



Described by President John T. Casteen III as “a remarkably accomplished teacher, scholar, and fundraiser,” **Meredith Jung-En Woo** became Buckner W. Clay Dean of Arts & Sciences in 2008. During her six-year tenure, she skillfully elevated the fields of arts and sciences by bringing to bear her experience as an administrator and reformer as well. In addition to

improving the quality of the academic program, she enhanced the performance of the College’s administrative and fiscal operations. Under her leadership, graduate programs underwent a comprehensive restructuring, resulting in more competitive offer packages for students. Annual philanthropic support for the College nearly tripled, from \$24 million in 2008 to over \$60 million in 2012.

A woman of courage and resilience, Woo became President of Sweet Briar College in 2017. An expert on international political economy and East Asian politics, she has written and edited

seven books, the most recent being *Something New Under the Sun*, a collection of essays about liberal arts education. She was the executive producer of an award-winning documentary film, *Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People*, about Stalin’s ethnic cleansing of Koreans living in Far Eastern Russia during the Great Terror.

A native of Seoul, Woo attended high school in Tokyo and came to the United States to study at Bowdoin College in Maine. She completed her master’s degrees in international affairs and Latin American studies and a doctorate in political science at Columbia University.

**WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED, AND WHAT CHANGES DID YOU SEE?**

I arrived at a college on the cusp of a big change that hadn't yet happened. There was anxiety about its centrality in the life of the University. The search for the Dean had gone on for more than two years, with the whisper that nobody in his or her right mind would ever want this job. There was also anxiety about whether the capital campaign for the College was ever going to get off the ground. Then I arrived on Grounds at the same time as the Great Recession of 2008.

The work ahead was clear. The college had to improve its management and other administrative processes. Thanks to the fantastic team that led the College – and I want to note in particular Rick Myers, who joined me as Associate Dean for Finance and Administration – this was accomplished. The College also raised more money than it ever imagined possible, thanks to Gene Schutt, who jettisoned his “retirement” to join the College as Associate Dean for Development. By 2014 when I left my office, the College was in a very good shape. The morale was also higher. I think the faculty, even though their salary was frozen for nearly six years, felt that the College was no longer an ugly duckling, sidelined by the University.

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

I was the first woman to be permanent Dean of Arts and Sciences – Karen Ryan was Interim Dean for a year before me. I was also Asian, and a foreigner who spoke English as a second language. Oddly, I don't recall anyone making note of it in public, although who knows, they were whispering about it in private!

But the fact that I was so obviously different led me to pay less attention to issues of identity. People tend to fret over small differences, not big ones. I judged myself in terms of what my team and I were accomplishing together in the College.

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continued

## In Her Words | Meredith Jung-En Woo

### WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE?

I was hired by President Casteen, and he remained a resource for me, especially after he stepped down as President. Karin Wittenborg, another Zintl recipient, is a great friend. She was a font of knowledge about culture and management at UVA, and she always told it like it was.

### WHAT KEPT YOU GOING IN MOMENTS OF ADVERSITY?

I was at UVA during one of the most difficult times, when President Teresa Sullivan was dismissed only to be reinstated two weeks later. And that incident in 2012 cast very long shadow. For a long time, the atmosphere was quite politicized and, in that very difficult and politicized atmosphere, to have friends like Karin was invaluable.

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

When I came, I asked some UVA old-timers for their advice on my job. I remember one person who said that Dean of the College was an impossible job and that I should just keep my head down. Maybe that was wise advice but not very exciting! Since that advice was not coming with context, it was difficult to understand what it meant. If I were to give advice to a new Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, I would probably tell him or her to make great friends, be truthful, work hard – but don't keep your head down. For some people (like me), it is just not that easy.

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

I believe women's leadership is different from other leaderships we have experienced in the past. Women throughout history have been at some distance from power and influence. Yet, they got things done. If you don't have the direct power to affect events, you often leverage the power of others. Women are good at reaching out, mobilizing others, getting things done, without always reveling in the limelight.

I think women may be better than men at giving credit to others rather than claiming it for themselves. I think that it speaks to a leadership style that is more collaborative, more team-oriented, and more supportive.

This is not to say that every woman is like that. But I think that given the place of women in history, it stands to reason that women's leadership might look different.

### **WHAT LEGACY DID YOU LEAVE THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?**

The College is the intellectual core of the University. It is the soul of the University. I wanted a College that was intellectually vibrant and so my team and I cared deeply about the quality of scholarship and teaching. I'm very proud of what we were able to accomplish together in the six years that I called the College my home.



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