The Simmons years

She revamped the curriculum, tirelessly promoted diversity, and set Smith on a bold course. In the process, Ruth Simmons also became one of the most recognizable and charismatic leaders in higher education. How Smith's ninth president will be remembered.

By John MacMillan
Photograph by Kathleen Dooher
Whether she wants to admit it or not, in the six years she has presided over Smith College, Ruth Simmons has become somewhat of a national celebrity. Just ask the cab driver who pulled up alongside her car one morning in mid-November as she made her way through the streets of Providence, Rhode Island, on her way to giving her first address as president-elect of Brown University.

"I could see out of the corner of my eye that he was trying to get my attention, and I thought it was a bit odd," Simmons says. "He was waving and I looked over and he held up the newspaper and pointed to my picture and, with his thumb in the air, he said, "Yessss!"

This kind of recognition has become commonplace for Simmons, whose appointment as president of Smith in 1995—the first African American woman to lead a Seven Sisters college—caused a stir in the world of higher education and launched Simmons on a career trajectory that has placed her on the national stage. In November, she made history again by being named the first female president of Brown and the first African American to head an Ivy League institution.

To say that her rise through the ranks of the academy—from assistant professor at the University of New Orleans to provost at Spelman College to president of Brown—has been phenomenal wouldn’t be much of an overstatement. But it’s Smith College that holds a special place in Simmons’ heart, and she readily acknowledges that it was her experience at Smith that has allowed her to take on the challenges of leading an Ivy League university. "I’ve grown immensely since coming here," Simmons says, "and that’s due in part to the wonderful people I’ve come in contact with—faculty, students, staff. Every day I came to work I was inspired. Every day on campus I learned something new about life, about the human spirit."

Through it all she also managed to elevate the position of college president to almost iconic proportions. On campus, students greet her with the kind of enthusiasm usually saved for rock stars. They chant her name at public events and often leave messages written in brightly colored chalk outside the president’s house. Nationally, The New York Times has called her a “visionary leader.” She has been featured in People magazine, profiled on CBS News, and recently was named by USA Today as one of a handful of people to watch in 2001. No other current college president can match her charisma or her influence.

“Within a year after her arrival [at Smith] she became a national celebrity,” said Peter Rose, Sophia Smith Professor of Sociology and Anthropology. “Once the whole country recognized her as a premier educator and an
academic leader, she became fair game for any institution conducting a presidential search.

Given the amount of attention her personal and professional accomplishments have attracted, it wasn't much of a shock to many faculty members when they received official word that the 54 members of the Brown Corporation had tapped her for their top job. Many had expected that she would make the short lists of presidential search committees at Harvard, Princeton, and Brown based solely on what she's achieved at Smith. Even before setting foot on campus, she had elevated the national discussion about Smith, its mission, and its position as a leading institution for the education of women. And during her tenure the college became a symbol for innovative curriculum-based programming. Her record of accomplishments speaks for itself: She doubled the college's endowment, established the first engineering program at a women's college, instituted a paid internship program for all undergraduates, promoted diversity, and emphasized the teaching of writing and public speaking.

"Thanks to Ruth Simmons, everyone's ideas about higher education, everyone's ideas about what you can achieve, have changed greatly," says Brenda Allen, assistant to the president and director of institutional diversity. "Her presence at Smith has changed the agenda for most people. On campus, everyone thinks in a way they didn't think before—in terms of possibilities. She took away our limitations and brought us back to Oz."

Now comes the hard part. The question isn't merely who will succeed Simmons but how that person will ever live up to the expectations that will naturally follow her highly successful term as president.

"There's no question, Ruth is going to be a tough act to follow," says Professor Rose, who served on the search committee that brought Simmons to campus. "She's one in a million, and if there is one thing we shouldn't be looking for it is a clone, because we're not going to find one. What is important to understand is how far we've come in the past five years and how vital it is to keep that momentum going. The last thing we need now is a caretaker."

A month after announcing her resignation, Simmons is sitting at the head of a large, oval-shaped cherry wood table in her elegantly appointed office on the second floor of College Hall. It's three days before Christmas and the campus is winding down for a week-long holiday break (one of the more popular staff benefits Simmons initiated during her tenure). She is looking forward to spending a few restful days with her son, Khari, daughter Maya, and other relatives ("If you think cooking is relaxing," she says), but will be back to work the day after Christmas when she flies to her hometown in Houston, Texas, to meet with Morley Safer from "60 Minutes." The show, which is working on a profile of her for broadcast later this year, wants some location shots of her visiting her old neighborhood and school yard.

For the moment, though, Simmons' thoughts are focused not on where she's been but on where she's going. Her decision to leave us something new about life, about the human spirit."
John Connolly was looking forward to taking his first year-long sabbatical in nearly a decade when word came that President Ruth Simmons would be leaving Smith in June to assume the presidency of Brown University. As provost, Connolly is second in command on campus and next in line to fill in for Simmons until a new president is appointed.

"Needless to say, my sabbatical has been put on hold for a while," he says. The role of an interim president varies from institution to institution, but for the most part, says Connolly, it is to carry forward plans that have already been put into motion. "I'm basically here to keep the ship on course," he says.

Connolly is certainly qualified for the job. He joined the Smith faculty as an assistant professor in the philosophy department in 1971. He was named dean of the faculty in 1994, and became the college's first provost in 1998. He has degrees from Fordham and Oxford universities, as well as a Ph.D. from Harvard. In the next few months, he'll be working closely with Simmons and members of the board of trustees to determine which programs and initiatives will need his attention.

But don't expect to see his name on the short list of presidential candidates. "I've told the faculty I'm not interested," he says. "I'm very pleased to be going back to the classroom."

Smith for Brown, which has a student body of about 7,000 compared to Smith's 2,500, wasn't easy. In fact, she calls it one of the most "agonizing" and "tortuous" choices she's had to make in her professional life. "When I was first approached [in May], I couldn't get my mind around leaving Smith," she says. "I was extremely happy here. I believe in the college's mission with great passion, and I considered Smith the perfect place for me."

So much so that after two conversations with Brown officials she decided that she wasn't interested in talking to them again. "I wanted to get back to work at Smith," she says.

That was in early August. Just as the fall semester was getting under way, though, Brown called again. This time to tell Simmons that she was on their short list of candidates. "At that point, I had to seriously consider withdrawing my name, and I came very close to doing so," she says. "When the school year began, which is really the most wonderful time to be on campus, I was so wracked with doubt about being able emotionally to handle such change that I didn't think I could ever leave."

Still, Brown persisted, and so began a final round of conversations involving Simmons, members of the presidential search committee, and Brown's chancellor, Stephen Robert. At the same time, trustees at Smith began their own round of talks with Simmons, trying to persuade her that this was not the best time to leave Smith and that remaining would serve everyone's best interest.

What ultimately convinced Simmons to accept Brown's offer was a realization that being the president of a large, highly respected university would give her a much broader profile to discuss issues of importance to her on a more national level. Those issues run the gamut, from diversity to access to higher education to public policy. "There are certain things that you get to do as a university president and certain things you get to do as a college president, by virtue of size and scope. It is a different track," Simmons says. "Colleges don't often have a chance to influence certain kinds of things in the national debate about education, whereas at the university level those conversations tend to be more credible."

So on October 30, after meeting with Robert, Simmons agreed to accept the presidency should she be offered it.

The news of her departure caught many Smith students off-guard. Some were brought to tears as they recounted stories of meeting and talking with Simmons on campus, or remembering the first time they heard her speak at Opening Convocation. "Her leaving is unfortunate, to say the least," said Mary Anne Van Tyne '02. "Ruth became a solid and steady icon for Smith students. For many of us, she became the keystone of Smith, and removing her has caused the foundation to crumble."

Not quite, say her supporters. Though Simmons' departure will undoubtedly be felt in all areas of campus life, it's unlikely that the many initiatives she spearheaded will erode anytime soon. "There has been enough change in attitude across all areas of campus that it would be hard for people to go back," says Brenda Allen. "She has taught all of us to think out of the box about what's important for Smith. She united the community here and energized faculty, students, and staff. I think everyone wants to keep that momentum going."

Simmons has presided over Smith at one of the most prosperous times in the college's history. When she assumed office in 1995, there were few, if any, pressing problems looming on the horizon. The college was financially sound after undertaking a series of cut-
process, which the college undergoes every 10 years, into a full-scale review of Smith's mission and priorities for the next two decades. Known on campus as the Smith 20/20 plan, or the "self-study," the document may go down as Simmons' greatest accomplishment. It outlines six "themes of distinction," including faculty excellence, internationalism, and science and technology, that in the past three years have led to some of the boldest reforms the college has ever seen.

"The 20/20 plan is a great example of Ruth as a strategic thinker," says Provost John Connolly [see "Temporary president," page 18]. "In those early days, she got us all thinking through the self-study about how we can do our jobs better, how we can serve the college's mission better. As a result we now have a set of goals, a set of core values, that will guide us for many years to come."

Simmons' tenure may have been shorter than her predecessors' (though Simmons' term is actually on a par with the national average of six years for college presidents), but it's difficult to match her achievements.

"Back to the core"
At her inauguration ceremony in the fall of 1995, Simmons was greeted with cheers of "vivat academia." Looking back, Professor Rose believes the phrase was the perfect theme with which to welcome Simmons to Smith—and it's been one she has continued to exemplify during her tenure. "She has brought us back to the core of what we're all about: teaching and learning," he says.

In that respect, Simmons revamped the curriculum by putting an emphasis on programs and initiatives that added value to the undergraduate experience. Most notably, Simmons made the teaching of science a priority, and last year Smith became the first women's college to establish an engineering program. "It took Ruth Simmons to see that it wasn't out of the question to think of having our own engineering program, to take that on when no one had dared to dream of such a thing at a women's college," says Connolly. "It's her willingness to think in different categories, this big thinking, that has done so much for us."

Simmons also approved the Poetry Center, which brings some of the world's leading poets to campus. She encouraged the development of the Kahn Institute, which brings faculty, students, and visiting scholars together to work on projects of broad scope and then present their findings to the community. So far, the institute has presented two yearlong symposia, "Exploring the Ecologies of Childhood" and "The Star Messenger: Galileo at the Millennium." Simmons also melded the world of practical experience with the broad scope of a liberal arts education by developing the Praxis program, which guarantees a paid internship to any student who wants one.

Still, not all of Simmons' initiatives have been met with such overwhelming enthusiasm. For example, she ruffled some feathers when she suggested that all students participate in courses aimed at improving their writing and oral presentation skills to rid them of what she called "mallspeak," or the use of "like" and "um" in conversation.

In the end, Simmons' goal was to refocus the campus' attention on the academic quality of the programs being offered. "If there's one thing I tried to do it was to ensure that academic policies came first," she says. "I've always believed that it is our duty to educate students about what is most important now and to prepare them for the unknowable changes that they are sure to encounter over a lifetime. The best way to do that is through a broad and rigorous liberal arts education."

"An atmosphere of understanding"
Early on in her tenure as president, Simmons called a meeting of college staff and asked a simple question: Are you happy here? It's rare for a college president to want to know how the staff is feeling, but Simmons made a habit of taking the campus' temperature. "When I came to Smith, there was a good deal of unhappiness among employees, but I think we've changed that," she says. "Now it's a great joy to walk across campus and see the cheerfulness and involvement of a staff member who, in the past, may have felt alienated."

Part of that change may be credited to the fact that Simmons has made Smith a more inviting and accepting place, say her colleagues. She has done that by encouraging civility and inviting difference. "Ruth has created an atmosphere of understanding," says Rose. "The environment on campus is much less polarized in racial and ethnic terms."

Specifically, Simmons established the Office of Institutional Diversity, which is led by Brenda Allen and is charged with overseeing the college's efforts to diversify. As a result, the idea of diversity in all forms (not only racially or ethnically) has been ingrained in the fabric of the college. "We've been elevated to believe that as we institute all these wonderful new programs and we become a more elite college, we can also become a more diverse place—and that we should do that; it's a matter of social justice," says Allen. "For me, that's tremendous growth."

Since Simmons' appointment, applications from minority students have increased, thanks in part to her efforts to reach out to in-
A tremendous leader

When word got out that Ruth Simmons had accepted the presidency of Brown University, her office was flooded with letters from alumnae offering their congratulations and thanks for six years of inspired leadership. Following are excerpts from selected letters.

Dear Ruth,

Like every other alumna, I'm in mourning for Smith. Your tenure there has been so productive and your insights...well, insightful. You appear to have single-handedly brought the college to the cutting edge, to a point where we burst again with pride in our alma mater. Thank you for that and the best of luck in your new challenge. Brown is very lucky.

Phyllis Draper '53

Congratulations, Ruth. I am thrilled for you to move (back) to the Ivy League as president of Brown. You were a tremendous leader for Smith: visionary and inspiring. Now show the guys how to do it right! Smith will miss you, but you leave it in excellent health; we'll survive.

And, Ruth, I have just one request. Please use your presidency for a national bully pulpit. We need public intellectuals and visionary thinkers to speak out. Your voice is one we want and need to hear.

Kathryn Rodgers '70

I congratulate you on your ground breaking appointment as president of Brown. You have most certainly earned the honor. You bring pride to Smith and, indeed, all women. But there is no way to state how important you are as a role model for black women. Will all the barriers ever be gone, so that no one else has to bear the weight of being "the first"? Probably not, but each time one is broken, the hopes and dreams of others can joyfully expand. Please know that many appreciate and are grateful for what you shoulder, making the path smoother and easier for the rest of us.

Judith Turnock '67

Since I learned of your new appointment as president of Brown, I have worked my way through the traditional stages of grief to a sense of gratitude that you and Smith will have had six wonderful years together. I may begrudge Brown the credit it is receiving for "finding" you, but I will always be glad Smith had the courage of its convictions earlier on to make you our leader, allowing your great potential to flourish.

There is no question that the college has become a stronger institution with a much-enhanced sense of pride in itself since you arrived. Economic forces have been kind, but you have the sort of positive vision that seized opportunity and awakens others to possibility. The community responded enthusiastically. On my visits back I have been very pleased with the overall sense of a college, not self-satisfied, but pleased and excited about its future.

Phoebe Reese Lewis '51

Congratulations and continued success! You are a remarkable woman and many of us have been blessed to have known you. I want to thank you for all your support and effort that you have given to create the special experience called Smith. You will truly be missed.

This is a big loss for Smith, but talent like yours has to be free to go where hope is needed.

Mariah Richardson, M.F.A. '00

Smith has been blessed to have had you as our president. You have the ideas, the strength, and the powers of expression to do this very demanding work well.

Women are still under the shadow of dependency in this fortunate land, even though we are much more free here than in other countries and cultures. I am one of the lucky ones, and yet I see the advantage gained from my Smith experience. All of us have a job to do for women. You are our representative, the example that shines at the head of the parade.

Catherine Sellers Angle '46

n-teen leaders.

More personally, Simmons' very appointment as president of Smith (and now president of Brown) has sent a message to minority students, faculty, and staff to recognize their own potential and to be proud of their heritage. "What's so important for people of color is that Ruth achieved this with very little compromising of self," says Allen. "It is of huge significance to those who have been told their whole lives that you really have to compromise who you are as a person of color in order to be successful. But Ruth said, 'Well, wait a minute, no, you don't.'"

$900 million and counting

After embarking on the self-study, Simmons knew that the next step would have to be fundraising for the many programs and building projects that came out of the plan. It wasn't a task that she was looking forward to. An academic through and through, Simmons would have preferred to remain on campus to guide the implementation of each new idea rather than hit the road to drum up financial support.

"It's hard to get excited about money, because it's just legal tender," she says. "The ideas are what really matter."

Despite her misgivings, Simmons proved to be an exceptional fundraiser and money manager. In her six-year tenure, the college's endowment doubled to more than $900 million. In 1997, Smith began the quiet phase of a comprehensive campaign to raise $250 million by 2003. To date, alumnae have contributed more than $225 million.

To make that happen, Simmons built fundraising goals around specific initiatives (the engineering program, the new fine arts complex, the campus center, the Praxis internship program, for example). It proved to be a highly effective strategy. "I tried to make it clear that we were not asking for money," she says. "Rather, we were asking people to accompany us on a journey to advance the

"The environment"
Aims of the college, to make Smith a better place.”

Karin George '84, vice president for advancement, says Simmons' strengths as a fundraiser lie, quite simply, in her instincts, her vision, and her "unflagging" commitment to the college. "Her voice is passionate and optimistic when it comes to Smith," says George. "She is unwilling to let the skeptics have the day in the face of an idea that might seem risky or too edgy. She is always mindful of the great traditions at Smith, but she pushes everyone to think beyond what was or is and well into what will be."

Listening to alumnae

When Simmons arrived at Smith, the Alumnae Association, which was founded in 1881 and officially incorporated in 1931, was just beginning a new partnership with the college in which a portion of the association’s annual budget would be funded by Smith. Previously, the association had functioned as a financially independent organization. On the heels of the change, many alumnae feared that their voices would be lost. But Simmons understood the importance of engaging graduates in the life of the college and worked hard to bring alumnae closer to Smith. She invited alumnae to participate in the Smith 20/20 plan. Her appearances in cities from New York to London drew sellout crowds, and she rallied alumnae to spread the good word about Smith.

"Every college president speaks of her school in glowing terms," says George, "but Ruth takes it a step further and challenges all alumnae to do the same. Simply, she encourages us to remain unflinching in our care for Smith."

In her roles as alumnae trustee and president of the Alumnae Association, Christian Schley '70 has worked with Simmons on a variety of levels but has never been more impressed with her than when she interacts with alumnae. "When she is with alumnae, she shines brighter than in any other of her many roles," Schley says. "She listens to alumnae, she speaks directly to them, and she only asks that they recognize and promote what we all share: Smith's excellence."

With little more than three months left in her Smith tenure, Simmons can't help but get a bit nostalgic. From her office, she has a perfect view of downtown Northampton, City Hall, the Academy of Music, and the Mount Holyoke range looming in the distance. For the past six years, she's called this place home and when she heads to Brown in the summer she'll miss the coziness of Smith's campus and of small-town life. "By leaving Smith, I'm giving up that intimacy, which has been very important to my life here," she says.

Regrets? Believe it or not, she has a few. When she first arrived on campus, she spent nearly two years learning the ins and outs of life at Smith before she began leaving her own imprint. "I wish I had that time back because I think I could have stirred some things sooner," she says, "and I think I could have done things better if I had started sooner."

In particular, she points to the Target of Opportunity program, which she implemented last year. "Had I started this kind of program in my first year I think the composition of the faculty would have been significantly different from what it is as I leave here," she says. "I regret that. I regret not being bolder than I was."

She also wishes that she had had more time to spend in the house, with students. "The exuberance and independence of Smith students has been something I’ve cherished," she says. "They are amazing in the way they approach life. I always feel inspired by them, because I know they’re going to make a difference in society."

In turn, they have found inspiration in her story. Simmons was born the youngest of 12 children and grew up in Houston’s Fifth Ward, one of the poorest sections of the city. Her father, Isaac Stubblefield, was a tenant farmer and factory worker, while her mother, Fannie, did domestic work. Often, there was barely enough money for food, let alone a college education. But years later, after a $1,000 scholarship took her to Dillard University in New Orleans, Simmons recalled her parents’ hard work and determination to provide for their family. "There were many times when I personally had to struggle," she says, "but I didn’t give up. By struggling I came to understand what I could do."

That idea of recognizing your potential is one she will continue to impart to students wherever she goes. "I want them to understand their value, their place in this world," she says, "and that if I can get this far, imagine what they can accomplish." •

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