

University of Delaware Honorary Degree

RUTH J. SIMMONS
DOCTOR OF LETTERS
honoris causa

Passionate advocate for higher education, your parents were sharecroppers, and as the youngest of 12 children, you believed in the value of education even when a college degree seemed out of reach. You received your undergraduate degree at Dillard University, studied in France on a Fulbright scholarship, and earned your Ph.D. in romance languages and literatures at Harvard University.

You said in one interview that even as a child, you knew that you had to go outside the world of segregation and bigotry that you grew up in. “And that’s what everybody has to do,” you added. “They have to find a way to be a part of that larger world. If they do that, they’ll be better problem-solvers, they’ll be better leaders, they’ll be better mothers, they’ll be better partners, they’ll be better in every respect if they have that broader purview.”

In your long, illustrious career in academia, you have touched the lives of countless students and faculty members at the colleges and universities where you have taught or served as administrator. You began your career as a professor at George Washington University and later served as an associate dean of the graduate school at the University of Southern California, provost at Spelman College, and dean of finance and later vice provost at Princeton University.

Champion for change, in 1995 you were named president of Smith College, the largest women’s college in the country, making history as the first African-American woman to head a major college or university. While there, you established a finance program as well as the first engineering program at an American women’s college.

You made history once again in 2001 when you were selected to be president of Brown University and became the first African-American president of an Ivy League university. You expanded and strengthened the faculty, increased support and resources for students, improved facilities, renewed a commitment to shared governance, and ensured that diversity informed every dimension of the university. Your efforts led to a more than 80 percent approval rating among Brown undergraduates.

Trusted and acclaimed leader, you are a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the American Philosophical Society and the Council on Foreign Relations. You were appointed by Barack Obama to the President’s Commission on White House Fellowships, and you serve on the board of the Smithsonian’s Museum of African-American History and Culture.

You have received countless awards, including the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal, the ROBIE Humanitarian Award, the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal, and the President’s Award from the United Negro College Fund.

Time magazine named you America’s best college president in 2001; *Ms.* magazine named you a Woman of the Year; *U.S. News & World Report* named you a top U.S. leader; and you were twice honored as a *Glamour* magazine Woman of the Year. You have been a featured speaker at the White House, the World Economic Forum, and the Association of American Universities.

Charlotte Brontë wrote in *Jane Eyre* that “Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education.” Ruth Simmons, when you saw prejudices and a lack of opportunities for certain groups of students, you worked assiduously to eradicate those prejudices through education and to create new opportunities. Students, the universities you have served, and the world of academia at large have benefited from your beliefs, your commitment, and your actions.

Therefore, under the authority of the Board of Trustees of the University of Delaware, I have the pleasure and honor of conferring upon you, Ruth J. Simmons, the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, and do declare you entitled to all the rights, honors, and privileges to that degree appertaining throughout the world. In testimony thereof, I am pleased to present to you this diploma.

A. Gilchrist Sparks III
May 30, 2015