



Many longtime professors don't recall their early education on how to teach at the college level – because most didn't have any. "Give a quiz once a week" was about all the advice **Marva Barnett** received when she began teaching French at her first university teaching assistant job.

Barnett, who founded UVA's Center for Teaching Excellence (formerly the Teaching Resource Center [TRC]) in 1990, made visible her love of teaching and desire to help others engage students deeply in learning. She championed and strengthened the teaching segment of UVA's mission as a public university, alongside research and public service.

Nominating her for the University's prestigious Thomas Jefferson Award, a faculty member wrote: "There was a time when, in certain circles, putting effort into one's teaching was considered less important than research accomplishments.

Moreover, in its first years, some assumed the TRC served merely a remedial function for poor teachers who required 'fixing.' From the beginning, however, Marva demonstrated that the most outstanding teachers are those willing to examine their pedagogy with the same rigor they apply to their research."

Barnett's scholarship as a faculty member in the French department and then the Drama department has focused on author Victor Hugo, especially his renowned *chef d'œuvre*, *Les Misérables*. In 2020, she published *To Love is to Act*, which explores how Hugo reveals his guiding principles for life,

including his belief in the redemptive power of love and forgiveness. She was honored to have the renowned *Les Mis* musical creators, Claude Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, contribute the foreword and to host them for two artistic residencies at UVA.

Her book *Victor Hugo on Things That Matter* was published in 2009, and she also co-edited *Lettres inédites de Juliette Drouet à Victor Hugo* in 2012. For her work in promoting French language, culture and literature, the French government named her Chevalier de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques in 2012.

In all she does, Barnett aims to follow Hugo's maxim: "To love is to act" ("Aimer, c'est agir"). She retired from UVA in 2016.

WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

For my first seven years at UVA, I was director of the required language course sequence in the French department. I oversaw the 45 TAs who were teaching over a thousand students in elementary and intermediate French courses. There were very, very few people – only two of us in the country – who were on the job market and trained to do that in the early '80s. So, of the various offers that I had that year, UVA offered me a chance to train teachers in an important program. I was born in Virginia, so it felt right to come back here.

I think the reason people looked at me for the Zintl award was that I founded and directed what is now called the Center for Teaching Excellence, which opened in 1990. It was called the Teaching Resource Center because I wanted it to have a name that was accessible and not intimidating. I directed the Center for 25 years, until I retired, and taught in the French and Drama departments. I loved to teach – and teaching college-age students well is very important, even at what's known as a research institution – so I started a teaching center. During my UVA career, I published articles and taught and did all the other faculty work, but if people know my name, they know it because of the Teaching Resource Center.

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

I joined the Colonnade Club and their wine club. I was already interested in wine, from a course I'd taken while in grad school. I was surprised to find only women at the meetings and to be greeted more than once with, "Hello, and what does your husband do?" They were all faculty wives, and so for them that was normal.

That was for me an early women's issue at UVA—the expectation that women had husbands and that they were the professors. That happened in maybe '83, '84, and I never heard such a thing after that. That was progress.

My mother was born in 1913 and the only one of her five siblings to go to college. She did that very much on her own and became a high-school teacher of Latin, English, and Shakespeare. She also taught technical writing at

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the University of Utah and published three technical-writing textbooks. Mom was a perfect role model for me, without either of us making much ado about it. I didn't perceive glass ceilings that might have been there, simply carrying on with my career.

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

I found it a bit ironic that I won a UVA Excellence in Faculty Mentoring award, since I often felt that I had no senior mentor to whom I could turn when I needed help.

Perhaps in terms of salary equity and working on salary equity for the people who worked with me. Once, only a dozen years ago, it was obvious that upper-level administration was more receptive to making a counteroffer for a man than for a woman when other universities were trying to poach our people. I hope that's changed.

Regarding the issue of being a woman professor, being in the French department in my first years was perhaps a buffer, because there were a good number of women faculty there. And almost always, certainly in upper-level French courses, there were more women students than men students in class. So, in that context, there was less a domination of maleness than probably elsewhere at UVA.

WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE?

When I arrived at UVA in 1983, the one person who seriously reached out to me was a graduate student, Wynne Stuart. She was super supportive then and remains so. I believe we've had a productive mutual mentoring process – consulting and helping in both directions.

In the context of the Center, I never had a real, ongoing mentor, such as the mentor I had in Professor Albert Valdman at Indiana University during the two years I was there. I didn't think about it much until we created the Excellence in Diversity Fellowship; in that program we annually helped a dozen beginning assistant professors find mentors outside their departments and encouraged mutual mentoring.

I found it a bit ironic that I won a UVA Excellence in Faculty Mentoring award, since I often felt that I had no senior mentor to whom I could turn when I needed help. The people who were supportive when I started the center—especially Ray Nelson, the Dean of Arts & Sciences, and Alex Sedgwick, Arts & Sciences Dean of Graduate Studies, had moved on to new endeavors.

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

I guess I'd say build a network of mutual mentoring colleagues, not just with the people you're immediately working with, but wherever it makes broader sense.

And, at this point in my life, I would advise not being perfectionistic and burning yourself out, as academia pushes us to do. If you have friends who watch you getting old and tired in your 30s, I'd recommend paying attention to them. Sadly, sometimes it's not until later – when we step away from overworking, look back, and get some distance – that we realize that such a life is kind of crazed. But that's the culture, you know, and it's apparently hard to counter that culture? So I suggest finding ways to take breaks and stay in touch with yourself and things that really matter, family and friends and all that good stuff.

HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU LEAVING THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

At the TRC/CTE, we provided – and still provide – a caring place and a listening place for people. I hope my legacy is a sense that teaching and students matter immensely in the context of a research university, and it is not a zero-sum game. The energy and interest that a teacher invests in teaching does not take away from the research and publishing side. These activities are mutually supportive. The high-powered researchers and big-name scholars are often also teaching award winners because each intellectual exercise feeds the other.

I was moved when President Terry Sullivan quietly said to me at my retirement party something along the lines of, “Always remember that you made a difference.” What a lovely thing to remember!



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