



A graduate of Virginia State University, **Sylvia Terry** constantly stressed to UVA students the importance of succeeding in college. Her parents, both educators, emphasized to her and to the Black students they taught the opportunities a college degree provides. After earning her bachelor's degree,

Terry enrolled as a graduate student in UVA's Department of English in 1971. During her graduate studies and several years thereafter, she taught English in the Upward Bound program, a college preparatory program for first-generation, low-income students. From 1973 until 1979, she taught English in Charlottesville public schools. While she loved her teaching career, she realized she really wanted to encourage and assist students in their pursuit of higher education.

She began working in the Office of Admission in 1980, hired by John T. Casteen, III, who was Dean of Admission at the time. A few years

later she was appointed Director of Minority Recruitment developing publications, coordinating programming, visiting schools, churches, and other community locales to interest Black families in the once all-white, all-male university.

Described by many students as a "mother away from home," Terry spent the last 20 years of her career at UVA in the Office of African-American Affairs, where she was the driving force behind the peer adviser program, a program she proposed during her admission days. Among other things, the program paired incoming students with upper-class Black students to support them in their UVA

academic and co-curricular careers. Under her leadership, the program made a major contribution to UVA's (at the time) 15 consecutive year record of having the highest Black graduation rate for public universities in the nation. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* noted the program's success included its personal, sensitive support; counseling; academic initiatives like "Raising the Bar"; and academic celebrations. In the years since she retired, this rate has continued to rise; according to the *JBHE's* most recent report, 86% of Black students graduate within six years, a rate more than double the national average.

Terry was one of the inaugural recipients of the Zintl Award in 1998. She retired from UVA in 2009.

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## WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

My parents were educators. They valued a college degree and what it could do. When I began teaching in the public schools, I talked to students about college opportunities and experiences. One day in reading the local newspaper, I stumbled on an ad from the UVA Office of Undergraduate Admission advertising a position that included recruiting African American students. That's initially what attracted me to the University. It was a chance to talk with and encourage more Black students to consider college possibilities.

UVA had a job to do. But in doing it, we had to confront the University's past history of racial discrimination when Black students were not permitted to attend. Parents wanted to know what experiences would be like for their children now that UVA was interested in them. In our recruitment, we asked African American alumni, currently enrolled Black students, faculty, and administrators to join us in our efforts.

I wanted prospective students to know and see there were Black students who had graduated from the University. I wanted more to enroll, graduate, and fulfill their aspirations. That was my goal, my dream.

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

Upon my arrival at UVA, as a graduate student, for example, I was mystified to hear Dixie being played at football games, an affront to my sensitivity and to the sensitivity of other Black students. When I began my University career until I retired, I saw and lived through our UVA ups and downs. There are the positives, though, that lend themselves to our continuing to work such as the support of unified Black alumni, the creation of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, Black student leaders, a strong Black Parent organization, caring faculty and administrators, to name a few.

continued

## In Her Words | Sylvia V. Terry

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

My positions both as Assistant Dean in the Office of Admission and my position as Associate Dean in the Office of African-American Affairs meant I was looked upon and had to be someone who was a truth teller. Parents and students relied on truth. It was this identity that permitted them to have faith in me. Allowed me to give the best support I could. I felt responsible for our students. I was a stake holder in their lives, their dreams, their goals. I proudly accepted this identity and the responsibility that went with it.

An alumnus asked me, “Well, now you’re retired, what shall we call you?” I smiled and said, “You can still call me Dean Terry.” I went on to explain the title is not about an administrative position. When students and parents say I’ve been like a second mother, that’s what “Dean” means. When I have students say, “Thank you for listening to me, caring about me, advising me” that’s what “Dean” means.

**Don’t let anyone steal your joy. I say this over and over again. No matter your age – young or old – no matter where you are in your career, always cling to your passion and dreams. Hang on.**

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

Don’t let anyone steal your joy. I say this over and over again. No matter your age – young or old – no matter where you are in your career, always cling to your passion and dreams. Hang on. Don’t let anyone try to hold you down. If you feel you are not being valued or respected, remember you are somebody. You are talented and motivated. Let your passion and your calling be your guiding light. There is an early graduate I often cite, the first Black student to receive a UVA undergraduate degree. This person always kept a light on in his

dorm room window. It was a reminder of his dreams and a motivator for other students passing by. As they put it, “Because he stayed at UVA, they stayed.” Be that light. Cling to your goals. Remain strong. On those rough days – we all have them – give yourself a hug. Be your own cheerleader. In other words, love who you are. March on.

### WHAT KEPT YOU GOING DURING TIMES OF ADVERSITY?

At UVA what kept me going was embracing the struggles of those before me, slaves who built this place, and the first Black students and the hardships they faced. In my work with Black students, I continually reminded them UVA was theirs. If anyone should claim the institution, they should because they (through slavery) have always been present at this place. When I look at the Slave Memorial, it reminds me of our beginnings. Both that and the struggles/experiences of our earliest enrolled Black students, in particular, keep me motivated during difficult times. They are my heroes – my guiding light – because they persisted.

## HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED? WHAT LEGACY DO YOU THINK YOU LEFT?

Even though I have many things about which I am proud at UVA (including my work in the Office of Admission increasing Black student enrollment), it is the Peer Advisor Program that is my heart, my joy, my legacy. I created it as a link between admission and retention. It all started with a meeting the UVA vice president of student affairs at the time had with Black student leaders.

A fourth-year student at that meeting said words I will never forget. “UVA has done everything to get me here. But now I’m here, nobody seems to care.” That was like a dagger thrown into my heart. And when I left the meeting, one of the first things I did was to go to my office, feeling the pain and isolation I heard, because not only did I want students to come to UVA, but I also wanted them to have the experiences that I had at my college, VSU. There was on-going support and encouragement. I decided to create a “visitation” committee. It was a forerunner of the peer advisor program. It picked up where the office of admission left off. I assigned visitation committee members to go to the various residence halls to personally welcome our entering students and serve as resources.

My dream was for students to feel that this place, UVA, was theirs, to feel a part of a collegiate family, to feel the joys I felt as an undergraduate. And if they didn’t feel these, to have somebody at UVA who could make a difference for them. When you look at factors of retention, one of them is that if a student is going to remain on a campus, that student needs to feel someone cares about him or her just as they felt welcomed during the recruitment process. I did not want students to feel abandoned. And so, through the Peer Advisor Program, my intention was to build a family of first-years and entering transfers, create a family among peer advisors and to incorporate all of these into the UVA family-at-large.

A few years later after the vice president’s meeting, another student said words I will also always remember. This time: “It was the Office of Admission that attracted me to the University of Virginia; it was the Peer Advisor program that kept me here.” Progress, definitely.



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