In July 2014, Phoebe Haddon became chancellor of Rutgers University—Camden, overseeing a campus of almost 7,000 students and over 1,300 employees. In fall 2017, the campus achieved the highest enrollment in the school’s history. As chancellor, she has led the initiation of Bridging the Gap program, which provides full or significant tuition coverage for New Jersey’s working families. She earned her bachelor’s degree from Smith College, an LL.M. from Yale Law School in 1985 and a Juris Doctor, cum laude, from Duquesne University School of Law in 1977.

NIKI T. INGRAM: Tell me about your thought process that led you to take this role.

CHANCELLOR PHOEBE HADDON: The thought process had everything to do with the fact that I wanted to be a college president, or a university president – a chancellor. It had been on my mind since I was a law faculty member at Temple University. I went to Bryn Mawr College to do the Higher Education Resources Services Institute, a women’s group for professional development, at the suggestion of Diane Nelson. She had gone to HERS many years before, and highly recommended it. At the time, most people had no sense that it was possible to think about college presidency, but were looking for mostly senior leadership positions, still in the law school or in whatever university capacity they were, and places where they could move forward until the end of their careers.

Once I went to HERS, for the first time, I said I wanted to be a college president, after hearing four or five women come to HERS who were presidents or provosts. I knew I wanted to do something beyond teaching and writing, but I didn’t know what that was, and HERS let me see that. I’m now on the board of HERS.

Some of my role models were Ruth Simmons and Pat McPherson, who was a Bryn Mawr College president. She was one of the first black woman presidents, including within the ranks of women’s colleges. I served on a couple of boards with her while I was a law professor, and she really encouraged me to look at a presidency.

How do you let women – particularly women of color – know these things are possible?

Just this morning, I read to the Rutgers-Camden Ignite – a summer camp for fourth, fifth, and sixth-graders. They have a “Read Me” program that faculty participate in, and I do it every year.

I feel passionate about people imagining themselves realizing their dreams. I talk at HERS, as well. I talk about the fact that there seems to be a tipping point for women, and an even smaller tipping point for women who want to be college presidents or provosts. It may take many tries, but it can happen. It’s like Martin Luther King’s arc of justice – it bends wide. You don’t know where you’ll go until you’re there.
What did you learn after you founded Smith College’s Black Students Association that has been of importance to you?

I was very studious in high school, but had a whole other life socially outside of high school, so Smith was ideal for me because I knew I could study hard on the weekends, and as you know, we had lots of friends that extended beyond Smith on the weekends, and could socialize and relax.

Did you feel pressured to do either education or the law as a career, or was it what you wanted?

I always wanted to be a lawyer; I’m a fourth-generation lawyer in my family, and I’m a fourth-generation higher education person, so this was a pathway that made sense to me in terms of the kinds of things I wanted to do after graduating.

I had a very close relationship with my aunt who was a civil rights advocate. She was social worker, not a lawyer, but she led the desegregation of schools in Denver, and for anybody who’s a lawyer, they know about the Keyes decision. She was my role model.

Would you be able to explain a little more about your mother?

My mother, however, was one of the hidden figures, and everybody knows about that now, but she basically became a guidance counselor – well, first, a math teacher and a science teacher at a junior high school when we migrated from the South, as they say, to New Jersey. So, my aunt and my mother were really my role models in terms of being serious about work, but also having roles that were really involving leadership.

Has your daughter carried on the legacy?

Yes, she is a litigator for the Legal Defense Fund! She started out as a scholar – an outside-funded scholar. Now she’s employed, litigating and quite amazing. My husband is a litigator by training, but he also teaches and is engaged in scholarship, so she’s a combination of the two of us. She had a couple of oral arguments that she practiced before us, and she has his smooth, confident approach as a litigator, and I think she is also very much committed to writing – she’s done some articles now – so she takes after me, in that respect. We have two boys as well – Frank has two older boys. One of them has a daughter who is in her early 20s, and his other son has a 3-year-old.

What’s been the biggest challenge for you since coming here?

I came at a time when the economy was on its way up, and in the last five years, it’s continued to improve. That’s a bad time for universities because it means that people choose to go to work rather than getting that additional degree, or that first degree.

I’m on the Federal Reserve Bank board, and I’m able see how enrollment changes across the United States. We’re in good economic times, but it means that many people have decided not to enroll in college, or go part-time or go to community college and continue to work. When I first came to Rutgers-Camden, we
had a very robust enrollment. Now, enrollment is down in many universities, so it means that we must think about how to attract people.

Rutgers-Camden has always been first-generation, but not black or brown. Historically, Camden was not black or brown, and even after Camden became black and brown, this was not an access place. It was my concern and focus to make sure that we created opportunities within Camden.

You developed the Bridging the Gap program. How has that been successful?

We knew we wanted to be an access place, but we also knew that people in this area – I’m talking about South Jersey generally – needed additional funding if they were to be able to come to a place like Rutgers.

After the Pell grants and the other kinds of scholarship support – state and federal – we provide the “last-in” money. We close that gap, so that’s why it’s called Bridging the Gap. And so, for people who are very poor, they may pay very little under that program, and for people who are even close to middle-class, they may get some scholarship support. It’s a way of growing because people can make a choice to come here instead of a community college or some other university that doesn’t have the worldwide reputation of Rutgers.

In addition to Bridging the Gap, we have an entire chancellor-level office that includes support all the way through the summer, as well as during the school year, called Student Success, and we have success coaches, who can interact and keep in touch with the students, many of whom are receiving Bridging the Gap funds.

The other part of it that people don’t talk about is that people are hungry. Some don’t have the means to get cafeteria food through our programs, even though we try to make it affordable. Even if they live at home, they’re hungry. That’s the fact of the matter.

We have made sure that many of the students who are in the Bridging the Gap program have on-campus jobs and they can get some additional food. We also have a food pantry, like Temple University, and other places around, but the reality is that students just don’t have the food.

The pantry is in an area near the student health office, so they can be discrete. It was started in the student health office by a medical doctor who knew that there were hungry students, so she set up a table with muffins.

When you finish here, what do you want your legacy to be?

I want to populate this whole area with people who are world-class Rutgers professionals and other workers who basically can pay it back. I think this has been a great experience to interact with students who have great dreams, big dreams, and I love seeing them as they graduate, recognize who they are, and see where they’re going.

Our civic engagement is our experiential learning program. It’s well known how many students learn work ethic and how to succeed academically. It has been proven that going out into the city, but also beyond the city, volunteering as a civically engaged person can lead to more success academically. We’re committed to that, and about 70% of our students are involved in some civic engagement activity.

They teach in Ignite, or they volunteer at Cooper Hospital. They are involved in all the social agencies here, and we have several different other programs that are children-focused. It’s
leadership building, but it’s also interaction with people who aren’t necessarily like them.

Seeing Temple University, University of Maryland, and now, Rutgers, how has the pipeline evolved for black and brown students?

All three places have a real and undying commitment to increase diversity in the students, as well as the faculty. The challenge, now, is that the specter of student debt and the promise of entry-level job opportunities has created obstacles to college enrollment for some.

Many people are still living at home and must support family. That’s a challenge going forward. You can’t be an access place and not take account of the environments in which some people live.

That’s not unique to Rutgers-Camden, though. We just had a program of the local Pennsylvania-area universities and colleges. There were about 30 of us presidents who participated, along with students, and they all had the same stories to tell. As we increase access, whether it’s black or brown or white, we’re trying to get people who are first-generation, who don’t have support systems in place.

We want to make sure they graduate in usually five years or so. Four years is wonderful. There are some people who overload on course work, and they do it in even less time. Having a student success coach and having somebody who is focused on that at a chancellor level is important.

You were awarded the Smith Medal, which was significant. Can you tell our readers about that medal?

The Smith Medal is not ordinarily, or always, Smith College-focused. It’s about people who have done well. I was honored to be included in a class of people who are really, really awesome, and it was even more sweet because Linda Smith-Charles was my champion.

Smith Medal recipients make up a great class of women who have done extraordinary things, not just in higher education, but in all areas where they’ve made an impact.

Niki T. Ingram (ntingram@mdwgc.com), director of the Workers’ Compensation Department at Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin, P.C., is a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.
Lessons For All Who Seek To Persuade

“A debut scholarly work explores Abraham Lincoln’s remarkable talent for rhetorical persuasion. Roda ably makes the case that Lincoln’s achievement as a persuader of others is historically unmatched ... supplies an analysis of this president’s oratorical prowess as astute as any other single-volume treatment ... (and) helpfully anatomizes Lincoln’s rhetorical success into five distinct virtues: credibility, clarity, fact, logic, and emotion.”

Kirkus Reviews

Available Now at AbrahamLincolnBook.com