

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives**

**Voices of Illinois Oral History Project**

**Interviewee: Dr. Robert Jones**

**Interviewer: Jessica Ballard-Lawrence**

**April 25, 2025**

**Length: 28:49**

**Jessica Ballard-Lawrence: Let me make sure the closed captioning is on, and to also not look at the closed captioning.**

Robert Jones: Well, I'm ready to get started whenever they are. Well, that didn't help.

**JBL: Okay, so I'll do just a short introduction of...Oh yeah, it is showing up...Of just, you know, what this interview is, and then lead into the question, if that's okay.**

RJ: Okay!

**JBL: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The interviewer is Jessica Ballard-Lawrence. The narrator is Chancellor Doctor Robert Jones, the 10th chancellor of the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana campus. We are in Chancellor Jones's office in the Swanland Building. The date is April 25th, 2025. So, thank you very much for fitting time in your extremely busy schedule to meet for this interview, Chancellor Jones!**

RJ: It's my pleasure.

**JBL: So, may I start off first by asking you to provide your full name?**

RJ: My full name is Robert James Jones.

**JBL: Great. And could you please share where you grew up and any information you would like to share about your childhood and family?**

RJ: Well, I am a product of the Jim Crow South. I was born and raised in southwestern Georgia. My parents were sharecroppers on a peanut cotton farm. And between them, they probably had a 5th or 7th-grade education, but they were really very, very adamant that my brother, my sister, and myself... We were from... I had a small family relative to most sharecroppers that had at least 10 to some cases 16, 17, 20 kids to help out with the farm work, but my parents valued education, and they made sure that we didn't miss school out of missed time out of school to harvest the crops. And that was probably one of the best gifts they gave us. And so I became... I was always curious as a child, and I knew very early, probably from the time I was about nine years old, that I wanted to be a scientist. And I was very, very fortunate that along the way I had some mentoring from the vocational agriculture

teacher who started to call me professor in the ninth grade. And so I guess it took somewhere along the way, Mr. Walter Stallworth was his name, and he was very, very clear that I...he saw things in me I didn't see myself, and helped me to develop a bit more not only curiosity, but confidence that I could do whatever I wanted to do. And he made it clear that I was going to college, made it clear that I needed to take certain courses in order to be college-ready. So, I thank him for that.

And I had two options. To go to Tuskegee, it was called Tuskegee Institute at that time, not Tuskegee University, but I chose Fort Valley State University in Fort Valley, GA and pursued a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture there. So that kind of was my upbringing. And I guess for a lot of people it is kind of not logical, given the fact that being a sharecropper was not a glamorous way of life that I would actually end up pursuing a degree with...That had a focus on agriculture. And I did it because of my deep scientific curiosity. And Mr. Stallworth kind of mentored me to pursue the program in agriculture. So that's how I ended up with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture from Fort Valley State University.

**JBL: Great. And so, he talked about where you went to college as well as your major. And could you talk a bit more about how your upbringing and college experience helped to shape your career path?**

RJ: Well, my upbringing, as I said earlier, was really focused on the "whatever you do, do the best to your ability." My parents were very, very clear about being disciplined, about studying, doing homework, and at the same time carrying out those chores that you were given as a child. And I had many chores, and one of them was to go down every evening and get the cows out of the swamp and bring them back up to the pen next to the house. And that was a...that was an interesting and often precarious experience because there were all kinds of wildlife, from alligators to snakes and wild bobcats and all kinds of interesting craters, but that helped shape my perspective that I would have a better life for myself and my family by getting an education. And that's one of the reasons I worked as hard as I could, studied as hard as I could in order to have a life that was different and perhaps a bit more prosperous than my parents, right?

**JBL: Great! And, what, moving I guess a lot forward...what ultimately led you to consider and accept the role as chancellor for the University of Illinois?**

RJ: Well, let me try to give you the reader's digest version, because the only thing I ever planned to do was to pursue a degree in agriculture. Also, I ultimately did a master's degree in Crop Physiology at the University of Georgia and a PhD at the University of Missouri, and got my first tenure track position at the University of Minnesota when I was 26 years old. Started there in 1978 and the only goal I really had was to be the best professor that I could be, get promoted, get tenured, write those research grants that allow me to do the research that I thought was critically important, and to attend national and international conferences presenting my research papers and just being the best professor. I didn't teach any undergraduate students. I haven't talked to undergraduates ironically since I was a graduate student myself, but mainly just running a very large research program because my appointment in Minnesota was 100% research and didn't have any formal teacher responsibility.

I did start teaching a graduate-level course on physiological molecular biology and responses to the environment. But that path got me on the very strong academic track. And that

academic track was where I focused my time until I became tenured. And then once I continued focused at the University of Minnesota, started to pull me into part-time administrative work. Whatever they asked me to do with the next ensuing 15 to 20 years, I did it well—I assume—because they kept asking me to do more, which really did prepare me to be in a position [that] was not part of my grand plan. I...it wasn't on my bucket list to be a university leader. I had no aspirational goals in that whatsoever. But I had been successful as a faculty member, got involved in faculty governance at Minnesota. And then the president of the university asked me to create a mentoring program for underrepresented students. And then they asked me to share the search committee for the First Vice President for equity, diversion, inclusion at the university. And then the Dean became the Provost, and he asked me to be one of...I was one of his first staff members hired as a Vice Provost for faculty and academic personnel. Then that person who is Provost became the president, and he made me Senior Vice President for the University of Minnesota System. So that's why, to give you the path that I got here and that led me in 2013 to be the president of the State University of New York at Albany. And I was there for four years.

And then Illinois came calling. And I answered that call primarily because during the four years I was at Fort Valley, I mean at SUNY Albany, was the first time I had not been part of a land-grant university. So the land-grant mission is something that I identified very closely with because all of my degrees are from a land-grant university. I spent 34 and a half years at the University of Minnesota, which is in land grant. So the opportunity to come back to a world-class land-grant university was what attracted me to this opportunity to be the Chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

**JBL: Great! And can you talk more about your experience at the University of Illinois? And what were some of the biggest challenges?**

RJ: Well, it seems like in these jobs in these contemporary times, and it's been that way for a long time, challenges or a big part of the responsibility, everything is not, you know, the good stuff of creating innovation and that kind of thing. But one of the biggest challenges I had was...by the time I started here, the university was in the midst...was starting on the second year of a 270-some-million-dollar budget decision from the state, from the governor, Governor Rauner. And so I came into this university in the midst of a budget crisis and had to help navigate us through that budget crisis, and was very pleased that we were able to do that without laying anybody off, without doing some of the things that other people were doing. They were furloughing people, they were cutting programs, etcetera, etcetera. And for that next year or so, we were able to navigate through that crisis, and a lot of it had to do with the fact that the University of Illinois, from a financial perspective, has always been well managed financially. And we had sufficient budget reserves to not only maintain our...to the best of our ability, we lost a quite a few faculty members, but we were able to maintain most of them. The attrition rate doubled during that [period] because everybody recognized that the university was financially vulnerable from their perspective, and so they stepped up their recruiting effort. So we lost twice the number of faculty that we normally use on an annual basis. So that was a very, very troubling period, but glad that we were able to navigate through it. We kept morale high. We even gave a 1% pay increase in the midst of a budget crisis. We kept all students, graduate students and others employed to the best of our ability.

And so, but then roll the clock forward another 18 to 24 months, and then we had COVID-19, which was the second big crisis we had to navigate. And as you know, COVID-19 called a complete, the complete disruption of the higher education enterprise. I remember like it was

yesterday when I had to make the tough decision to tell students before they went home for spring break that they perhaps should take their laptops with them because there was great probability that they would not be allowed back on campus after spring break, that because of COVID-19, we probably were going to move to remote education. And we did that and so proud of the faculty and staff and...that this university that flipped this massive university to from face to face to online education and get it in less than 10 days, and was able to continue to do a remote education for the rest of that spring semester. But then as we were wrapping up that semester, we decided that remote, complete remote education was not going to be sustainable and had a conversation with Provost Andreas Cangellaris about what we needed to do. And we mutually agreed because the epidemiologist was telling us that if we wanted to bring students back, then we had to have a robust testing protocol, testing at least everybody in the university. They wanted us to do it three times a week. We settled on twice a week. And at one point in time, we were doing 2% of all the COVID-19 testing in the nation. And the test itself is actually was a miracle because we didn't create the first saliva-based COVID-19 test, but we created the best, that was more cost-effective and much more sensitive. Most saliva tests would only pick you up when you were up to at least approaching 1,000,000 copies of the virus per mL of saliva. The test that Tim Fan, Marty Burke, and Professor Hergenrother created was very, very sensitive. It would pick you up when you were only 100,000 copies of the virus. So what does that translate to? That was...it was very, very sensitive. Our student tested positive before they started to shed students, [unintelligible], and staff. All of us had to test drool into a test tube, and it allowed us to prevent the spread of the virus rapidly on campus. We had to put folks in quarantine several times, but we never had spread from the university to the community. And I can tell you that was a very challenging period because there was no playbook, no handbook about how to manage a university during the crisis. But at the same time, we had to make it up as we went along. And because of the amazing innovative spirit of this university, I think we managed COVID-19 better than any other place that I know. We saved lives. We mitigate spread to the community, and we had nobody in the university community proper that died from COVID-19. So that was a challenge, but we turned it into an opportunity to innovate and to do what this university does well in the midst of a crisis, we redefine the word impossible and do things that have saved lives. And so that was very gratifying. And what was the other...you wanted to know about other challenges or in general?

**JBL: If you want to talk about just some of your experiences here at the University of Illinois...**

RJ: Well, that that those two issues were the biggest kind of experience, but...but I'll let just one more challenge, which of course, what happened with the what happened with the October 7th and what happened in Israel and subsequent attack on Gaza that led to the encampments that started almost a year ago today, ironically. And having to navigate through that crisis, trying to make sure that we were being supportive of Jewish students, but also protecting the rights and free speech opportunities for students from the Middle East, whether they were Palestinian, Northern African or whatever. It was an intense 12 days, but I think again, because of the relationship that we've developed with students and faculty at this university, we got through that better than most places that I know of. We only had to use the police once as we were trying to bring the encampment down because it was a violation of university policy. But we...through dialogue and conversation, the encampment eventually was taken down and we had a very peaceful, enjoyable graduation, graduated nearly 20,000 students. And so, so that...those are some of the things I remember that were challenges, but on the more positive side, absolutely gratified by the following.

We launched the largest campaign in the history of this university with a goal of raising \$2.25 billion. We reached that goal with 18 months left in the campaign and ultimately we raised near \$2.7 billion, the largest, most successful campaign in the history of the university. And we think it was successful because we really did focus on telling the university story to our donors and supporters in the most compelling way. And we did that starting my first year here and all the way up until we finished the campaign. And people really did connect with the university in ways that they had never connected before because we changed the approach that we use in terms of our development approach and advancement approach. The second thing we're very excited about is [that] we focused on keeping education accessible and affordable and with...led to us creating the Illinois commitment strategy that provides free tuition and fees. Initially, it was for any student from a family of 67,100 and less, because of inflation this past year we increased that to 75,000. And we know it is having an impact because the first [unintelligible] few years about 30% of our students, first-year students and transfer students were recipient of the Illinois commitment. And then now it's probably about 24%. But once we implement the 75,000 category, we think it may get back up closer to about 30% of the first-year students receiving that fund. And so that really focused on something I care a lot about...is to tell students don't worry about what it costs because the reason we started that program, a lot of students thought the tuition was 80, ninety, \$100,000 a year. I don't know where they got the notion from, but we started Illinois commitment to take the issue of costs, at least tuition and fees off the table and started a billboard campaign, which had never been done in this state before, that said, "Illinois Commitment: Free Tuition and Fees," and had a web address in which they could log on to. And so...very very pleased with that because it is focusing on something I care about and that is making educational accessible and affordable to students from all walks of life, the Black and brown students, poor, majority students from Central and Southern Illinois have also benefited from that effort. So, we're extremely proud about that. And I'll just give you one more particularly since it just happened about a month ago, is that I had the pleasure of implementing Carle Illinois College of Medicine. It wasn't my big idea, but with the change in leadership, I had the responsibility for making sure that big idea that was brought to the table by Phyllis Wise and a number of people that are still on the faculty of the staff here at this university. She left before we could launch that, but I had the pleasure of launching it, hiring the inaugural Dean who got us through the first four years, and then hiring Mark Cohen, who is now the Dean that has helped us get past the...I would call it the second big milestone. The first milestone was to recruit a class for students who wanted to come to a medical school that had no graduates, that was not accredited. And so you can't even start the accreditation process until after the first class graduate, which was three years ago. And I'm pleased to say that on March 7th, I got a letter from the LCME, the Learning Committee on Medical Education, telling us that they had approved our accreditation, which was...made us the first engineering based College of Medicine in the world with full accreditation. It was the first time that LCME had accredited a medical school like this in all of their history. So a lot of first in that regard and that is something that I'm extremely proud of as well.

**JBL: Great! And are there any other accomplishments that...[laughter]**

RJ: Not [unintelligible]. I could go on and on, but I don't want you to electronically run out of tape deal or whatever you call it.

**JBL: And could you talk about any organizations that you're affiliated with outside of the university?**

RJ: Well, I'm affiliated with a few organizations outside of the university, but most of them are Higher Education Association, Professional Association. One...oh two of them actually are fraternity related organization. One is a college based fraternity. I've been a member of Phi Beta Sigma fraternity since 1970, and I am a member of Omicron Boulet. The Boulet is caused as a professional African American men's fraternity. I am a member of the Association of American Colleges and University. I've been on the board of directors for that for the last five, six years, just finished my term as the chair of the board, and I'm finishing up my last few months on that board. I've also been a member of the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities. That's all of the...mostly Land Grant universities, 240-some membership, and I've been chair of that board, hired the current president of that association. And currently I serve on the board for National 4H Council, which is a youth-based organization that's part of Colleges of Agriculture and Extension Offices of Land Grant University. I'm on that board, National Board of Directors. I also serve on the board for Hope Chicago, a program that was started probably about four years ago with the sole purpose of providing a debt-free education for students from five Chicago Public Schools. And I got a few others in there. I was over the board of a small tech company that's trying to leverage and create using millimeter wave technology to do testing for viruses like COVID-19, other kind of viruses that may present themselves in the public space. So that's a small tidbit of the force and other things that I do outside of my job here is to...it's part of it indirectly, but not a core part, right.

**JBL: And so the final section of here is asking some advice that you may have for staff, faculty and administrators.**

RJ: Well, I would...my advice is never lose sight of your passion. And I mean that sincerely because what keeps us going throughout trials and tribulations and what keeps us motivated in the best of time is the passion about making a difference. We teach, we educate because we're passionate about it. We're passionate about creating the next generation of scholars and leaders to help advance society. So that would be whether you're a faculty member or staff member, whatever your station or position is within the university. And I've seen that time and time again, we just had the Chancellor's Staff Awards last Friday, and sixteen individuals who come to work each and every day and just go above and beyond the call of duty to answer questions, to do their job at scale, to go beyond just the perspective that's often time exist in workplace. When someone asks you a question, they take it as you well, "how you bothering me?" You know, that's that's not the way to to lead and to advance this university. So I think just find your passion and at this place and just always stay true to your values.

**JBL: Great. And do you have some advice that you'd like to pass on to students?**

RJ: Same advice.

**JBL: Great. If I could put you on the spot and ask you a question that I didn't give you an advance, is there anything you can think of that you might miss the most about the University of Illinois?**

RJ: The students... We have some of the most amazing students in the world at this

university. And because I've worked real hard at being a student focus leader, it is. And I take gratification out of it. I can't walk on campus without taking a selfie. I've probably taken most selfies than any chancellor or president in modern history. And that's all because I've tried to present through videos and just stopping, having conversations, asking students how it was going.

I really students have a feel, a sense of belonging to the campus and that I'm approachable. And I can tell you that is just really gratifying to me. And I'm going to miss that, going to miss that more than anything, because we have some amazing students. They demonstrated that during COVID-19, when they did everything we asked them to do—most of them did. And they did it as scale and took responsibility for themselves and for others. And so I'm going to miss that as part of the ethos of this place. And this is an absolutely beautiful campus and going to miss that as well.

**JBL: I agree. And yes, the students really do bring some wonderful energy to this space. And so are there any concluding thoughts that you'd like to mention?**

RJ: Well, congratulations on your appointment. I'm so proud of you, and I wish you all the best.

**JBL: Great, thank you so much. And thank you again for making time for [unintelligible].**

RJ: Hopefully, there was something in it.