

SMITH

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Can Education Lift

In Camden, New Jersey, university chancellor Phoebe Haddon '72 brings town and gown together—for the benefit of both

a City?

For Phoebe Haddon '72, higher education is a family tradition going back generations. As a university chancellor, she wants students of all means—but especially those from low-income, underserved communities—to see college on their horizon.

Her Mission:

By April Simpson '06
Photographs by Beth Perkins



Access to Education



At an early age, Phoebe Haddon '72 learned a valuable lesson from her family: Going to college can change the trajectory of your life. Both of her parents, as well as her aunts and uncles, her grandparents and even her great-grandfather, went to college, and all became leaders in their professions and communities. Still, even with these role models providing inspiration, Haddon knew that education should not be taken for granted. "If people don't get a chance to go to college and make a better life for their family, they're not going to succeed like other people who are more privileged," Haddon says. "I was privileged because my parents could afford to send me to the college I wanted to go to. And as long as I was not married, to graduate school."

Like many in her accomplished family, Haddon pursued a career as both a lawyer and an educator. She clerked in the U.S. Court of Appeals 3rd Circuit and became the first African American dean of the University of Maryland School of Law. Now, as chancellor of Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey—a public university with an enrollment of nearly 7,000—Haddon is dedicated to making sure students from all backgrounds have a shot at attending college. "I'm a very access-focused person," Haddon says.

Since becoming chancellor in 2014, Haddon has developed a signature program: Bridging the Gap, which greatly reduces tuition costs for low-income families. As a result, her campus has experienced a 50 percent increase in first-generation college students. Other accomplishments include increasing Latino and African American enrollment and expanding the university's graduate offerings to include master's degrees in business administration and taxation, master's and doctoral degrees in nursing, master's programs in forensic science and more. A proposal for a doctorate in social justice is on the table.

From people familiar with her accomplishments, Haddon sometimes hears "a little tinge of, 'Well, you're different from other black people,'" she says. "As if this is not something that people can do." So she sets the record straight: "I know lots of people who would be stellar presidents or provosts or leaders in higher education or leaders in politics or judges who just didn't get the chance."

At Rally Day in February, Haddon added Smith College medalist to her many honors. Here are a few more things to know about Phoebe Haddon.

Haddon's mother, Ida Bassette Haddon, was one of NASA's women "computers" in Langley, Virginia. Alongside other gifted black mathematicians, Bassette supported space travel while working in the segregated conditions depicted by the 2016 Academy Award-nominated film *Hidden Figures*. Haddon's father, Wallace James Haddon, studied dentistry at Howard University in Washing-



ton, D.C., where Haddon was born. He went on to become one of the first black dentists in New Jersey.

Haddon's aunt Rachel Noel was the first African American elected to the Denver Board of Education. In 1968, she proposed what became known as the "Noel Resolution" to integrate Denver schools and provide equal opportunities to all students, Haddon says. It was a precursor to the landmark Keyes case, which challenged racial segregation in Denver schools at the Supreme Court.

At Smith, Haddon was a founding member of the Black Students' Alliance (BSA) in 1969. There were only 21 black students admitted into Haddon's class of 1972; two years later, the number of admitted black students more than tripled, Haddon says. She credits the BSA for pushing "the administration to commit to a greater number of scholarships and other supports and recruitment of very able black women who hadn't been recruited before."

Being at Smith in the early 1970s wasn't easy. She recalls a meeting with then-President Thomas Mendenhall in which black students were advocating for changes to make Smith more welcoming for students of color. "We had a list of things that we wanted to talk with him about. We were sitting there, and he greeted us by saying, 'You Afros.' ... It was so outrageous that it was funny." The interaction underscores why Haddon cares so deeply now about inclusion. "We live such segregated lives racially in this country that people don't know each other. And so they say the most ridiculous things, because they just don't know. In these days and times, you can't have that kind of ignorance."

After Smith, Haddon attended Duquesne Law School because she received a full scholarship and it was the first nationally recognized law school with a black dean. While there, she ran up against new obstacles. A male classmate “who obviously didn’t like the idea that women were in class—and as they said, “Taking seats from other people”—confronted her after she won a law competition. “So this one person said to me, ‘What are you going to do with your diploma? Diaper your babies with it?’” Haddon’s response? “It’s not printable,” she says.

Haddon was editor of the Duquesne Law Review in 1977. She earned her J.D. degree and went on to receive her master of laws degree from Yale in 1985 even though, she says, “I had absolutely no interest in practicing.” Haddon’s plan always was to be a professor and to work with adults. Regardless, she knew she needed at least some experience practicing law. She practiced at Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering in Washington, D.C., and clerked for U.S. Appeals Court Judge Joseph F. Weis Jr., whom she describes as conservative, fair, honest and highly respected. In 1981, she began teaching constitutional law, torts and more at Temple University’s Beasley School of Law.

Haddon proudly sits on the board of HERS, or Higher Education Resource Services, a leadership development organization for women in higher education. “That was the first time I said I wanted to be a college president,” she says.

She got her first shot when she made the short list of candidates for the presidency of Bryn Mawr in the late 1980s. “There were a lot of trustees and alums who were not ready for women to be presidents,” Haddon recalls. Even now, women represent less than a third of college presidents. “Smith and Bryn Mawr were some of the places where women broke through to the presidency.”

She finally got her chance to lead a college when she was appointed chancellor of Rutgers University-Camden. Civic engagement and using the university’s resources to address community needs are cornerstones of her chancellorship. The Rutgers Future Scholars program, for example, identifies rising eighth graders across New Jersey and supports them all the way through their college search. “In many cases, they come to one of the three main Rutgers-Camden campuses,” Haddon says. Rutgers-Camden also recruits and supports local students by providing full or significant tuition to eligible families. She wants to be known as a leader who helped develop the city of Camden and grew

Leading a university that is engaged in its community is a priority for Haddon, the chancellor of Rutgers University-Camden in New Jersey.

diversity at Rutgers-Camden. “So we are an anchor, but we also are civically engaged,” Haddon says. “We do a lot of the work that needs to be done, because of the poverty and because of the poor quality of the schools.”

The good work she has done at Rutgers—and throughout her career—hasn’t gone unnoticed. In January, Haddon received the Ruth Bader Ginsburg Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of American Law Schools (AALS); the award honors contributions to the legal academy and their impact on women. “A woman [at the AALS meeting] literally stopped me in the hall at one of the sessions and said that I had been her law professor, and she was now a law professor,” Haddon says. “I started tearing up because she said that I was the first person who really convinced her that she could do this. She’s a constitutional law professor now.”

The family tradition of combining law and education continues. Haddon’s great-grandfather studied law and was an educator who founded the Bassette School in Virginia, where he taught freed slaves. Her grandfather and uncle practiced law. Her grandmother and mother were both teachers. Haddon’s daughter, Cara McClellan, started out as a middle school teacher but now practices law at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Haddon has spent summers on Martha’s Vineyard all her life, and she continues to spend a few weeks there every summer. Her favorite place is Gay Head at sunset.

She keeps fit by working with an athletic trainer up to three times a week. She also loves to swim and take long walks with her husband, Frank McClellan, professor emeritus of law at Temple University’s Beasley School of Law. “We solve all the problems while we’re walking,” Haddon jokes.

Yoga keeps her balanced—literally. Tree pose is a favorite—most of the time. “Some days I’m not in the right state of mind, and I can’t do it, and that is frustrating,” she says. “I don’t ever want to lose my balance. That comes with getting older; for many women it means losing their sense of balance.”

Haddon is optimistic but practical. “I’ve had sufficient disappointments myself about pathways to career or other things, and I know it’s not always sunny,” she says. “What I do know is that in those challenging times, I’ve been able to pick myself up, dust myself off and keep going.”

April Simpson '06 is a writer in Washington, D.C.