



Caribbean-American Political Action Committee

Advancing the political agenda of Caribbean Americans

Lois Dickson Rice



In this final CPAC Black History Spotlight, we feature the woman dubbed, “The Mother of the Pell Grant,” Lois Dickson Rice.

Rice, a daughter of Jamaican immigrants, was born in Portland, Maine, on February 28, 1933. Her parents instilled in her and her four siblings an appreciation for the transformative power of higher education. She graduated from Portland High School in 1950, where she was the student council president and valedictorian. She was also voted the Most Likely to Succeed, and the Most Valuable Female.

Determined to make college an option for their children, Rice's parents not only funded their education on a janitor's and maid's wages, but also mortgaged and re-mortgaged their home. Rice earned a bachelor's degree in history and literature from Radcliffe College in 1954. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and later became a Trustee of the College. She was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Columbia University, and was later awarded honorary degrees by both Brown University and Bowdoin College.

Rice joined the College Board (originally known as the College Entrance Examination Board) as an executive in 1959. In 1972, as a Board executive, she pushed for the creation of the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant Program. The Program was later renamed after its legislative sponsor, Senator Claiborne Pell. It annually provides billions of dollars to help undergraduates cover the costs of tuition, transportation, miscellaneous personal expenses, living expenses, and dependent care. As national vice president of the Board from 1973 to 1981, Rice lobbied and testified before Congress to keep the Pell Grant program intact. According to Clay Pell IV, "This program was not inevitable, and it would not have come into existence without [Lois Dickson Rice], nor survived in the decades since without her passionate advocacy." According to Brookings, "the federal government now provides nearly \$30 billion in grant aid each year to nearly 8 million students from lower-income families (mainly with household incomes below \$50,000 per year) through the Pell Grant program, which can give students up to \$5,920 per year to help pay for college."

Rice became a scholar in the Economic Studies Program at the Brookings Institution in 1992. There, she researched higher-education policy and promoted racial diversity. She also directed Brookings' Think Tank Consortium. In June 2006, Brookings honored Lois Rice and her daughter, Former National Security Advisor Susan Rice, as the only mother-daughter research duo in the Think Tank's history.

Rice served on the boards of major U.S. corporations when it was uncommon for African American women to do so. She was a member of the board of directors of eleven of the largest corporations in the U.S. from 1978 to 2003. She was also a senior vice president of Control Data Corporation, and a member of President Clinton's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

Lois Dickson Rice died in Washington D.C. on January 4, 2017. In a [New York Times interview](#), former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, remembered her as "a hero, a role model and an example of what true service is all about. She helped create a pathway to college for literally millions of low-income and first-generation college-goers, changing the trajectories of their families forever."