



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Katherine Bergeron
President

January 9, 2017

Dear Members of the Connecticut College Community,

I write with sadness to inform you of the passing of Jewel Plummer Cobb, a distinguished biologist and the first African-American dean at Connecticut College, whose tireless work championing underrepresented students in the sciences inspired a generation and earned her a national reputation.

Dr. Cobb served as dean of the College and professor of zoology from 1969 to 1975. During these critical years in our institutional history, she played a central role in implementing coeducation and increasing racial diversity on campus. She worked to expand the number of faculty of color and to involve students in shared governance. And she led significant numbers of students toward advanced degrees in the sciences through both her example and her mentorship.

Trustee Timothy Yarboro '75, physician supervisor and occupational health bureau chief with Arlington County Virginia Department of Human Services, credits Dr. Cobb with his decision to become a physician. "Had I not met her, I would not have gone to medical school. I would not have become a doctor. Because of her, I knew it was possible," he told CC Magazine in 2012 for a [cover story](#) about Jewel Plummer Cobb.

Her always-high expectations propelled students toward higher levels of achievement. "She was a remarkable woman, a renaissance woman," says Trustee Estella Johnson '75. "In those days, women were expected to be teachers and nurses, but her parents expected more of her and she, in turn, expected students to reach higher. We had to step it up because she expected all students to come up to a very high standard."

Dr. Cobb pursued a highly successful career as a scientific researcher at a time when opportunities for women were limited. Her research focused on the relationship between melanin and skin damage, and on the effects of hormones, ultraviolet light, and chemotherapy agents on cell division.

The granddaughter of a freed slave, Dr. Cobb earned a bachelor's degree from Talladega College in 1944 and master's and doctoral degrees from New York University. When she arrived at Conn in 1969, she was already a well-established professor and researcher who had experience at the University of Illinois, New York University, and Sarah Lawrence College. It was here at Conn that she had her first foray in administration, a career that culminated in 10 years as president of California State University at Fullerton.

In retirement, she served on many boards of trustees and was the recipient of more than 20 honorary degrees, including one from Connecticut College in 1994. In 1993, she



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received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Sciences. The Center for Excellence in Education selected her to receive the Achievement in Excellence Award in 1999 and, in 2001, she was the first recipient of the Reginald Wilson Award for significant and noteworthy accomplishments in the area of diversity in higher education. She was inducted into the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame in 2008, and in 2013, in recognition of her many significant achievements and her impact on generations of students and scientists, she was awarded the College Medal, Connecticut College's highest honor.

Those closest to her remember her not just as an impressive scientist and administrator, but as a warm and generous friend. Former Dean of Studies Theresa Ammirati recalls her deeply human qualities and the many dinners enjoyed in Cobb's home on Williams Street, now the site of the Gender and Women's Studies department and the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity.

She was the first woman of color appointed to the National Science Board, which then oversaw the National Science Foundation. I like to think of our Science Leaders Program, now funded by that foundation, as an outgrowth of her advocacy for underrepresented scholars. Our community certainly benefits from her legacy.

"She was a valued, respected, and cherished black woman in the sciences. To be in a place that cherished her was the right place for me," said Trustee Annie M. Scott '84. "She was a model for administrators, a champion of students, and a rock star among women in the sciences."

Her memory will live on at Connecticut College through the [Jewel Plummer Cobb Prize](#), established last spring by Estella Johnson '75 and a group of alumni and trustees. This award will be presented annually to a woman in the graduating class who both demonstrates distinction and aspires to pursue an advanced degree in one of the STEM disciplines.

I extend my deepest condolences to Dr. Cobb's family, including her son Jonathan Cobb, and to the many friends and colleagues here at the College and throughout the country who loved her.

Yours,

Katherine Bergeron