



## Robert J. Jones Ph.D (1951-Present)

President

**University at Albany, State University  
at New York**

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### Overview

“I’ve been interested in natural science since I was eight years old,” Robert Jones recalls, tracing his progression toward a career in the environmental field. “In high school, I had a great vocational agriculture teacher who introduced me to agricultural sciences. Then, when I was a junior in college, I took my first plant physiology course, and from there I decided to change my major from soil chemistry to plant physiology. The rest is history. I’ve been at work in the field ever since.”

*This interview was conducted in 2015.*

### Early Life and Education

Jones, born and raised in rural Dawson, Georgia, earned his bachelor of science in agriculture from Fort Valley State University in 1973, an master of science in crop physiology from the University of Georgia in 1975, and his doctorate in crop physiology from the University of Missouri, Columbia in 1978. Immediately after finishing his doctorate, Jones worked as an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota, as part of a research team looking to improve maize (corn) production. Jones says he was thrilled to be offered the opportunity so early in his career: “I was heavily recruited to work in the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics at a major land grant university in a major metro area. It was perfect for me because it was exactly what I wanted to do.”

### Career

Jones is currently the 19<sup>th</sup> president of the University at Albany of the State University at New York. Prior to serving as president at the University at Albany, he served as a professor at the University of Minnesota.

During his time at the University of Minnesota, he currently spends most of his time in an administrative role, he maintains an active research program. His research focuses on elucidating the physiological and molecular bases of heat tolerance during grain development in maize, and trying to understand why it is sensitive to high temperatures. Jones says understanding and manipulating the physiological events leading to kernel development will help prevent heat-stress reactions that lower grain yields. The son of a sharecropper, Jones says the ultimate purpose of his research is to stabilize grain yields by insulating them from environmental stressors.

## Highlights

As for his career accomplishments, Jones says simply, “They speak for themselves.” He has published widely in the 28 years he has been at Minnesota, and his work is recognized and valued by colleagues in plant physiology around the world. Jones attributes his success to hard work and skillful research, but notes that he owes a lot of credit to his mentors. Jones credits his high school Vocational Agriculture teacher, Mr. Walter Stallworth, for inspiring him to study the agricultural sciences; M.C. Blunt, an instructor at Fort Valley State who Jones says motivated a large number of black students, including him, to pursue their Ph.D.’s; and Jerry Nelson, Jones’s Ph.D. advisor, who “taught me to be a researcher, scientist, and scholar.”

Jones is proud that, as a young black man, he was able to enter a predominantly white institution and establish a successful research program on par with any of its kind in the world. “I know that’s a rare achievement,” he says. “I’m proud to have trained many students, both domestic and international, who have gone on to have successful careers.” Jones also derives satisfaction from his program’s many accomplishments, most notably an innovative modeling system that can screen kernels for reaction to heat stress. “We were the first research team in the country to publish a study on the physiological response of kernels to high temperatures,” Jones says. “Our team was able to show why kernels abort after being exposed to high temperature.”

## Advice to Young Professionals

Jones has this advice for minorities considering a career in the environmental sciences: “Be prepared to deal with a sense of isolation, because there are still not many minorities in the sciences today. But know that that’s changing, and there are opportunities for you to play a role in this. As you build your professional experiences, be tenacious. Know whether you want to be in academia or in corporate research. The sciences are becoming more competitive than ever before, both in terms of career opportunities and finding external support for your work. Be prepared, and be the best at what you do.”

## For More Information

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