

Dr. John L. Smith Jr



In March of 1999, John L. Smith became president of Fisk University, a predominantly African American institution in Nashville, Tennessee. Fisk is one of the oldest, and most prestigious, of the historically black universities, having been founded as a school to educate former slaves in 1866. Among its first alumni were W.E.B. DuBois, social critic and co-founder of the NAACP. The university is also famous for its singing group, the Jubilee Singers, who, beginning in 1871, introduced much of the world to the spiritual as a musical genre. In 1998, Fisk had 825 students.

Before his appointment as president of Fisk, Smith was a professor and administrator at the University of South Florida in Tampa for more than 26 years. Smith, a musician by training, served for 15 years in various management positions in the College of Fine Arts, including dean, assistant dean and assistant department chair.

“The school’s choice [for president], John L. Smith Jr., might seem an odd one at first glance,” Monique Fields wrote in the *Tennessean*. “Smith comes to Fisk from a large public institution, the predominantly white University of South Florida.” Nevertheless, his appointment as president was well-received by Fisk’s faculty and students, who both gave Smith a standing ovation when the appointment was announced. “While the contrasts are evident, Smith seems a good fit at Fisk ...,” Fields wrote in the *Tennessean*. “The university needs a fundraiser and a solid administrator.”

In the early years of his career, Smith taught at University of Missouri-Kansas City, Oklahoma City University, and Langston University in Oklahoma. He also achieved recognition as a gifted tubist, performing with orchestras in Florida and Oklahoma. “John L. Smith Jr. brings excellent qualities to his new position as president of Fisk University,” the editorial board of the *Tennessean* wrote. “... Smith’s background in music and the fine arts matches him perfectly to an institution that began with the strong voices of its choir. That’s called harmony.”

Visited Fisk as a Child

John L. Smith Jr. was born on Sept. 14, 1938, in Bastrop, Louisiana. At the age of 15, he first visited the Fisk campus, when his sister, Barbara Terry, began her freshman year there in 1953. According to Monique Fields, writing in the *Tennessean*, “he saw Jubilee Hall and the Fisk

Memorial Chapel and was so impressed with their power that he never forgot them.” Little did Smith suspect that one day he would become president of this historic university.

After high school, Smith enrolled at Lincoln University, a predominantly African American institution in Jefferson City, Missouri. He graduated with a bachelor’s of music education in 1959. During the summers of 1959 and 1960, Smith had his first experience as an educator, teaching at Griffen High School in Lake Providence,

At a Glance ...

Born John L. Smith, Sept 14, 1938, Bastrop, LA; married Juel Shannon Smith, founding director of the Institute of Black Life at the Univ. of South FL; seven grown children. *Education:* B.A., in music education, Lincoln Univ., MO, 1959; M.A. in music education, Indiana Univ., 1961; Performer’s certificate, Indiana Univ., 1961; PhD, Univ. of MS, Kansas City, 1979; Post-doctoral study, Institute for Educational Management, Harvard University, 1992.

Career: Taught at Griffen High School, Crambling State Univ., Oklahoma City Univ., and Univ. of MS, Kansas City. Asst. prof of music, Langston Univ., 1966–72; Chair, Dept of music, 1969–72. Asst. prof. of music, Univ. of South FL, 1972–78; Asst. chair for the Dept. of music, 1973–74; Asst dean, College of Fine Arts, 1977–86; Assoc. prof., with tenure, 1978–85; Full professor, 1985–98; Interim dean, College of Fine Arts, 1986–87; Dean, College of Fine Arts, 1988–98. President, Fisk University, 1999.

Principal tubist and associate conductor with the Great Lakes Navy Band, 1963–66; Principal tubist with the Chicago Community Orchestra, 1964–66; Principal tubist with the OK City Orchestra, 1966–72; Adjunct and second tubist with the Florida Orchestra, 1972 to 1986; Principal tubist with the Florida West Coast Symphony, 1985–86.

Member: President, Intl. Council of Fine Arts Deans, 1996–98; Chair, FL Higher Education Arts Network, 1992–94; Natl. Assn. of State Universities and the Land Grant Colleges Commission on the Arts, 1992–94. boards of numerous organizations, including the Florida Orchestra, the African American Arts Council, the Museum of African American Art, and Habitat for Humanity in Tampa, as well as the Black Liberated Arts Center in Oklahoma City.

In 1961, Smith earned a master’s degree in music education from Indiana University, Bloomington; he also earned a performer’s certificate, becoming the first tubist to do so. While he did well academically at the predominantly white institution, “he remembers so vividly how

alienated he felt when he attended Indiana University," Monique Fields wrote in the *Tennessean*. Years later, when Smith became an administrator at the University of South Florida, one of his top priorities was to make sure that the African-American, Asian, and Hispanic students there felt at home.

In the early sixties, Smith pursued a career as a professional musician. He was the principal tubist and associate conductor with the Great Lakes Navy Band from 1963 to 1966, and principal tubist with the Chicago Community Orchestra from 1964 to 1966. In 1966, Smith moved to Oklahoma, taking a position as assistant professor of music at Langston University. In 1969, he became chair of Langston's music department, a position he held for three years; meanwhile, in 1971, the university awarded him tenure. In addition to his teaching and administrative load, Smith was also principal tubist with the Oklahoma City Orchestra.

Became Dean of Fine Arts at USF

In 1972, Smith left Langston University to take a job as assistant professor of music at the University of South Florida (USF). USF, located in Tampa, is Florida's second largest university, with more than 37,000 students.

Two years later, Smith was awarded a grant from the Florida State University system and USF to pursue a year of graduate study. Smith used the grant to do doctoral work at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, earning his PhD in 1979. Years later, in 1992, he would further his education at the Institute for Educational Management at Harvard University, where he pursued postdoctoral study.

Even with his teaching load and graduate work, Smith still found time to perform professionally: from 1972 to 1986, he was adjunct and second tubist with the Florida Orchestra, and from 1985 to 1986 he was principal tubist with the Florida West Coast Symphony.

At the University of South Florida, Smith rose steadily through the academic and administrative ranks. From 1973 to 1974, he served as assistant chair for the department of music. In 1977, he was appointed assistant dean for the college of fine arts, a position he held until 1986, when he was named interim dean. He became associate professor, with tenure, in 1978, and a full professor in 1985.

In 1988, Smith was named dean of the college of fine arts, serving in this role for ten years. As dean, he was responsible for more than 2, 000 students, including 820 majors; 85 full-time faculty; 25 visiting and adjunct faculty; and a \$13 million annual budget.

From 1992 to 1994, Smith served as chair of the Florida Higher Education Arts Network, a statewide university arts organization. From 1996 to 1998, he was president of the International Council of Fine Arts Deans, which has representation from 23 countries.

As dean, Smith distinguished himself as a talented fund-raiser. In 1990, he persuaded the university to offer “endowed chairs” in the fine arts. Under this system, donors agree to give a certain sum of money, and in return an academic position at the university is named in their honor. Smith raised \$1.2 million for the Stuart S. Golding African Art Chair, thought to be the only chair of its kind in the United States. He also raised \$2.4 million for the British International Theatre Program, which brings British theater professionals to Florida to work with students in developing productions.

“Fundraising is a quiet, serious process,” Betty Castor, USF president, was quoted as saying in the *Tennessean*. “Big gifts don’t just happen. What he did for us is build those quiet, long-term relationships, and that’s what really counts.”

“His work at the University of South Florida undoubtedly caught the attention of Fisk trustees,” wrote the editorial board of the *Tennessean*, in a piece that lauded Fisk’s decision to appoint Smith as president. “In the course of that position, Smith raised large amounts of money—exactly what Fisk now needs to do to stay on top of its game and continue to attract top students to its campus.”

Appointed President of Fisk University

In November of 1998, the Board of Trustees of Fisk University elected Smith to be the 12th president of Fisk University. “We...are delighted to find an educator and administrator of his caliber to lead the university into the next important stage of its growth and development,” Ben R. Rechter, chairman of the Fisk University Board of Trustees, was quoted as saying in a university press release. “Dr. Smith brings more than 20 years of outstanding management and fundraising experience as a university administrator as well as 33 years of classroom experience. His leadership skills are vital to Fisk’s growth and success over the next decade....”

“I am honored and humbled to accept the distinguished position of Fisk University’s 12th president,” Smith was quoted as saying in the same press release. “Fisk is at the forefront of American education, not just among historically black colleges and universities, but among all colleges as well....For years I have followed and admired the moving work of the Jubilee Singers, and for a musician to serve as president of their university is indeed a great honor.”Smith took office on March 1, 1999.

Smith calls his vision for Fisk “TLC,” which stands for “Total Learning Community.” According to this plan, all formal and informal activities will be evaluated based on the amount of learning that takes place. TLC can be used as a guide to decide whether or not an activity is worth-while, Smith told Monique Fields of the *Tennessean*. He also plans to embark on a major capital campaign, which may include expanding the campus and creating an endowed chair for the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Smith also has high hopes for Fisk’s academic program, envisioning a day when 100 percent of graduates either enter graduate school or professional school, or become leaders in the national or international arena, he told Monique Fields of the *Tennessean*. “I think the possibilities are enormous,” Smith was quoted as saying in the *Tennessean*. “I think that it’s possible for this institution to become recognized based on understood standards as one of the great liberal arts institutions in this country.”

Smith has served on the boards of numerous organizations, including the Florida Orchestra, the African American Arts Council, the Museum of African American Art, and Habitat for Humanity in Tampa, as well as the Black Liberated Arts Center in Oklahoma City. He has delivered papers and addresses throughout the US, and in fourteen overseas conferences in Europe and Africa. Smith is married to Juel Shannon Smith, founding director of the Institute of Black Life at the University of South Florida; the couple have seven grown children.

Sources: *Tennessean*, Dec. 13, 1998, Curriculum vitae, John L. Smith Jr.