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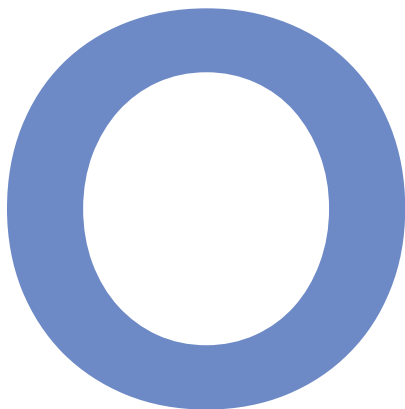
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THE CRISIS LEADER

Dr. Lynn Perry Wooten, the first Black president of 120-year-old Simmons University, is uniquely prepared to lead the women's college through these turbulent times.

BY JACKIE KRENTZMAN





n February 6, 2020, Dr. Lynn Perry Wooten accepted the position as the first Black president of Simmons University, a women's school in Boston that specializes in combining a liberal arts education with a hands-on, professional experience. Wooten, who was leaving her post as the David J. Nolan Dean and Professor of Management and Organizations at Cornell University's Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, excitedly began meeting with university leaders, faculty, staff, alumni, and students; recruiting prospective students; planning the curriculum; and working on new initiatives she was eager to launch.

A little over a month later, those plans fell apart. Like the rest of us, Wooten found her work and personal life thrown into turmoil by the coronavirus pandemic. Instead of her biggest worry being how to fill an auditorium to hear one of the dynamic guest speakers she envisioned bringing on campus, she wondered if there would even be a school year in the fall.

Fortunately for Simmons, it had hired the perfect leader for the moment. Dr. Wooten—a scholar, teacher, and dean—had dedicated much of her career to researching and writing about crisis leadership. In 2010, she cowrote, with Erika H. James, current dean of the Wharton Business School, the book *Leading Under Pressure: From Surviving to Thriving Before, During, and After a Crisis*. Also among her scholarship are dozens of articles and book chapters she edited, authored, or coauthored, including a recent chapter titled “The Glass Cliff: African American CEOs as Crisis Leaders.”

When COVID-19 began upending every organization's plans, Wooten quickly convened her leadership team, and when she took the reins on July 1, the school decided that the fall 2020 semester would be virtual. Wooten, who has spent her life on a college campus, was disappointed she could not welcome the incoming contingent of new students but knew this was the correct decision.

“My career and one-third of my research have been about crisis leadership,” said Wooten in a Zoom interview. “COVID has elevated two things we are strategically thinking about at Simmons—prioritizing the health and well-being of the Simmons community and, as a by-product, what it means to run a university in a virtual world until we have a public health policy or a vaccine where people can be back on campus.”

COVID-19 was not the only crisis Wooten had to contend with. When the video of George Floyd's murder at the hands of

become better as an organization,” she says. “A crisis brings out the skeletons and scars, so you got to think about how we can come out better. Here, we are looking at our social reckoning and ways to use it to innovate.”

One by-product of the racial reckoning was the revamping of Simmons Community Read, a campus-wide read of a book that enables students, faculty, staff, and alumni to connect intellectually and provides a dedicated forum for critical discussion and the thoughtful exchange of ideas. This year's Community Read is Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha's *What the Eyes Don't See*, which examines the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, from a multitude of cross-departmental perspectives. The book meticulously lays out how the crisis was the result of decades of systemic racism, governmental indifference toward communities of color, and a breakdown of the public health system. The

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— Susan Brady, CEO, Simmon's Institute for Inclusive Leadership

a Minneapolis policeman went viral on May 26, not only people of color but also white allies were outraged. As a result, the Black Lives Matter movement gained significant credibility and clout, and every institution—including universities—voluntarily examined its decades, in some cases centuries, of systemic racism, and quickly adopted antiracist policies. In the case of schools, this involved reworking the curriculum.

Wooten and Simmons were ready. As Wooten well knew from her work, if managed appropriately, a crisis can also be an opportunity.

“One of our premises in our book was how to use a crisis as an opportunity to

Community Read will demonstrate how these forces are closely intertwined with the current COVID-19 public health crisis and fight for racial justice.

Wooten wants to use the current crises to advance her deep-seated goals and at the same time position Simmons as a thought and action leader in the charge for fuller racial equity.

As Wooten told the Simmons community in her official welcome message, “One of my hopes is to increase the number of our students working in local communities on social justice projects and with nonprofit organizations that have the mission of alleviating racism and disparities in poverty.



Through learning, doing, and knowing, higher education can be a major contributor to alleviating systemic racism.”

Simmons University was founded in 1899, funded by a bequest from John Simmons, a Boston clothing manufacturer. Simmons fervently believed that women should be able to live independently, so from the start, the school offered a liberal arts undergraduate education that students could integrate with their professional work experiences. The initial mandate was to offer classes that had a direct professional pipeline, such as nursing, teaching, designing, and telegraphy, and courses in arts, science, and industry.

More than a hundred years later, the mission is remarkably consistent with John Simmons’s vision. The combination of education for leadership in professional fields undergirded by a solid intellectual

foundation prepares graduates to find well-paying, self-supporting jobs and also to gain the skills to lead in their professional lives and community. Simmons has a strong history of attracting future women leaders, including TV journalists Gwen Ifill and Rehema Ellis and Ann Fudge, the former chair of Young & Rubicam who has served on many corporate boards.

Wooten was willing to leave the security of Cornell for Simmons because the school’s mission so closely dovetailed with her work, her philosophy about education, and her assessment of the evolving role of universities.

Other reasons Wooten is excited to lead Simmons—one of the few remaining all-women colleges in the United States—are its women-centered education and its focus on leadership development. “I had known about Simmons for a long time before I took the position,” she says. “It was that bridge between academic and

professional development that spoke to me.”

A particular lure was the school’s Institute for Inclusive Leadership, led by CEO Susan MacKenty Brady. The institute, founded in 2019, develops leaders at all stages of life so they can foster gender parity and cultures of inclusion. The institute hosts global conferences and educational programs for corporate partners and conducts research, all with the goal of empowering inclusive professionals who will advance women’s leadership.

Over the past several months, Brady and a group of strategic advisors have paired the institute’s work with Wooten’s belief that everyone can, and should be, leaders.

Wooten is honing the university’s longstanding commitment to social justice by creating action-based “leadership labs” for all Simmons students. Given that Simmons students often apply their social justice framing of leadership to service learning in diverse communities, Wooten believes it is critical that the program’s focus now builds in leading with a racial equity lens. Inspiring leadership is Wooten’s and the school’s guiding light. The new Simmons Institute for Inclusive Leadership aims to help shine that light brightly.

“Having Lynn here changes the game for Simmons on all things leadership,” says Brady. “Her academic expertise and lived journey about the intersection of race, gender, and leadership will amplify the work of the institute in globally impactful and tremendously exciting ways.”

This means the university must embrace challenging discussions, with a willingness to confront what was once considered an uncomfortable, if not a taboo topic—all aspects of race, from institutional racism to white privilege and white supremacy.

“We have to want to erase race as a four-letter word—meaning we have to understand race,” says Wooten. “We have to understand that people are racial beings, and when they come to a university campus to work, study, and engage, the university’s role is to create a welcoming environment.

In fact, the university should be responsible for understanding the history of various races and how it impacts the university experience, in whatever community a university lives and operates in. It needs to understand the demographics and race of the students.”

One way to improve the curriculum and university experience for all students, in particular students of color, she says, is by emphasizing that every single student on campus is a leader. Wooten believes that leadership can come from every corner of an organization, not just the top of an org chart, and that the front burner issues today have reinforced that view.

“Leadership can come in different forms,” Wooten says. “Especially now, just think about our everyday leadership—we’ve seen in the last months how essential workers have been driving our world. I like to call it ‘unleashing leadership’—intentional leadership development that gives everyone the opportunity to lead. If everyone is trained and invested as a leader, it makes both that person and the organization stronger.”

Wooten’s own leadership chops were unleashed at an early age. She grew up in a middle-class family in Philadelphia. Her father was a social worker, primarily for the state’s psychiatric mental health hospitals. Her mother was an elementary school teacher. Wooten attended a private girl’s high school, then earned her BS in accounting from North Carolina A&T State University (where she was valedictorian). Her parents made sure she had a historical and moral grounding. They often talked to her about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jim Crow laws and other issues that would impact her life. “They gave me a history of racism before I could make sense of race as a social construct,” she says.

Wooten earned an MBA from Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, then a PhD in corporate strategy from the University of Michigan.

“There has been a series of moments in my life in which I learned how to lead,” she says. “It began with the influence of my parents, then as a youth church leader. The

Girl Scouts gave me a passion for women’s leadership. In college, I began developing more formal leadership skills in my sorority. Then the opportunities increased during my academic journey. My first official leadership position was as the principal investigator on an NIH grant on health disparities.”

For 19 years, Wooten was a clinical professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. She served as codirector of the business school’s Center for Posi-

further diversify campus by increasing the enrollment of students of color.

Wooten has made remarkable progress thus far. In the fall of 2019, Simmons’s student body comprised approximately 20 percent women of color, of which 1.4 percent were Black. One year later, those figures, while still not finalized, have leapt to 55 percent women of color, including 10 percent Black.

The most likely explanation for this dramatic increase is the appointment of

“A crisis brings out the skeletons and scars, so you got to think about how we can come out better.”

— Lynn Wooten

tive Organizational Scholarship, then was elevated to serve as the school’s associate dean of undergraduate programs. She met her husband, David Wooten, at Michigan, where he was an associate dean and a professor of marketing. They have two children, Jada, who just entered Brown University, and Justin, who recently graduated from Michigan Law.

Wooten is actively engaged in several national nonprofits, including Jack and Jill of America, Junior League, and The Links Inc. She serves as an advisory board member for the Aspen Institute’s Business and Society Program and is a board member of the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan.

Wooten’s work and personal path could serve as a template for successful Simmons alumni, especially women of color who often struggle to gain respect and advance within their organizations. Courageous conversations about race are a natural fit for a college campus, where students begin exploring more deeply their identity and where and how they belong in the world. These intersectional discussions work best when people from different backgrounds and perspectives are in the room together. To that end, Wooten and her colleagues are working hard to

Wooten, the school’s first Black female president.

“We don’t exactly know what happened,” says Wooten. “I was announced February 6, and prospective students had to make their decisions by June 1. As it turns out, half of the incoming class are what we call ALANA—Asian American, Latina, African American, and Native American. The other half are largely first-generation college. We have lots of theories—one is that prospective students began seeing a president that looked like them.”

As universities nationwide struggle with how not only to thrive but to survive in today’s uncertain, fragile world, Simmons can count itself one of the fortunate institutes of higher education. It has in Wooten a Black leader at a time when Black voices and leadership are coveted—a leader with deep experience in crisis management and leadership development for women.

“Lynn’s ability to lead from both the left and right side of her brain means that she is able to problem solve in the most challenging circumstances, express empathy to those who are adversely affected by those circumstances, and communicate solutions in a way that is both compelling and inspiring,” says Erika James. “If that’s not leadership, I don’t know what is.” **DW**