



From 1988 until her retirement in 2006, **Shamim Sisson** served in student affairs at the University of Virginia, bringing to her roles longstanding professional interests in women’s education, communication between men and women, leadership development, and interracial and intercultural

understanding. She previously held appointments at Auburn University, Valdosta State University, and Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, now Randolph College.

Sisson chaired the University’s Sexual Assault Board from 1998 until 2006. She was also instrumental in creating the LGBTQ Resource Center, which is dedicated to students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or as a proactive ally in the University community. The center created

the V. Shamim Sisson Ally of the Year Award and bestowed the inaugural honor on Sisson, who hired the first LGBTQ program coordinator in 2006. The Sisson award is presented annually during the Serpentine Society’s Gala Awards Dinner.

In addition to receiving the Zintl award in 2006, Sisson received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award that year, given to recognize excellence of character and service to humanity.

WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

While I was Dean of Students at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, I met and married my husband, who was a dean and professor at UVA. We decided to make our life together here.

I sort of jumped off a diving board into an unknown pool. I don't know if you've ever heard of Mary Catherine Bateson's book, *Composing a Life*. She was the daughter of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. A cultural anthropologist, she wrote about the stop-and-start nature of many women's lives and how they adapt. I had pretty much always thought about career as a ladder, and it was very helpful for me to read because I began thinking about composing a life instead of just climbing a ladder.

I applied for a number of positions that didn't work out. I had a couple of one-year interim positions, and then happily moved into a permanent position as Assistant Dean in the Office of the Dean of Students. The nature of my work there evolved over the years, but it remained immensely rewarding to have a role in students' development at this critical juncture in their lives. The constant was facilitating the balance of challenge and support.

WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED AND HOW DID IT CHANGE OR STAY THE SAME OVER THE YEARS?

Meaningfully, the prominence of women and people of color in student and University leadership significantly increased. It was much more exceptional when I first came. But at that point that's how diversity was defined: We had white students, Black students, and some international students. There wasn't the rich diversification that we think of now – well, there probably was, but it wasn't acknowledged and students often didn't feel empowered to identify and talk about it. UVA was a much more traditional place.

Another big change was in how the University is financed. There has been less and less state funding over time, and the role of private fundraising has become critical. When I came to UVA in 1988, there was a development director and there was fundraising, but the scale of fundraising was miniscule compared to what it is now. We have sadly joked that UVA used to be a state-supported institution and then we became a state-assisted institution and now we're a state-located institution.

The role of the law in higher education has also expanded over that time. When I first came to UVA, you might meet occasionally with somebody in the general counsel's office about a student case. By the time I left, there was a full-time attorney in the Vice President for Student Affairs office because there are so many legal considerations to anticipate and risks for litigation.

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

I was thinking about what my identities were that had impact here. One of them was being a woman and one of them was being white, but fundamentally, I was an educator and, hopefully, a bridge builder.

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In Her Words | V. Shamim Sisson

As a woman, I worked to validate female voices and perspectives and use the framework of women and men's development to better understand and influence individuals and systems within the University. Many of the University's structures were born of an originally male-dominated model. One example is the honor system, whose purposes I wholly endorse. But as a woman and as an educator, I chafed at the single sanction, believing that students should have the opportunity to learn from even very serious mistakes and earn the potential to return to the community. As a white person I was a constant student, learning from students and colleagues of color and endeavoring to use my privilege for good. I am sure my identity favored collaborating with others, which was always interesting, exciting, and accomplished much more than I ever would have on my own.

WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE? WHAT KEPT YOU GOING IN LIKE MOMENTS OF ADVERSITY?

I really had wonderful colleagues and I can't say enough about them. I think it was sort of a golden time. I'm sure everybody feels that way, but I was really surrounded by great supervisors and colleagues. My husband was terrific, too. And I always had supportive friends, family, and a life beyond the University.

Women's Reality, by Anne Wilson Schaef, was a seminal book for me, too. It particularly illuminated life for me and gave me a great template as I was going forward. It helps so much if you have tools to try to understand things, rather than just feeling like you're being dumped on, you know?

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

Building alliances is really, really important. And one of the ways you do that is by saying "yes" a lot to committees here and projects there, so that you have a chance to break through the silos of the University that are too easily constructed.

I'd also say look for what needs to be done. We all have our job descriptions, but within that, and beyond that in the organization, there are interesting things that need to be done that are not in anybody's job description. What can you do to help fill those needs or fill those voids or encourage somebody else who reports to you to do that? Find ways to contribute to the larger organization beyond your individual work. I think that's twofold. It's good for the institution. It's good for your career, but moreover, it makes your work doubly meaningful.

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

I have had a rich opportunity to watch and be a part of the continuing evolution of thought about leadership. We have moved from the old “male as leader and director” model to a much more collaborative, inclusive, and dynamic concept that has had special resonance with women. In my life, leadership meant taking the responsibility to work with others to accomplish collective goals in the best interest of our students and the University. Among other things it required connecting and communicating with others, the give and take of true collaboration, openness to multiple perspectives and a commitment to larger purposes.

A particular joy for me was the opportunity to encourage the leadership development of others, both students and younger colleagues, and to watch their contributions and influence unfold. In 1991 I helped found the Women's Leadership Development Program. Felicia Kantor, who had just run for Student Council office, showed me her campaign posters, which had been defaced. She said, “I just don't want women to be discouraged from putting themselves forward for leadership positions by things like this.” So, we developed the program, deliberately recruiting promising young women who hadn't yet found their voices.

Student self-governance at UVA is a wonderful laboratory for leadership development, and working with student leaders as colleagues enriched my own leadership.

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

I hope I'll be remembered for caring, for being willing to work through complex issues, for respecting and believing deeply in students, for thinking and moving beyond the traditional silos of higher education, and for making meaningful contributions.

I am probably most proud of the chief project in my student life role when we were beginning to move as an institution to do more to support our growing numbers of Asian Pacific American students, Latino/a students, and our LGBTQ community. For about seven years I had the fabulous opportunity of working closely with colleagues toward that end...hiring the first assistant deans to support the first two of those communities, advocating for funding a full-time director of the LGBTQ Resource Center, and assisting the launch of important new programs in each of these areas.

I hope that I've left a little fingerprint somewhere in racial and intercultural understanding and greater responsiveness by the institution to our myriad students of myriad backgrounds, and in encouraging and supporting students to be full partners at this institution.



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