and more than 70 peer advisors, who are at least in their second year at UVA. They provide first-year students with support and friendship to help them get acclimated to the Grounds. When Bassett became director, one of her goals was to build on the University's previous

success of cultivating the highest Black graduation rate among flagship public universities. She expanded the program to provide advising in a range of academic disciplines, including STEM fields, and collaborated with her fellow deans to manage a collective strategy of enabling Black students to achieve higher GPAs so that they could compete more successfully for graduate and professional schools, as well as employment.

In 2021, she joined Johns Hopkins' Whiting School of Engineering as assistant dean for undergraduate academic advising. She has left behind a peer advisor program that, year after year, produces not only accomplished UVA graduates, but also seasoned leaders.

### WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

I came to UVA to pursue my PhD in chemistry. A year or so prior to the completion of my degree, I finally admitted to myself that I was not fulfilled doing research. This was such a confusing time for me. I did not know what my options were, but I knew these three things: I loved being on a college campus. I wanted to be a university administrator. I wanted to work with undergraduate students, and I wanted to work with Black students.

Before I finished my degree, I engaged in some career exploration and, in the process of doing that, I had an informational interview with Maurice Apprey, the then-interim dean of the Office of African-American Affairs. As he explained how they worked at the interface of academic affairs and student affairs, I was intrigued. When the opportunity presented itself to work in OAAA, I jumped on it, and the rest is history. One of the best decisions I ever made.

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

It was overwhelming. You must remember I was pursuing my graduate studies as a woman in science, as a Black woman in science, when I arrived. UVA felt very white, but it was a different kind of white. While I attended a Historically Black College, my elementary and high school education took place in largely white schools, so I was used to learning with white people. However, UVA was a different kind of white experience for me. It was wealthy, white, and Southern. Let's just say, it was a lot to process at the same time, and it is still difficult to describe. In some ways, I am still processing the experience of arriving at UVA as a graduate student and that transition developmentally and professionally.

When I consider my professional life at UVA, unfortunately, what comes to mind is the trauma we faced as a community. Perhaps this is a result of my work on the University's crisis response team. Virginia Tech happened as I was transitioning into my role in OAAA. Then we had our own UVA-specific traumas: Morgan Harrington, Yeardey Love, Hannah Graham, the attempt to oust President Sullivan, *Rolling Stone*, and Martese Johnson. Then, in the spring of 2020, COVID took the whole world hostage. So much has happened since I arrived.

What has changed? Honestly, everything has changed and, when you look at history, nothing has really changed at all. I take that back. What has changed? I changed. I grew. I was transformed. The students were always bright 18-to-22-year-olds trying to figure out how to live this thing called life, and as I gained perspective, I have learned how to help my students do the same. I spent a considerable amount of time thinking about how to live my values at UVA, and I endeavored to teach my students to do the same. I helped them see the University as a microcosm of the United States or the world. With that in mind, I challenged them to consider how they wanted to show up 'in real life' and to commit to persist toward that ideal.

continued

## In Her Words | Kimberley Bassett

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

There are so many things about higher education that are pretentious, patriarchal, elitist, classist, and racist, and UVA is not immune.

Despite the politics, I will say that my identities were celebrated in my role in the Office of African-American Affairs. Every day, my task was to consider the growth, development, and academic success of gifted Black students. In that space, I leveraged my identities to create a safe space for students, and that safety contributed to their success.

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Most of my support system at UVA is largely a network of women. Anda Webb willingly lent her experience and perspective to me. She helped me understand how universities work, and she introduced me to coaching for personal and professional development. Deborah McDowell has showered me with love and wisdom. She helped me realize my potential and overcome deep seated fear about leading. And, more importantly, she opened wide her heart in friendship. Keisha John is one of my biggest advocates and thought partners. The list goes on...Patrice Grimes, Tabitha Enoch, Vicki Gist – these women chose to live their lives with me.

There were also men who nurtured me along the way. Maurice Apprey, Dion Lewis, Michael Gerrard Mason, Oren McClain, and Peter Yu were all invaluable colleagues in OAAA. W. Dean Harman was my PhD advisor, and he supported my career change all those years ago and helped me generate that first informational interview list. Michael J. Smith, in Politics, was my supervisor on Semester at Sea one summer, and since then he has been one of my champions. And, Maurice Apprey saw my potential and invested in my future. I will be forever grateful to him.

And, my students! They were always a source of joy, laughter, and motivation.

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

Very early on, I decided my worth could not come from work. I had to remember I was worthy before I started working. And, if I forgot, I needed to have people in my life remember for me and remind me. If I came to work seeking to be validated or to loved, I was going to be disappointed. ... Now, I did feel loved and tended to at UVA, but I knew I could not look to the institution as my primary source of joy, or I would always be left wanting. I am a Christian, and this perspective is grounded in my faith. Whether it is faith or something else, you must find your anchor in something greater than people.

You also need sober expectations. Nothing about this place is extraordinary. When difficult things happen, and they will, consider history, and you will notice nothing is new. You are working with people. There will be power dynamics, and it will be messy. If we can get over the shock that it, whatever it is, happened, again, then we can get to viable solutions sooner.

## HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY DID YOU LEAVE THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

Student development does not just happen. It is clear-eyed and deliberate hard work. For almost 15 years, I poured into UVA students and professionals, and I know their lives, the lives of their loved ones, and the University of Virginia are better for it. I know that is a bold claim, and I know it is a fact.

I want to be remembered as someone who lived their values and loved people deeply. I want to be remembered as someone who 'spoke the truth in love' and was always open to learn from colleagues and students.



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