

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

JOHNNETTA COLE

By Brittany Robertson



The accomplishments of scholar, educator, and anthropologist Johnnetta Cole are numerous. She was president of Spelman College, and later became president of Bennett College – two HBCUs for women. During her tenure at Spelman, Cole and her team raised over \$113 million, which at the time was the institution’s largest endowment to date. In addition to her administrative positions, she was a professor of anthropology at several institutions, including Washington State University, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Hunter College. Cole also served as the director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art.

In my interview with Cole, I had the opportunity to capture a glimpse of the motivations behind her career choices. She shared her perspectives, her greatest personal and professional accomplishments, as well as the challenges she faced throughout her career. Through it all, she indicated that her priorities were shaped not only by the women and communities she served, but by her identity as a Black woman.

In 1987, Johnnetta Cole became the first Black woman president of Spelman College. Cole indicated that this shift in her professional journey was influenced by her Black women mentors. She initially planned to continue teaching at Hunter College, where at the time, she was both a professor of anthropology, and director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies program. Her plans changed when her mentors

strongly encouraged her to pursue the opportunity to become president of Spelman College.

An additional and important source of motivation behind Cole’s choice to become president of Spelman was her identity as a Black feminist. The institution’s goal and mission as an HBCU that served Black women strongly appealed to her. It was important for her to serve as a “Sister President” for students that were as she described it, a “reflection of who [she] was.” Cole was and is first and foremost a Black woman, who viewed supporting other Black women students, faculty and administrators as her top priority.

Cole mentioned the impact of sisterhood several times throughout the interview. Her close women friends and colleagues were essential sources of support and guidance throughout her career. She described her relationship with these women as “the Righteous Sisterhood.” In times of distress, she would call upon this “Sisterhood” for words of encouragement and advice. Their common experiences created a sense of “solidarity” amongst the group.

In addition to these connections, interactions with her Black women students contributed to some of her most enjoyable moments during her presidency at both Bennett and Spelman. Supporting these women throughout their educational journeys, was in her words, “a privilege.” She indicated that seeing them graduate and lead successful lives was one of her greatest accomplishments, and the one thing she missed when she became the director of the Smithsonian. It was evident that her identity as a Black woman shaped her career, as well as her approach to leadership.

Cole made sure to highlight both her personal and professional accomplishments. On a personal level, she was proud of the fact that she raised sons that were “close to being feminists,” which shows how important her identity as a Black feminist truly is. Cole indicated that encouraging young men to absorb feminist ideologies was not an easy task. Nevertheless, in her view,

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doing so is an important step in the quest for gender equality. Another more professional accomplishment that Cole noted was her involvement in efforts to promote social justice, particularly in her scholarly work.

Cole listed several challenges that she faced during her presidency at Spelman and Bennett. These challenges included those that a president of any institution may relate to regardless of the institution they serve, as well as challenges specific to Black women leaders. The first challenge that a president may encounter is managing multiple responsibilities to all “constituencies.” More specifically, managing their conflicting goals and priorities can be a difficult task. Constituents include students, as well as faculty, staff, alumni, the community, the public, and donors. Next, a more personal challenge is effectively dealing with the demands of the job. A lack of work/life balance, and pressures to ensure the safety and well-being of students can also take its toll on a college president.

Another challenge Cole spoke in detail about is related to fundraising. Cole could not stress the importance of fundraising as an institutional leader enough. Yet doing so can be an arduous process. Based on reflections from her time as president, she often characterized the role of a college president as “... someone that lives in a big house and begs for a living.” Furthermore, for Black women leaders, access to networks and relationship-building, essential elements for both advancing professionally and fundraising, may be particularly difficult. Cole faced doubts from all constituents about her competency and leadership capabilities. Finally, Cole mentioned that there are unique challenges associated with adequately serving students from marginalized groups, or those on the “periphery of society,” at an HBCU.

In the interview, she revealed that facing these challenges “hurt.” In order to cope, aside from the support she received from the “Righteous Sisterhood,” she had to learn to consider the context of the situation. As she eloquently stated, though these words hurt, “...what she was experiencing was symptomatic of the nature of racism and sexism in America.” Framing these experiences through a “historical and anthropological” lens allowed her to recognize that while certain circumstances were out of her control, she could control how she responded. She knew that she must be persistent in order to achieve her goals.

At the end of the interview, Cole shared her advice for emerging scholars and higher education professionals. The first piece of advice that she shared was that you should advance professionally with integrity. She made sure to note that this integrity must be kept even when accepting large donations. Second, as mentioned previously, you should be persistent despite the obstacles. Third, you must do the work that is required to achieve your goals. Fourth, you should pursue your academic, professional and educational goals, whether it be publishing an article or applying to a doctoral program. Also, serving the community should be a priority throughout your professional journey. Finally, and most importantly, you should be passionate about your work. As Cole stated, “Make sure you’ve got a passion for this work, because if you don’t you won’t make it. It is not work for the faint of heart.”

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled “Understanding Minority Serving Institutions,” in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.