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Dr. Safiya George Becomes UVI's First Graduate to Serve as University President

Dr. George noted UVI's impact, noting nearly 11,000 degrees awarded, including 1,000 nurses, 4,000 business owners, and 4,000 educators. UVI also leads in marine science, ranking among the top three in technical diving and advancing deep-sea research

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UVI President Dr. Safiya George speaking during her inauguration on Monday, March 17, 2025. By: UVI

The inauguration of the sixth president of the University of the Virgin Islands was a historic occasion, as for the first time, a graduate of the university sits as its leader.

“I consider this my labor of love – lots of labor, and lots and lots of love,” Dr. Safiya George said, as she began her remarks after she was officially robed as president.

George takes the helm at a critical moment for higher education across the country, according to Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, calling it “a strained and uncertain moment.” Pointing the gathered audience to events playing out on the national stage, Plaskett noted that “universities are now questioned and threatened with withholding resources and succor, assistance and support in times of hardship and distress.”

The Trump administration is threatening to withhold or stop funding to some universities primarily due to allegations of failing to address antisemitism and discrimination on campus, as well as broader policy disagreements. In early 2025, the administration targeted institutions like Columbia University, canceling approximately \$400 million in federal grants and contracts. This action was justified by claims that Columbia did not adequately protect Jewish students from antisemitic harassment during protests related to the Israel-Gaza conflict in the previous year. The move was part of a larger effort involving multiple federal agencies, including the Department of Education and a Task Force to Combat Antisemitism, which cited violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. This law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin at institutions receiving federal funds, and the administration has interpreted it to include antisemitic incidents tied to national origin.

According to Plaskett, the impact will be particularly felt at institutions such as UVI, where students by and large come from a cohort of society which has been “systematically denied for hundreds of years; people whose DNA have been impacted by 250 years...of chattel slavery.”

In the face of these adverse conditions, said the congresswoman, George is a president that is up to the task. “I know that with Safiya George, we will have that momentum, that speed, that velocity to drive this university where it should be, no matter who or what or other administrations are in its way,” Plaskett said, pledging her support to the university as it charts a course into the future.

Senate President Milton Potter emphasized the enormity of the task at hand for George as – after seven months serving in the role – she officially embarks on her journey as president. “The University of the Virgin Islands holds a sacred trust in these islands,” Potter noted. “It is where our culture is preserved and our future is imagined.” He, like others, highlighted the impact of the university on the wider community. “It is where the children of fishermen and farmers, of teachers and tradesmen come to transform their lives, and in doing so, transform our community,” he said, outlining the weighty responsibility that now lies on George's shoulders.

That transformative impact on Virgin Islands society was emphasized when the new university president looked at the numbers. In the 63 years since its founding in 1962, the university has awarded just under 11,000 degrees, George revealed. “Nearly 1000 nurses...we've produced over 4000 business owners. We've produced nearly 2000 liberal artists, nearly 4000 teachers, educators.”

UVI's excellence is not just benefiting the territory, but the entire nation and the wider world. “We at UVI are representing excellence in the blue economy,” George asserted. The university is seen as one of the top three institutions in the world in the field of technical diving, the new president disclosed, with the university's marine scientists having discovered the ideal ratio of oxygen and helium to support deeper exploration of the ocean. The university's dominance in marine science is also evident as three of the top 22 ocean researchers in the country, [as recognized by the National Science Foundation](#), are attached to the university. “You don't need a math degree to

know that's a significant percentage, 13.6 to be exact," Dr. George quipped.

"UVI is doing its part to have lasting impact, and so we're going to continue to celebrate academic achievement," she declared.

To be able to do that, however, George acknowledged that UVI needs support. "We are going to require an entire village," she said, noting that the legislative and executive arms of government have already demonstrated their commitment by ensuring free tuition for all Virgin Islanders. Private sector support has also been forthcoming and needs to continue. "We're very thankful to our philanthropists who have already invested in UVI, and who will continue to invest in UVI," George remarked, while calling on additional support from the community to ensure the university can continue its mission of education and empowerment.

As UVI continues to make strides in the delivery of tertiary education, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. exhorted the citizenry to take advantage of the opportunities before them. "It is time for us to get off our tails and accept all the frees that we can," he said, referencing the university's tuition-free education for Virgin Islanders. Alluding to the shrinking largesse from the federal government, the governor argued that "it is time for us as the Virgin Islands to realize that we as a people, as a territory, could make it if we try, but if we sit down and always depend on somebody [that's] going to come and save us...we will never reach our full potential."

Governor Bryan – the first UVI alum to be elected as the territory's chief executive – challenged George "to force us to our full potential" through her stewardship of the university, and in the same breath challenged Virgin Islanders to support their new leader in tertiary education "as she takes on perhaps the most important role for the future of our islands."