



Johnnetta B. Cole, Multifaceted Academic



Johnnetta B. Cole speaks at an awards luncheon as part of the 2008 Essence Music Festival. © AP Images

Johnnetta B. Cole is an anthropologist, author and award-winning professor. She gained national attention in 1987 when she became the first African-American woman to lead Spelman College, a historically black school for women in Atlanta. During her 10-year tenure, she improved the school's academic standing, prominence and financial health. In

2002, she again took a president's chair, this time at Bennett College for Women, another historically black school in Greensboro, North Carolina. Seemingly tireless, after retiring from Bennett, Cole became director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art. Cole said the museum job was irresistible because it "allows me to continue to feel the

power of education." In particular, she wants to overturn some people's presumption that African art is primitive and crudely crafted. "We have to get rid of these old notions, and I must say often racist notions, about Africa, her people, her arts and her culture," she said.

Born in 1936, Cole grew up in a successful and well-educated family. Her grandfather,

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Johnnetta B. Cole helps consecrate the ground of a slave cemetery at a 19th-century plantation in Florida. © AP Images

Abraham Lincoln Lewis, founded the Afro-American Life Insurance Company in 1901 and became Florida's first black millionaire. Cole entered college at age 15 with plans to become a physician but said she became captivated by

anthropology instead. Her scholarly work has dealt with cultures in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. In a 2010 National Public Radio interview, she said, "All you have to do is go back far enough, and each and every one

of us is an African." In 2013, Cole received the highest citation of the International Civil Rights Center and Museum: the Alston-Jones International Civil and Human Rights Award.

