

Framing a new post-affirmative action world. Insights from Dr. Ruth Simmons, Harvard University & Rice University, and Dr. Tamara Huff, orthopedic surgeon.

When the supreme court struck down race-conscious admissions this year, they ended policies of affirmative action that have helped to diversify college campuses since 1978. The ruling is considered detrimental to efforts to cultivate a representative healthcare workforce.

At this year's annual National Medical Association scientific assembly in New Orleans, Dr. Ruth Simmons was the keynote speaker at a symposium organized by the Cobb Institute, in association with Movement is Life (1). In this episode she explores the implications of the SCOTUS ruling with Dr. Tammy Huff, a board director for Movement is Life and an orthopedic surgeon.

In 1995, Dr. 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. In 2001 she was selected president of Brown University, making her the first African American woman to head an Ivy League institution. She was later appointed President of Prairie View A&M University, the second-oldest public institution of higher education in the state of Texas. Most recently she joined Rice University, in her home state of Texas, as a President's Distinguished Fellow, and is an advisor on HBCU engagement to Harvard University.

(1) "From Hopwood to Harvard: Anti-Affirmative Action in Higher Education Admissions Amidst Systemic Racism and Historical Racial Inequities in Health."

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Full Transcript

Excerpts:

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“I don't want us to privilege the decision as being objectively meritorious. I want people to understand it happens for a reason. Universities, in particular, will have to reorganize their activities to make sure that they are insulated from future assaults, as a consequence of shifts in political power. One of the worst things about higher education is that it has stratified the institutions. And so, there's a group of select institutions that seem to matter a good deal, and they get everything. And so, what choice a student has is they've got to choose between not being able to get into a so-called select institution and they've got to start at a community college. I want every student to know that if you go to a community college that's as good a bet as any. It was only through seeing professionals in my community, particularly teachers, that I came to believe that I could do something more than become a maid, which everybody that I knew growing up, every woman I knew was a maid, and I thought, well, maybe that's what I'm going to be too.”

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Interview

Dr. Huff: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Health Disparities podcast. I'm Dr. Tamara Huff, and I am a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and founder and CEO of Visio Orthopedics based in Columbus, Georgia. I am also a member of the Board of Directors for Movement Is Life Today. It is my great pleasure to welcome Dr. Ruth Simmons to the podcast as we convene at the National Medical Association Annual Assembly here in New Orleans. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Simmons.

Dr. Simmons: Thank you. I'm pleased to be with you.

Dr. Huff: I am so pleased to have you here. I want to share with our audience a little background information about you. Dr. Simmons is a distinguished presidential fellow at Rice University, an advisor to the president of Harvard University on engagement with historically black colleges and universities. In this role, Dr. Simmons will champion the recommendations of the presidential committee on Harvard and the legacy of slavery as well as foster meaningful and enduring partnerships with the nation's HBCUs. Dr. Simmons has an illustrious career centered on leadership in higher education. She has served as president of Smith College, president of Brown University and President most recently of Prairie View A&M University, a historically black college and university. She's a sought-after member for corporate and nonprofit boards across medicine, education, industry, and finance. She has served on boards for Pfizer, Goldman Sachs, Howard University, Princeton University, and Chrysler. Dr. Simmons earned her bachelor's degree in French from Dillard University here in New Orleans and her master's and doctorate degrees in romance languages and literature from Harvard University. Today, Dr. Simmons was our keynote speaker at the W Montague Cobb Symposium, which I had the distinct pleasure and honor to moderate where we discuss the recent Supreme Court decision on Affirmative Action. Let me start with congratulating you on a tremendous presentation and just an engaging panel and keynote. It was truly a wonderful talk. Would you kindly share with our listeners some of your points from your presentation, your key, you shared so much with us.

Dr. Simmons: Well, the first thing that I wanted to do was to say to the audience what I've been saying to others since the Supreme Court decision. Remember now this is a decision rendered in a political environment. And keep in mind that all of the measures that are taken to address social ills and discrimination are done in a political environment. And so, they will always be subject to the kinds of shifts that take place in the judgment of the majority in the country. And so, I don't want us to privilege the decision as being objectively meritorious. I want people to understand it happens for a reason. It happens because of where we are in this country at the time and where we are is with a growing non-white population that is stoking fears among some that whites are losing control of the country and naturally there are all kinds of efforts being made and will continue to be made to roll back a sense that others are gaining too much power that should belong to whites. So, I want people to understand the context more than anything else, especially the fact that it is a political context and so it matters how we behave politically in reaction to what is going on. That suggests the need for continued involvement, continued efforts to advance the cause of justice in the country. We have to be vigilant. We cannot sit back and say, oh, well this is happening. We have to be involved. And so, that's mostly what I wanted to contribute. As for the decision itself and what actions need to take place, I talked about the ways in which

universities in particular will have to reorganize their activities to make sure that they are insulated from future assaults as a consequence of shifts in political power. And in that vein, I suggested that we owe it to the country to explain fully what our aims are and to design an admission process that marries our aims with what we're doing in the admission process. And I'll stop there and then I could talk a bit more about that but fundamentally, we have to do what we say we are doing and be very cognizant that people will be watching to see whether or not they can undermine the things that we are trying to accomplish.

Dr. Huff: There're so many great points right there. One of the things that you spoke about earlier, and you just hit on it just now, is the importance of us owning this space. Us whether we're in higher education or as physicians, we know what's best for the students that we're bringing in the next generation who can better judge who is the right candidate for these institutions. We have to be actively involved in that. And I just really love that point in orthopedics also in other surgical fields, we are seeing a tremendous decline in the number of African American men going into these surgical fields. And similar to issues in higher education, it's the same concept. If we can't get our black men through undergraduate education and graduate medical education, of course we can't get them through to residency. So, you have had so much experience in different higher education spaces. What are some of the strategies that you've seen work in broadening and reaching out to those students who may not have had the opportunities, who may not even know that they want to go into a STEM field? What have you seen work in the various institutions that you've been in? And again, how can we broaden our admissions process to capture all those people in the wake of this ruling?

Dr. Simmons: Well, first of all, one of the reasons that I've been outspoken about contextualizing the Supreme Court decision is that I'm very fearful of the way that we're talking about it because there are young people listening in who may conclude that because of the direction that this is taking, they might as well not bother. So, the first message is all professionals have to be cognizant of the fact that they are being watched by the subsequent generations and that what we say in terms of future possibilities and what we show in terms of what we are doing will mean everything to whether or not these young people persist. And so, I told the story in the symposium about the fact that as a young person, I certainly would never have aspired to go to college, nor would I have aspired to be the first president, black president of an Ivy League university. That would've been preposterous in my eyes. It was only through seeing professionals in my community, particularly teachers, that I came to believe that I could do something more than become a maid, which everybody that I knew growing up, every woman I knew was a maid. And I thought, well, maybe that's what I'm going to be too. So, we are first and foremost examples.

Now, what that means is that we have to step outside of our normal zone of activity and go where these students are. We have to find our way in front of them, and we have to project to them what is possible because they will not be able to imagine it. We must imagine it for them. I can't tell you the number of times as a president that students have come up to me many years later and said, I want you to know that I did this because I saw you. So, people have to be aware that this is a very important thing that we do, serving as examples. In the admission process in particular, it is not unusual for people to reach out to students in K through 12 and to talk to them about what is going to happen. Now I have a great nephew who is seven years old. I sat down with him, and I talked to him, and I said, do you know I have set up a college fund for you? And I showed him when I'm making contributions to his college fund and I talk about what college is going to be like, and I've brought him to campus, to campus events. This is the kind of thing that we have to be aware of engaging young people into the reality of the long struggle through all of those years of school and then college, and then positioning them to understand what their lives can be in something like the medical profession.

Dr. Huff: I am smiling so hard just thinking about what you're saying. That is so true. In my family, I came from a family that were entrepreneurs, but not really many medical people at all. And I wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon since the age of 13 years old, just because of what you just said. I didn't know any doctors or anything. I didn't know anyone doing that. However, we had a family friend, so it found a family friend, messed up my knee and he allowed me to shadow him and to come to his office, my and how an African American girl, 13 years old, could get an opportunity to shadow physicians and to see what the inside of an OR may look like, it changed my life.

Dr. Simmons: Of course.

Dr. Huff: I had no idea that this field even existed, that you could even do this to take care of patients and to take care of, to use tools, while you take care of patients. It was life changing, and that was 13 years old. Now, interestingly though, one of the physicians that mentored me from way back when was an African American male. I didn't see an African American female for another 15, almost 20 years. Actually, on our panel, Dr. Bonnie Simpson Mason was the first African American female surgeon I'd ever seen or spoken to, orthopedic surgeon. So, mentorship matters. Examples matter.

Dr. Simmons: Yes.

Dr. Huff: It is just powerfully, very powerful. And I love how you brought it back, it's not enough to start in college. It's not enough to honestly start in high

school. You need to reach them way back in elementary school, I worked with Girls Inc. So, bringing it all the way back there so they can plant that seed.

Dr. Simmons: I think too, for all the parents that we know, I was once involved with an initiative called Healthy Start. So, one of the things that parents often don't realize is how much everything they do matters from the time a child is actually born. And so, the fact that a child born in the worst circumstances economically and otherwise could be cared for just as well as a child born in the most luxurious circumstances is an important thing for parents to know. It's what you do, it's what you expose your child to. It's what kind of encouragement you make to them all the time as they're growing up. It's the standards you set for them and so on. This is very important. So, our message has to be about more than the students we encounter. We have to be talking to our communities about what they can do.

Dr. Huff: I love that empowerment piece because it's easy for us as adults to almost feel lost. What can we do when you're faced with these overwhelming odds? It just can be almost too much, especially with us when we look at as a group of Movement Is Life, we think a lot about systemic disparities. So, whether they're caused by the social determinants of health, are they systemic racism? It all can feel just too big. And how can we do those small daily things to make incremental process? You change, you make large change with small baby steps. And I really love the fact that you brought that home. It's the little things you can do.

Dr. Simmons: It is day by day doing what you can do. And I'm old enough now to recognize that so many of the things that I did in my career that seemed to me just a small step are now I'm seeing the consequence of whole movements that have arisen as a consequence of a very simple thing that I did. So, when I was at Brown University, I started looking into the slavery history of the university, and people asked me today how wonderful that was and how brilliant it was. Oh no, it wasn't at all. At the time, I just wanted to do something very simple, and that is to tell the truth about the history. That's all I wanted to do. That's all I sought to do. And yet, as a consequence of that, hundreds of universities and nations and other institutions have now done the same thing. And it did not start out as anything but a very simple idea of something that would be good to do.

Dr. Huff: Just simple steps that can make such a tremendous impact. That's empowering. That means a lot moving forward that all of us can make those small steps.

Dr. Simmons: All of us.

147 MIL NMA 6 SIMMONS

Dr. Huff: Every day, we can make those small steps that when you look back have moved mountains.

Dr. Simmons: Right.

Dr. Huff: Many people are very concerned with the Supreme Court ruling, taking Affirmative Action out of admissions because some of the defense of it has been, oh, we do this because we're trying to get the most intelligent student in the person that's most worthy, the person that merits everything. And in your talk, you talked a lot about merit and what truly is merit and how do we judge merit? Who is the most meritorious person in light of systemic racism, in the light of the fact that you may not have been offered calculus in your high school. So how can you make an A in something that wasn't even offered? How do we handle that? Can you speak a bit about any possible silver linings to this? How do we talk about what is merit? And as we try to frame this new world that we're living in where Affirmative Action isn't considered in admissions, how do we define merit and move forward?

Dr. Simmons: Well, the first thing that we have to do is to realize that merit has been defined often in the past in a political context. And so, we cannot give so much credit to assertions of merit that are fundamentally rooted in something that's corrupt. That's very important. So, with our eyes wide open, we have to ask ourselves what it means to be worthy of something. Now, if you take that all the way back to the issue of one's humanity, we're all worthy. What we may have done in advance of applying to admission, that's important. But just because we don't get into one school, or another has nothing to do with our being worthy or meriting. Okay? It has nothing to do with that. It is just a sense that we have that culturally speaking, these are the people who merit, and these are the people who don't.

Let me give you this example. So, I retired from my position at Brown, president of Brown, and I moved back to my home state of Texas, and I then was persuaded that I could help out at Prairie View, and I became president of Prairie View. Well, this created the widespread hysteria in the country. How can you be president of an Ivy League University and then go to be president of an HBCU? You see what I mean? So, these distinctions are spurious and unworthy of educators who ought to know better. And so, I got a flurry of questions about, well, why did you do that? And what is it like being president of an HBCU after having been president of an Ivy League University? And I refuse to answer because if you pose that question, you're already making very subjective judgements about the worth of the students at Prairie View as opposed to those at an Ivy League institution. So, the statement I wanted to make was all those students are worthy. And so, I treasured my students at Brown. I treasured my students at Prairie View. They come from different backgrounds. They are doing

different things, but they are no less worthy. So, this whole issue of merit bothers me profoundly because I think it forces us to make some very bad judgments in our national life. And then I also believe that frankly, it is at the root of some of the divisiveness that we experience as a nation. And so, we say, oh, well, if you get into Harvard, then you must be smart, but if you get into a community college, you must be dumb. This is what we're doing to ourselves. And so, I tend to suggest that what we want to do is focus more on a variety of qualities when we're talking about admission and not simply validate the prevailing notions of what is merit, which is if you look at them a GPA? What is a GPA made of? Well, I mean, if you have the ability to go to school every day and you have educational materials at home, and if you have enrichment activities available to you, you may be able to soar in high school and get a high GPA. But what if you are going home every day hungry? What if there is not an ideal situation at home and so forth? That doesn't mean that you get to be on the trash heap for the rest of your life because you are unworthy, and you don't deserve to have an education. Quite the contrary. So, I want us to begin to talk about human worth in different terms and not these, I would say lazy ways of classifying people so that if you do one thing, you are in a prized category, and if you do another, you don't matter at all. I think that's a false dichotomy. And I think as educators, we are smarter than that, and we ought to be able to use our intelligence to really recognize what is valuable in human beings.

Dr. Huff: That is spot on human worth. We need to value humans equally.

Dr. Simmons: Yes.

Dr. Huff: And it's so much more than your socioeconomic status. We talk a lot about in Movement Is Life, we talk a lot about social determinants of health and how that helps determine where you're going, but that can also affect how you see your worth and how you see your ability to take care of yourself even better. So, seeing yourself as worthy of healthcare, seeing yourself as worthy of education, seeing your family and your children as worthy as something better is powerful. And you have such a unique perspective because you've been on both sides. So often when we talk about the idea of merit and worth, it is the dichotomy of the ivory tower on the hill, and then everyone else. Moving into your new role with Harvard University and working with those partnerships between HBCUs, what's your vision of how these two groups can work together to bring more diverse students and communities and populations together?

Dr. Simmons: Well, this is actually my passion. I have a book coming out next month that is my memoir, and it's really about my youth. And it opens with a moment where I'm standing on the stage at a Harvard commencement and the president is reading a citation about me and extolling everything

that I've done. Meanwhile, my mind is going to my younger self wandering around Harvard yard and feeling excluded and unworthy. And what I'm trying to put together in my book is an explanation to young people about how these kinds of environments that we enter can leave us with a feeling that we do not deserve to be where we are. And I'm trying to say at the same time, to the Harvard's of the world, be very careful because the person that you're extolling today as someone who has made a mark on higher education is the same person who was not worthy as a student at Harvard. So, I want to bring attention to the fact that the kind of easy distinctions that we make in the world and dealing with human beings can really be our downfall, because I want to make sure that Harvard is exposed to the wonderful work that's taking place in HBCUs, and I want HBCUs to recognize that Harvard is not all that, that there is value to what is taking place on the campuses, and that they should protect that and nurture that and improve that because they're entitled to. The statement I wanted to make to my students at Prairie View is, you deserve the same thing that a student at Harvard deserves. So, bringing together these groups is very important to me because I think higher education, one of the worst things about higher education is that it has stratified the institutions. And so, there's a group of select institutions that seem to matter a good deal, and they get everything. And there's a group of institutions that are not very good at all. And so, what choice a student has is they've got to choose between not being able to get into a so-called select institution, and they've got to start at a community college. I want every student to know that if you go to a community college that's as good a bet as any in terms of how far you can go in life, that's what I want, that's the message I want to send. And the way to send that that I'm advocating at Harvard is you've got to embrace, you've got to stop the language of dismissal of other institutions, and you've got to embrace the variety of institutions that we have that offer all these alternatives to our students where they can start anywhere and make their way to the top.

Dr. Huff: Again, spot on. And it actually hearkens back to one of our other panelists, Dr. Fredericks, who was speaking about Howard University. And many times, it's the endowment that necessarily gives these opportunities, not necessarily the difference between the different students at the schools, it's the opportunities they have because of the money available to that institution. So, he spoke a bit about how Harvard's endowment compares to Howard's endowment and how those differences really affect the opportunities that are given to the two different groups. Can you speak a moment about it, because we have listeners from all over the country, all over the world, from all different backgrounds and all different types of institutions, but many are alums of higher institutions. How can alumni give back? How can they be more involved in their institutions to foster this more inclusive community?

Dr. Simmons: Well, I would say that one of the most important things for alumni to understand is they did not pay for their education. They may have paid tuition, but no amount of tuition covers the real price of educating a student, and therefore they owe something to the institutions that they went to, and they owe it to those institutions to be involved. They owe it to those institutions to give and to give at the most generous level. They owe it to those institutions to be watchful for opportunities that they can bring to those institutions in all the ways that the alumni of the most prosperous institutions do. And so, if you're at a Brown, here's an example from Brown. When I was at Brown, I was very concerned about financial aid, and I decided that I would overhaul financial aid at Brown, and I decided that we would go need blind. Well, people were very alarmed about this decision because they said it was not affordable. But I had the conviction that we could accommodate this change by just making some tough decisions and committing to something that was a single most important thing. And that is any student who could come to Brown should not worry about whether or not they could afford it. Okay. Well, after doing that, an alumnus of Brown who had to drop out of Brown because they couldn't afford to continue, gave Brown about \$130 million. So, one of the things that happens when we make the right decision focused on, again, human value and the best things to do as opposed to what is glitzy and so forth, there are people waiting in the wings to help because that is a compelling thing to do to help other people. So often the endowments at smaller schools and at HBCUs in particular have really lagged significantly because think of what discrimination has done in the country generally in terms of the wealth gap. Well think of the wealth gap of families in this country and think of the gap between HBCUs and other institutions. And I like to remind people that wealth compounds, but so does poverty. So, over the lifetime of these institutions, that poverty that they suffered has continued to get worse in relative terms because they have never been given the level of support that they need in order to do the work that they do.

Dr. Huff: I've enjoyed so much the time we've had together, and if anything positive that can come from this ruling is it gives us the opportunity to recenter our focus, to recenter our focus for higher education on the worth and value of every individual, every student, every institution, and to really ask ourselves those hard questions of what we value as a society. What do we value as people? There are going to be productive members of the society. So, I thank you for bringing that to us today. Is there anything else you would like to share with our audience before we close?

Dr. Simmons: I don't think anything could be said that's better than what you just said. I thank you for that summation. That's what we should be doing, appreciating human lives and what they can bring to the world and doing everything we can to empower them.

147 MIL NMA 6 SIMMONS

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