

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ruth J. Simmons

PERSON

Simmons, Ruth, 1945-

Alternative Names: Ruth J. Simmons;

Life Dates: July 3, 1945-

Place of Birth: Grapeland, Texas, USA

Residence: Humble, TX

Work: Prairie View, TX

Occupations: College President; Academic Administrator

Biographical Note

Academic administrator and college president Ruth J. Simmons was born on July 3, 1945 near Grapeland, Texas to Fanny and Isaac Stubblefield. After the family moved to Houston in 1952, Simmons graduated top of her class from Phillis Wheatley High School in 1963. She then received her B.A. degree in French from Dillard University in 1967 and her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in romance languages and literature from Harvard University in 1970 and 1973.

Simmons became as an assistant professor of French at the University of New Orleans in 1973; and, two years later, was promoted to assistant dean of their College of Liberal Arts. In 1977, she was hired by California State University, Northridge where she served as administrative coordinator for their National Endowment for the Humanities Liberal Studies Project until 1978 when she was made acting director of international programs and associate professor of Pan-African studies. In 1979, Simmons joined the University of Southern California as assistant, and then associate dean of graduate studies. She remained here until 1983 when she was hired by Princeton University to serve as director of studies for their new residential college, Butler College. From 1985 to 1987 she also worked as their acting director of Afro-American studies; and, in 1986, she was promoted to associate dean of faculty at Princeton University. Simmons subsequently served as provost of Spelman College from 1990 to 1991 before returning to Princeton as vice provost. In 1995, Simmons became the first African American woman to head a major college or university upon being named president of Smith College. Here, she established the first engineering program at a woman's college. She held this position until 2001 when she was selected president of Brown University, making her the first African American woman to head an Ivy League institution. Here,

she raised a record amount of funding for the school and established a need-blind admission standard for undergraduates. In 2012, she stepped down as president of Brown, but remained as a professor of comparative literature and Africana studies. Simmons subsequently became interim president of Prairie View A&M University in 2017 before being named president of the school, making her their first woman president.

Simmons has served on numerous boards throughout her career, including for JSTOR, Pfizer, Inc., Texas Instruments, Goldman Sachs, Howard University, Mondelez International, Chrysler, LLC, and Princeton University. She has also been a presidential appointee for President Bill Clinton's Women's Progress Commemoration Commission in 1999 and President Barack Obama's Commission on White House Fellowships in 2009.

Simmons has over thirty honorary degrees and has received many awards such as CBS's Woman of the Year in 1996, the National Urban League's Achievement Award in 1998, the United Negro College Fund's President's Award in 2001, the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal in 2002, and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 2010.

Simmons resides in Texas and has two adult children, Khari and Maya.

Ruth J. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on December 3, 2019.

Related Entries

W.R. Banks Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Phillis Wheatley High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Dillard University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.A.

Wellesley College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

George Washington University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Harvard University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

M.A.

Harvard University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Ph.D.

Atherton Elementary [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Brown University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

President

Prairie View A&M University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1970 to ?]

Interim President

Prairie View A&M University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

President

Smith College [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1980 to ?]

President

Princeton University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 199201 to 199507]

Vice Provost

Spelman College [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1989 to 1992]

Provost

Princeton University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1986 to 1990]

Associate Dean of Faculty

Princeton University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1986 to 1987]

Assistant Dean of Faculty

Princeton University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1985 to 1987]

Acting Director, Afro-American Studies

Princeton University [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Director of Studies, Butler College

University of Southern California [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1986 to 1992]

Associate Dean, Graduate School

University of Southern California [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1974 to 1983]

Assistant Dean, Graduate School

California State University, Northridge [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1990 to 1998]

Acting Director, International Programs

California State University, Northridge [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1963 to ?]

Visiting Associate Professor, Pan-African Studies

California State University, Northridge [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1982 to ?]

Administrative Coordinator, NEH Liberal Studies Project

University of New Orleans [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1992 to ?]

Assistant Dean, College of Liberal Arts

University of New Orleans [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1977 to 1978]

Assistant Professor, French

Radcliffe College [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1983 to ?]

Admissions Officer

George Washington University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1987 to ?]

Instructor, French

Language Services Division, U.S. Department of State [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1990 to 2000]

Interpreter

Alfalfa Club [MEMBEROF]
[from 2012 to ?]

Member

Dillard University [MEMBEROF]
[from 2012 to 2013]

Board of Trustees

Princeton University [MEMBEROF]
[from 2012 to ?]

Board of Trustees

Chrysler, LLC [MEMBEROF]
[from 2012 to ?]

Board of Directors

Mondelez International [MEMBEROF]
[from 2012 to ?]

Board of Directors

Council on the National Museum of African American History & Culture [MEMBEROF]
[from 20101 to ?]

Member

President's Commission on White House Fellowships [MEMBEROF]
[from 2009 to ?]

Member

New England Association of Schools and Colleges [MEMBEROF]
[from 2007 to 200812]

President

Selwyn College, Cambridge University [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Honorary Fellow

Howard University [MEMBEROF]
[from 2007 to 2010]

Board of Trustees

Committee on Women in Academic Science and Engineering, The National Academies [MEMBEROF]
[from 2005 to 2006]

Member

Middle States Association Accreditation Team, The Johns Hopkins University [MEMBEROF]
[from 2004 to ?]

Chair

Massachusetts Historical Society [MEMBEROF]
[from 2003 to ?]

Member

Alliance for Lupus Research [MEMBEROF]
[from 2002 to 2004]

Board of Directors

The Goldman Sachs Group [MEMBEROF]
[from 2000 to 2010]

Board of Directors

Texas Instruments [MEMBEROF]
[from 1999 to ?]

Board of Directors

Carnegie Corporation of New York [MEMBEROF]
[from 1999 to 2004]

Board of Trustees

Women's Progress Commemoration Commission [MEMBEROF]

[from 1999 to 2001]

Appointee

Middle States Association Accreditation Team, Bryn Mawr College [MEMBEROF]

[from 1999 to ?]

Chair

Consortium on Financing Higher Education [MEMBEROF]

[from 1997 to 2003]

Board of Directors

Pfizer, Inc. [MEMBEROF]

[from 1997 to 2007]

Board of Directors

Center for African American Studies, Princeton University [MEMBEROF]

[from 1996 to ?]

Advisory Board

Healthy Steps for Young Children Program [MEMBEROF]

[from 1996 to 2001]

Advisory Board

JSTOR [MEMBEROF]

[from 1996 to 1999]

Board of Directors

Metropolitan Life Insurance Company [MEMBEROF]

[from 1995 to 2001]

Board of Directors

The Clarke School for the Deaf [MEMBEROF]

[from 1995 to 2001]

Board of Trustees

Institute for Advance Study [MEMBEROF]

[from 1995 to 1998]

Board of Trustees

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation [MEMBEROF]

[from 1991 to 1996]

Board of Trustees

Committee to Visit the Department of Afro-American Studies, Harvard University

[MEMBEROF]

[from 1991 to 1999]

Chair