
An advocate for minorities in science

Growing up in St. Kitts, Dr. Teshell Greene of VCU's Biology Department knew she wanted to study science. She went on to blaze a trail for other underrepresented minorities in the field. Now she deconstructs the idea of diversity at VCU.



WRITTEN BY
Paige Bellamy

TAGS
diversity, underrepresented minorities, racism

PUBLISHED
Nov. 1, 2016

It isn't every day that a smart, young woman from the Caribbean island of St. Kitts (population 46,000) moves to New York City (population 8.5 million). Unfortunately, it is all too common for a woman like this to experience sexism and racism in the field of science.

Dr. Teshell Greene, an instructor in the VCU Department of Biology, knew that she wanted to study science since she was a teenager. St. Kitts, with its West Indies neighbor, St. Nevis, represents the smallest nation in the Americas



Dr. Teshell Greene of the VCU Department of Biology

At Pace University and elsewhere in the Big Apple, Greene says she felt accepted: ‘You don’t experience racial tension in New York City.’

and still follows the English system, leading 13- and 14-year-old students to choose the career path that they want to pursue.

For Greene, the choice was easy. She moved to New York at 14 and kept pursuing science. She earned her undergraduate degree in chemistry from Pace University and then her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. She has taught at the University of Richmond and Virginia State University and now teaches at VCU.

At Pace and elsewhere in the Big Apple, Greene said she felt accepted: “You don’t experience racial tension in New York City.”

That feeling disappeared when she moved to Pennsylvania. Greene said she was once refused service at a bank. She was also singled out by her medical pharmacology professor in front of the whole class, while a white, male counterpart, who ended up getting a worse grade, was “babied.”

While at Penn, the underrepresented minorities – URMs – formed their own support system, finding none from their school.

VCU often touts its commitment to diversity. How does Greene feel about that?

“Completely disappointed,” she said. “The university doesn’t understand the culture of where students are coming from.”

The school puts a lot of effort into recruiting diverse students, but behind the scenes is a completely different story, Greene said. “Numbers start dwindling; you can’t maintain them.”

The faculty is a similar story. Greene said there is only a handful of URMs in the Biology

VCU puts a lot of effort into recruiting diverse students, but behind the scenes is a different story, Greene says. 'Numbers start dwindling; you can't maintain them.'

Department. Even then, she said, some of the older male faculty members look down on their younger female counterparts.

"They don't want to listen," she said.

Greene hopes the URMs will form their own support system, as she did at Penn. She is also hopeful that the new dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences, Dr. Montserrat Fuentes, will implement programs that will help sustain minorities.

Before coming to VCU, Greene studied gene therapy, a way to correct genetic disorders by transplanting normal genes into cells to replace missing or defective genes. In the field of science, gene therapy has exploded since its first successful implementation in 1989, quickly becoming commonly used in numerous clinical trials.

While her field has seen immense growth in recent years, Greene does not expect the same kind of rapid progress when it comes to supporting underrepresented minorities.

"Richmond goes slower," she said. •