



2010

Leadership with Grace

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Commonwealth University, gehli@vcu.edu

Susan Gooden
Virginia Commonwealth University

Nakeina E. Douglas
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Recommended Citation

Douglas, N.E & Gooden, S.T. 2010. Leadership with Grace. In R. Johnson & G. Harris (Eds), *Women of color: Taking their rightful place in leadership*. Birkdale Publishers; San Diego, CA.

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Leadership With Grace

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Nakeina E. Douglas & Susan T. Gooden  
Virginia Commonwealth University

### *Introduction*

A remarkable lady of incredible talent and vision, Dr. Grace Edmondson Harris had a unique experience with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). A native of rural Halifax County in southern Virginia, she was denied admission to graduate study at VCU (then Richmond Professional Institute), a large public university in Richmond, Virginia. Ironically, later in 1967, Dr. Harris became the first African American female faculty member in the School of Social Work at VCU and ascended the ranks to become Dean of the School of Social Work, Provost, and Acting President prior to her retirement in 1999. Although Dr. Harris has strong ties to the African American community, to situate her contributions to VCU solely in terms of a “segregation to integration” narrative misses the mark. It fails to capture her success in leading the School of Social Work and her clear vision in her capacity as provost and in developing VCU’s First Strategic Plan. She continues to share her leadership talents through the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute, which was established at VCU in her honor upon her retirement. Most recently, in 2008, an academic building on VCU’s campus was named “Grace E. Harris Hall.” Through a series of interviews with Dr. Harris, as well with as current and former administrators and faculty at VCU, we offer a description and analysis of Dr. Harris’ leadership style spanning her 40 year tenure at Virginia Commonwealth University. It is a style that we (and others) find to be uniquely effective, people centered, and decisive.

### *Women in the Academy*

Women’s participation in the academy has increased since the 1970s, fueled by greater attention to equal opportunity legislation, affirmative action principles, feminism, women’s work ethic, and abilities (Gerdes, 2006). The number of women serving in top administrative positions as presidents, provosts, vice

provosts and deans, department chairs, and program directors continue to increase (American Council on Education, 2007).

In spite of this progress, research continues to highlight the challenges and slow progress of women at every organizational level from students (Jacob 1996; Sax, 2008) to faculty (Zemsky, 2001) to administrators (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Lafreniere & Longman, 2008). The American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 2006 Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession highlights a number of alarming trends for women in the academy. Although there are signs of rapid increase, the rate is too slow to achieve parity for many of years. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, women have been slowly integrated into faculty ranks and are still struggling to obtain employment, tenure status, full professor rank, and average salaries on par with men. There is still significant work to be done if women are to be fully and successfully integrated into the ranks of America's faculty in institutions of Higher Education (West & Curtis, 2006).

Barton (2006) suggests that we can begin to address the issues facing women in colleges and universities by applying feminist pedagogical principles to create and sustain nurturing academic communities. Feminist leaders tend to be student centered, focused on equity and work to build holistic environments in which all constituents can thrive. They tend to be vigilant against oppression and work to ensure that everyone is treated fairly. Feminist educational leadership embraces a political agenda that is motivated by equity. For the participants in Barton's research, feminist leadership entails a micro and macro view of social justice concerns with a desire to move marginalized voices to the center of the conversation, and a willingness to take risks as one strives to enact a transformative agenda. Feminist academic administrators work toward equitable and holistic social arrangements makes them instrumental in developing more nurturing higher education organizations.

Women, especially feminist women, are more likely to be transformational in their leadership styles (Chin et al., 2007; Eagly, Johannessen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership originates in the personal values and beliefs of leaders and is transmitted to one's followers. The premise is that transformational leaders operate out of deeply held personal value systems that include values such as justice, liberty, equality and integrity. Transformational lead-

ers are able to empower and mentor their followers, addressing each follower's sense of self-worth, thus teaching them to develop a true commitment to their full potential (Burns, 1978).

Transformational leaders have the ability to transform their followers into leaders by broadening and expanding their interests. "The transformational leader arouses heightened awareness and interest in the group and organization, increases confidence and moves followers gradually from concerns for existence to concerns for achievement and growth" (Yammarino, 1992, p. 28). Transformational leaders stand out from others in their force of powerful personal characteristics, ability to appeal to ideological values and expectation of self-sacrifice from others, and intensely personal relationships with others (House & Howell, 1992). The objective for women leaders often includes empowering others through their stewardship of an organization's resources, social advocacy, promoting a feminist policy and agenda, and changing the organizational culture to create an equitable environment (Chin et al., 2007). Transformational leadership can bring about a higher level of performance within the organization than previously was experienced.

### *Women of Color in the Academy*

African American women remain underrepresented as recipients of doctorates and in academic positions within universities. As Table 1 reports, according to the Digest of Education Statistics, 2,445 Black women earned a Ph.D. in 2007, only 4 percent of the 60,616 doctorates awarded that year. Under 4 percent of all tenured or tenure-track faculty are Black females.

**Table 1: Black Female Awarded Doctorates in 2007\***

| Doctorates Awarded | Number | Percentage |
|--------------------|--------|------------|
| All Doctorates     | 60,616 | 100%       |
| All Females        | 30,365 | 50%        |
| Black Female       | 2,445  | 4%         |

Data sources:

\*Table 290, Chapter 3: Postsecondary Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2008

**Table 2: Black Female Representation in Faculty Ranks 2007\*\***

| Faculty by Rank                         | Number  | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------|---------|------------|
| All Full Professor                      | 173,395 | 100%       |
| Female Full Professor                   | 45,907  | 26.5%      |
| Black Female Full Professor             | 2,193   | 1.3%       |
| All Associate Professors                | 143,692 | 100%       |
| Female Associate Professors             | 57,032  | 40%        |
| Black Female Associate Professors       | 3,745   | 2.6%       |
| All Assistant Professors                | 168,508 | 100%       |
| Female Assistant Professors             | 79,767  | 47%        |
| Black Female Assistant Professors       | 6,035   | 3.6%       |
| All Instructor <sup>1</sup>             | 101,429 | 100%       |
| Female Instructors <sup>1</sup>         | 54,830  | 54%        |
| Black Female Instructors <sup>1</sup>   | 4,552   | 4.5%       |
| All Lecturers <sup>1</sup>              | 31,264  | 100%       |
| Female Lecturers <sup>1</sup>           | 16,480  | 53%        |
| Black Female Lecturers <sup>1</sup>     | 881     | 2.8%       |
| All Other Faculty <sup>2</sup>          | 85,175  | 100%       |
| Female Other Faculty <sup>2</sup>       | 40,332  | 47%        |
| Black Female Other Faculty <sup>2</sup> | 2,742   | 3.2%       |

Data sources:

\*\*Table 249, Chapter 3: Postsecondary Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2008

<sup>1</sup>Non-tenure track position

<sup>2</sup>Includes all non-tenure track faculty lines that do not teach such as researchers and administrators.

Within the academy, few African American women ascend to the highest levels of university professorships and administrative positions. Only 1.3 percent of 173,395 full professors in the United States are Black women. A forthcoming report by the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education found that Black women were about twice as likely to transfer from a tenure-track faculty position to an adjunct research path as were members of other groups, including Black men. Also, they were substantially less likely than other segments of the popula-

tion to be retained in tenure-track faculty positions (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008). Research on Black faculty women cites several external barriers that often stifle their success as scholars, such as an undue burden of nonresearch activities; ambiguous, inappropriate, and unfairly weighed tenure and promotion requirements; lack of access to resources and support for teaching and research; and racism and discrimination (Gregory, 1999).

Much of the research on African American women in the academy focuses on the difficulties they face living with multiple marginality (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Garner 2004; Gregory, 1995; Turner, 2002). As Turner (2002) discusses, "Although faculty women of color have obtained academic positions, even when tenured they often confront situations that limit their authority and, as they address these situations, drain their energy" (p. 75). Themes that emerge from her interviews include feeling isolated and underrespected; salience of race over gender; being underemployed and overused by departments and/or institutions; being torn between family, community, and career; and being challenged by students (p. 80).

Yet another line of scholarship examining African American women in the academy focuses on the importance of linkages with their communities, families, and the importance of being mentored and mentoring. In her autobiography, Lynn Winfield (1997) explains:

In general, African American females in America have not been valued for their femininity or their scholarly work, making issues of personal and scholarly identity problematic. I myself have found few self-affirming images of scholarship, beauty, or success of women of color. (Winfield, p. 194)

Winfield continues,

Very early, I developed multiple dimensions within my reality that allowed me to function simultaneously as wife, mother, scholar, Sunday school teacher, choir director and other roles in the community. (p. 195)

The positive impact of mentoring is supported in previous research (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Eberspacher & Sisler, 1988; Johnsrud, 1990; Moore 1982; Sandler & Wong, 1985). In their examination of African American female administrators who hold or have held senior-level administrative

positions in higher education in the state of New York, Smith and Crawford (2007) found that “mentoring in the traditional definition did not impact the career choices and development” of the women in their study (p. 6). Their study concludes by stating, “Mentoring must be valued as a means to empower African American female administrators in higher education...Similarly, leadership from the board of trustees and the president is clearly a fundamental prerequisite in creating a culture that would allow African American females to flourish” (p. 7).

Looking beyond the specific experiences of Black women in academic settings, Patricia Hill Collins’s seminal work on Black feminist epistemology is based on the following propositions:

1) *Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning*—As Collins discusses, “African-American women need wisdom to know how to deal with the “educated fools” who would “take a shotgun to a roach” (p. 208). She continues, “In traditional African American communities Black women find considerable institutional support for valuing concrete experience (p. 211).

2) *The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims*—“For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process (Belenky et al. 1986, p. 18 cited in Collins, 1990, p. 212).

3) *The ethic of caring*—According to Collins (1990), the ethic of caring has three interrelated components. The first component is the emphasis placed on individual uniqueness. “Rooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life.” The second component concerns the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues. And the third involves developing the capacity for empathy (Collins, 1990, p. 215, 216).

4) *The ethic of personal accountability*—“Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable

for their knowledge claims...Assessments of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics" (Collins, 1990, p. 217-18).

Collins's four propositions of Black feminist epistemology can be applied to a variety of settings including an understanding of African American women's approach to leadership.

### *Methodology*

We were interested in learning more about Dr. Grace Harris's leadership style from her directly, as well as from those who had worked with her. We held semistructured interviews with nine individuals. Each interview lasted about an hour. We interviewed the current president and provost of VCU, as well as other senior administrators and faculty (current and retired) who had worked with her over the years. These interviews included the following topics: leadership style, personal influences, administrative accomplishments, institutional legacy, and commitment to social equity and justice. As co-authors, both of us participated in each interview, alternating our roles as interviewer and scribe.

A traditional 360-degree feedback tool is a multi-rater tool that draws responses regarding leadership effectiveness from bosses, peers and subordinates on a wide range of subjects usually within a defined set of themes. Consistent with the literature on 360-degree feedback assessments, we agreed that capturing multiple perspectives provides us with a comprehensive picture of Dr. Harris's tenure at VCU (Chappelow, 1998). Our design is intended to provide a greater awareness of the influence and impact that she had on VCU. We use elements of scholarly personal narrative (SPN) and semi-structured interview methods to present a holistic account of Dr. Harris's leadership.

This exploration is designed to enlighten the reader about the experiences of one woman serving at an urban institution in the heart of the South. As one interviewee points out, "It's easy to tell the story of race and gender, but what makes this story significant are her accomplishments and the lasting impact that they have had on this university." SPN scholarship asks a series of personal, narrative-grounded contextual questions for the purpose of divulging the full range of human experience into formal scholarly writing (Nash, 2004). SPN writers intentionally organize their writings around themes, issues, constructs, and



concepts that carry larger, more universal meaning for its readers (Nash, 2004, p. 30). These requirements of SPN render the 360-degree model chosen for this chapter an ideal tool. Consistent with the framework of SPN, this chapter explores the professional life of Grace E. Harris and integrates this exploration with references and insights from other scholarship to examine larger theoretical and practical questions of race, gender, equity, and leadership. We selected Dr. Harris as the focus of this chapter because of our admiration for her, personally and professionally, and her commitment to social equity and social justice.

### *The Core Elements of Leadership with Grace*

Interestingly, Dr. Harris, the individuals we interviewed, and both of us all independently offered very similar themes regarding her leadership style. These themes include advancing administrative vision; putting people first; listening before deciding; and the importance of family, social and community networks.

*Advancing Administrative Vision*—One prominent theme among the interviewees is Dr. Harris's ability to establish a clear vision and inspire the commitment of others. Dr. Harris is consistently described as a transformational leader. She rose to Chief Academic Officer of the institution and to acting president on two occasions. Her dedication to the university's mission and the students was always clear. The growth of the School of Social Work, her stewardship on the University's first strategic plan and payroll system, her attention to affirmative action policies and procedures, and the development of her community leadership programs are all examples of her vision in action.

The President of Virginia Commonwealth University, Dr. Eugene Trani, described Dr. Harris as a trailblazer who had dramatic influence on the soul of the university in terms of its soul, what it is, and the way it relates to people. She is described as keenly aware of emerging issues and developments in the world outside the university. The comments infer that she sees the university as a resource with which to reconcile some of these issues both on and off campus.

Several of the interviewees attributed many of the university's core principles to Dr. Harris. The Vice President for Human Resources and Family Care Services of the VCU Health System commented that Dr. Harris's moral compass and her vision for VCU were needed to help lay the foundation for the university becoming a major force in Virginia:

I think she's been a visionary, a role model. I think she has inspired people to be not only proud of VCU, but also its potential. She genuinely values the unique differences and contributions of a diverse workforce and student body and she wants to make sure that people succeed and I think she fosters trust. She just has a great way of getting you excited about her vision and that helps a team be more motivated to accomplish goals. It's rare that a person can help bring you along, help you accomplish things, helps you through obstacles and then celebrates your successes. Her decisions have had a tremendous impact on our curriculum, our students, staff, and our community image.

Related to this impression, the Provost remarked,

VCU is an institution that has a greater appreciation of values of diversity because of Dr. Harris. The issues that Grace has worked on her entire life are issues that we have to continue to work on. If she weren't there to pave the way, VCU would be an entirely different place.

Dr. Harris's vision was identified across a broad spectrum of activities and ideas discussed by the interviewees. In her role as Dean, she was instrumental in constructing the agenda for the School of Social Work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Continuing in the footsteps of her predecessors, Dr. Harris led the School of Social Work to become a leading school in the field. The current Senior Associate Dean credits Dr. Harris with the continued growth of the School of Social Work:

She contributed to our momentum on the national scene. The growth of the doctoral program occurred during her tenure as Dean. The program is one of the best in the country. In 1978, we were told that the bachelor of social work (BSW) program had to move in to the school of social work. Grace insisted that "we are all one school," our faculty teach across all three programs. Thus, faculty understand the continuum of the instruction. Grace always supported the BSW program even when some faculty did not. She didn't want any of the programs to feel as second class programs. I have carried out this mantra of oneness. As a School, our strength comes from the three programs.

During Dr. Harris's tenure as Dean, the School of Social Work received reaccreditation, continued to assist in the growth of other programs across the state, increased its enrollment of students and the diversity of the faculty while continuing to increase awareness of social work and social work education on campus and the School's national prominence.

The interviewees reported similar success in Dr. Harris's role as Provost. According to the President, she oversaw the restructuring of two colleges (the School of Community and Public Affairs and the School of Medicine) and the transition from a commuter institution to a residential university. The president also credited her with enhancing the university's commitment to the community, improving student engagement, and hiring good personnel. There was considerable agreement among the interviewees that her stewardship on the strategic plan and university payroll system were probably her most prominent achievements as Provost. Additionally, her efforts to bridge the divide between the academic and medical campuses were laudable and helped strengthen VCU's future as a single institution. Dr. Harris is credited with fostering good relations between the two campuses and increasing *esprit de corps* at a time when separatist sentiments were strong. The Vice President for Human Resources and Family Care Services of the VCU Health System commented on the dissonance between the medical campus and the academic campus:

She has fostered a true understanding and collegiality between the two campuses. She set the culture to think about change and VCU in a different way. Dr. Harris laid the groundwork for a lot of what the President made a reality. She was Provost during a difficult time. The fact that she was able to run things so well eased his transition.

The University strategic plan was instrumental in forging the union between the two campuses and setting the tone for the new VCU. The President, Provost and former Dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences all noted Dr. Harris' role in crafting and implementing the University's first strategic plan:

She implemented and contoured the vision that the President had when he came to VCU. The first five to eight years (of his presidency) were the most dramatic since VCU's inception in 1969. She was a kind of chief academic officer at a time when VCU was creating an iden-

tity for itself as a research institution with a strong urban commitment. She was absolutely instrumental in its implementation because she had interpersonal and relational skills. (Former Dean, College of Humanities and Sciences)

He goes on to discuss the development and implementation of the strategic plan. He describes the completion as the turning point in university history. Not only was a plan developed, but she put into place mechanisms for evaluating it, “It was a novel idea; doing it, assessing it, monitoring it and holding people accountable was really a sea change at the university.”

All of the interviewees agreed on the transformative role that Dr. Harris played at the University.

[While] the symbolic representation is important, it's what you do while in that position that is more important. What you have here was the most influential provost [in the history of VCU]. That's a pretty substantial accomplishment. (Former Dean College of Humanities and Sciences)

She stabilized our university and proved that women and women of color could be successful in building alliances and making tough decisions, and just being admired as a person. (Vice President for Human Resources and Family Care Services, VCU Health System)

In reflecting on Dr. Harris, the current VCU Provost stated,

We would not be what we are today; we would not have the kind of commitment to our strategic plan, without that steady, consistent, determined, quiet, leadership. Her style wins people over in a way that loud brash and demanding leadership does not.

*Putting people first: Prioritizing the human side*—Without a doubt, Dr. Harris's leadership style is one that puts people first. She very carefully considers the implications of policies and decisions on those who will be directly affected. The Special Assistant to the Dean in the School of Education and retired Vice Provost reflected on Dr. Harris's involvement in making new faculty contracts more user friendly:

When she looked at the contract that we signed, she was concerned that it invoked a negative image. It was not user friendly. It was like signing a mortgage, instead of

something that was more welcoming. It needed a lighter more personal touch. Being a human being was more important than any technical expertise.

Having a background in business, he learned a great deal from her approach. He reflected,

She made me focus more on the human side [of issues] for sure. I've been in business for basically 30 years of my career where the nuts and bolts were finance and technology, business principles and practices. She helped me step back and see who was affected by this...Most business people, you can blindfold them, put on them a white shirt, tie, and suit and they will make business decisions based on feasibility studies or numbers. She encouraged me to think a bit broader than that and to think about the human side.

One specific example of this is when, several years ago, Virginia Commonwealth University made the switch from 18 pays for 9-month faculty to 24 pays for 9-month faculty. Several faculty were quite vocal in expressing their resistance to the switch. As the Special Assistant to the Dean of the School of Education and retired Vice Provost recalled,

In the Faculty Senate, there were about 75 people in the room and they were all vocal...She let me get my points across. Then, she just got up from the back of the room and walked to the front and she parted the waters. She said, 'If you don't like it this year, we will give you a grace period, however, we are implementing 24 pays for 9 month faculty... She had a high tolerance for working with faculty members. You wouldn't believe the folks who resented it. We converted the complete faculty payroll system on this campus. Her true understanding of faculty was a part of that leadership package.

Throughout her career, Dr. Harris has led by example and served as a mentor to others. All the individuals we interviewed could readily identify specific leadership skills they learned from her and discussed the way they incorporated these skills into their own approach. A former colleague reflected,

During my early work with her, one of my best friends was a doctoral student in our program. When I was taking on this first administrative position, she helped to clarify what boundaries are—what is administrative in-

formation and what can be shared with colleagues. I remember that being a lesson.

A former colleague in the School of Social Work noted, "With Grace, it was never 'I want you to hear this.' She taught by example which is the best way to learn. It really did impact how I dealt with groups of people."

As noted in our introduction, Dr. Harris' career path at Virginia Commonwealth University is historic. Having completed her undergraduate degree in Sociology from Hampton Institute in 1954, Dr. Harris was denied admission into graduate school at Richmond Professional Institute (now VCU) because of her race. In 1967, Dr. Harris joined the faculty of VCU as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and moved up the academic and senior administrative ranks. Although Dr. Harris officially retired from VCU in 1999, she continues to share her talents with the University on a part-time basis as a Distinguished Professor of the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute.



While all of the individuals we interviewed were familiar with Dr. Harris's early experiences with discrimination, they all cautioned us that it would be narrow to only discuss this aspect of her life in explaining her interest and engagement in issues of social justice. The Vice President for Human Resources and Family Care Services of the VCU Health System, reflected

During a time of racial discord or prejudice, she was able to become a faculty of a program, later become the dean of that program, and as an African American and a woman to be the Acting President of such a large university. That's just amazing. She was a pioneer in so many ways. And, despite all of the accolades and accomplishments, all of the heady things attributed to her, she has remained so focused on students, staff, the quality of VCU and its reputation. Some people would rest on their laurels, but she still stays involved.

Others offered a similar reflection:

The fact that she opted to come back to a university that did not accept her for graduate school is a statement of

what someone can do. It would have been easy to go some place else and assume a leadership role...It says the world about her. (Emeritus Faculty)

She always set this bar for everybody, that you need to think about everyone in terms of priorities and opportunity, and that you shouldn't just think about yourself. There were also little hints, "maybe you could ask him to do this or maybe you could ask her to do that." She was well thought of by most women and minority faculty. They thought of her as someone they could talk to—they'd get a fair hearing and she would represent their interests. (Former Dean, College of Humanities and Sciences)

Dr. Harris offered a similar sentiment regarding her contribution to women and faculty of color:

I made sure that these groups were always included in consideration for professional advancement, promotion and tenure, and recognition, that we had an adequate representation of women and minorities on search committees, attending conferences and traveling. . . There are lots of ways that people can help that leaders sometimes overlook.

*Key Leadership Approach: Listen and Decide*

Dr. Harris's leadership style is one that is participatory, calm, and inclusive. She approaches situations with a patient approach that seeks to sincerely understand the nuances and tradeoffs of alternative viewpoints. She listens and considers opinions from all sides: faculty, administrators, staff and students—always careful to listen to their voices. The Vice President for Human Resources and Family Care Services of the VCU Health System, elaborated on her participatory style:

She has made me see how important it is to be calm in situations and to really listen and to include, (as much as you can), a diverse group of people when you are making decisions. She has this uncanny way of remembering who you are and what your job is, and of bringing diverse interests together to encourage collaboration.

One of her retired School of Social Work colleagues noted,

In the end, I learned committees are cumbersome and they take up a lot of time, but they are effective. You can

get more done than what you can on your own. Grace always appreciated that. . .[She] taught me to keep my mouth shut and to allow people to talk.

Although Dr. Harris places a premium on listening to and understanding multiple viewpoints, she is clearly a decision-maker. She does not shy away from or avoid tough decisions. A hallmark of her leadership style is standing by the decisions she has made and making sure they are implemented. As noted by the Special Assistant to the Dean of Education and former Vice Provost,

The thing I found in her leadership style is that she was really great to work for. There were no false starts, switching directions, scrap and start all over like some people do... She knew when she set the direction what she wanted done. She was not one to just up and switch courses.

The former Dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences agreed:

She is well informed, seeks information from a variety of sources and doesn't make rash decisions. I remember one instance when I knew I was right. She countered with an alternative argument from someone else. She always did a good job at understanding the nuances and complexities of any issue. Her capacity to understand issues in a complex and comprehensive way was unparalleled... She had the ability, that when she makes a decision, she made it happen. Others make decisions and then take them back...When she made a decision, she made a decision.

Perhaps Dr. Harris summed it up best:

As I think about being provost, I recall giving everybody a chance to be heard, even when they weren't very nice. Another characteristic is to be patient; not making a decision too hastily. On the other hand, I do believe that decisions must be made...You have to reach that point of decision making after giving people the opportunity to express their views, after the input has been given. You really do want to get a good sense of the thinking of others of whom you respect.



In any leadership situation, making decisions means there will always be winners and losers on any given issue. Dr. Harris's inclusive leadership style resulted in an acceptance of her decisions due, in large part, to her articulation of her reasoning.

She had a remarkable way of not antagonizing people...

You never felt that you didn't get a fair hearing...(She would say) we reached this judgment for these kinds of reasons. Given you respected the way she went about making judgments, you were fine. There was rationality to it and there was a process that she went through in her own mind. I might have lost, but I was given a fair hearing. (Former Dean, College of Humanities and Sciences)

A former colleague, now the Senior Associate Dean, School of Social Work noted, "She had a great way of dealing with conflict without leaving you feeling defensive. She handled most antagonistic situations behind closed doors."

#### *The importance of family, social and community networks*

During our afternoon with Dr. Harris, she revealed the significant role that her family played in shaping not only who she is as a leader, but also the way that she connects and reaches out to others. Dr. Harris attributed her leadership to a well-informed background influenced by a lifetime of learning and experience. She has been married to her college sweetheart, James W. "Dick" Harris for more than 55 years. She is a mother of two children, and a grandmother. For Dr. Harris, a strong sense of family, love, respect, pride, and fun were essential to her success. In her interview, Dr. Harris credits her success to her upbringing:

It was our family way of life; there's nothing extraordinary about succeeding. It was kind of the norm. We had to do our homework; it was expected that you achieve. It was expected that you go to college, it was expected that you be nice to your sisters and brothers even if you fight. There was closeness and a bonding that has lasted. I come from a family of leaders, compassionate leaders, people who had a little fun in doing what they were doing. My uncle, John "JB" Coleman, was very active in the NAACP and was very sure of himself and had a fun outlook in life...he lived his life...he had great influence... I saw a commitment to certain principles and behaviors and at the same time a joy in living...He always made sure that there was

action about his commitments. He actively tried to make changes personally and professionally.

The power of family was visible to those around her. Many of the interviewees spoke about the influence of her family and recalled stories about her parents, sisters, brother, aunts and uncles. A former social work faculty member noted,

I think her family must have had a big influence. She and her sisters were close. Her parents instilled in them an achievement orientation but one that was, at least as I saw it...gentle, That was the way they were going to approach life and achieve what they were going to achieve.

When asked about the role of social and community networks, Dr. Harris reported that her knowledge of people really influenced the connections that she has been able to make over time. She is recognized as skilled in making and keeping connections with people from all walks of life. These connections were instrumental in accomplishing tasks within and outside of the university. Dr. Harris comments,

Practically, the fact that I know a lot of people and can get people involved has certainly been helpful in the Institute. Keeping in touch with issues and progress being made can help you expand your own way of thinking about people. There are connections to other things. I don't hesitate to call people if I think they can be helpful to the programs or other people.

Dr. Harris continued to maintain a strong presence in the Richmond community beyond her affiliation with the University. She was on the Board of Directors for the Christian Children's Fund (1987-1995). She was a founder of the Women's Bank and served on its Board of Directors (1976-1984). She was involved with the establishment of the John B. Cary Elementary School, a response to the need for a different kind of education for area children. Dr. Harris saw her roles in the community as opportunities for good practice. A former colleague reflected,

On the boards she was on, she was a good thinker. She was involved too, in her own social milieus. There were many women to whom she was friendly, and she maintained a good relationship.

The Special Assistant to the Dean of the School of Education and retired Vice Provost reflected,

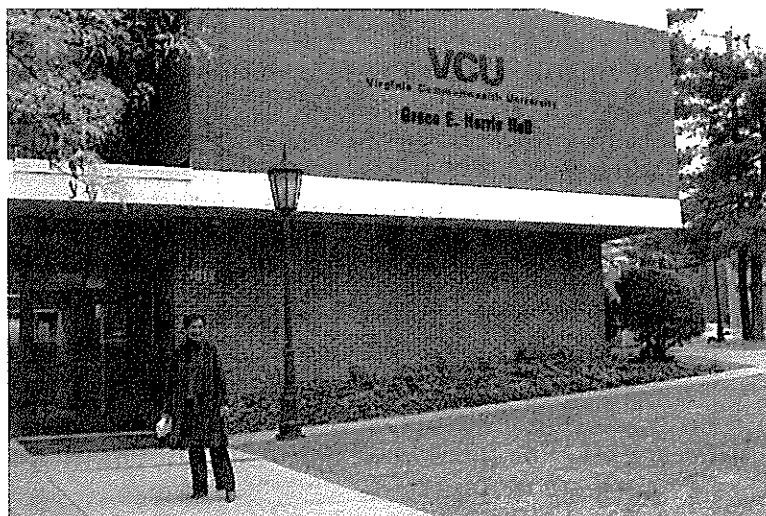
People outside would put her on boards that focus on social equity and leadership and that was a real tribute to her. When [former Virginia Governor] Warner was elected, he asked her to help staff his transition team.

### *Continuing the Legacy*

Dr. Harris's legacy and ideals continue to provide an inspiring framework for the University. When asked about Dr. Harris' legacy, the interviewees noted the multiple contributions she has made and continues to make to the entire fabric of the University. Dr. Harris' commitment to excellence and her ability to effect positive change, the establishment of the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute, and the dedication of Grace E. Harris Hall in her honor were just some of the things discussed when asked about her legacy. A former colleague notes,

She was here at a very fine time in VCU's history when VCU first became a university, when VCU was RPI. The students were pretty homogenous. We didn't have students who were from any place other than the South. She was very steadfast and strong in her need for respect for all people. It's a true respect for diversity. You get rich ideas. She has made an impact. She was in the right place at the right time and she used all of her grace and charm to make things happen.

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute was cited as a major component of Dr. Harris's legacy at VCU. Based on Harris's style



of leadership, the Institute develops and implements programs based on principles of transformational leadership, collaboration and partnership, commitment to long-term relationships with clients and participants, and focus on leadership in academic and community settings. The university programs, the VCU Leadership Development Program, and the Department Chairs Program are designed to institutionalize Dr. Harris's leadership style as a means to prepare and retain effective faculty, staff and administrators who are currently (or will likely become) leaders within the university. The community programs, the HIGHER Ground Women's Leadership Development Program and the Minority Political Leadership Institute, which operates as a collaboration with the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus Foundation, honor her commitment to her social work profession and continue the tradition of community service.

Most interviewees felt that the Institute programs create a lasting impression on its participants.

Clearly a lot of people who have gone through the program have taken on increased leadership roles in VCU and the health system. That's a great testament to the institute and to Grace Harris. (President, Virginia Commonwealth University)

The former Dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences commented,

The Institute is trying to identify a wide range of aspiring leaders who can take people from different backgrounds and use them to improve the university...it is institutionalized in the institute.

The interviewees also highlighted the significance of Grace E. Harris Hall. For the President, naming the building in honor of Dr. Harris was a fitting tribute. "It was very appropriate to name a major classroom facility to honor her lifelong contribution to the university and its students." The Special Assistant to the Dean of School of Education and the retired Vice Provost noted,

They named that after her for her total contributions to VCU...roughly 15 years from now there will be some children in that building learning whatever discipline. Fifteen years from now, those students in the building, they may not even know her or know everything we know about Grace. They are in a building named after Grace

the first African American dean, provost, and the only acting president. To name it after her, speaks volumes about her legacy.

### *Conclusion*

Dr. Harris's leadership style was transformational for the faculty, staff, and students at VCU. Her administrative vision and institutional stewardship demonstrated strength and wisdom. The interviews point out key elements of Dr. Harris' leadership style that are consistent with the literature on transformational leadership, including her ability to establish a clear and achievable vision, to move others into collaborative action, to create a learning environment, and to develop leaders who will continue a legacy of compassion and responsiveness to their communities. Dr. Harris's ability to gather and entrench people under a common purpose speaks to her transformative talent to encourage and engage a greater sense of purpose among the community.

Many of the themes that emerged from our interviews align closely with Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist epistemology. Dr. Harris's "listen and decide" approach includes concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Similarly, her "putting people first" approach aligns with the ethic of caring and personal accountability. Her emphasis on collaborative partnerships and her results orientation enhanced her ability to effect positive change in the organization in an authentic approach. Her model of exemplary leadership continues to provide an inspiring framework for many, as evidenced by the observations provided.

The interviewees provided a rich understanding of Dr. Harris's role at the university and in the community and her impact on each of us. Though we expected to receive many positive comments about her leadership style, the consistency between every story was astonishing. Even though we each had our own story and experiences with Dr. Harris, our recollections of our interaction with her were characterized with the same themes and, in some cases, even the same descriptors and choice of words. Without a doubt, the central components of Dr. Harris's leadership style were consistently identified and recognized by those who worked with her in a variety of capacities within the university. Her greatly admired and effective leadership style is truly leadership with grace.

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