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# What Do Diverse College Academics Do?: Maybe Make Quilts...

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## What do diverse college academics do? Maybe make quilts...

**Guest Blogger** / January 5, 2017

BY ANGELA MAE KUPENDA

*This is a guest post by Angela Mae Kupenda, a professor at the Mississippi College School of Law in Jackson. She is a summa cum laude graduate of Jackson State University in Mississippi and holds a master's degree from The Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Kupenda finished first in her class at Mississippi College School of Law. Her recent commentaries include: "[Increasing Black Wealth Takes Generational Sacrifice—It Always Has](#)," in Ebony.com (June 14, 2016); "[Higher Education: Putting Our Children on the Bus to Success](#)," in The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (July 27, 2016); "[Mentoring Pluses for Underrepresented Faculty](#)," in Diverse Issues in Higher Education (June 30, 2016). You can find her CV [here](#).*

When people ask me if I am a teacher, I proudly answer yes and their faces light up—probably because almost everyone has had a teacher who made a difference in their lives. When people ask where I teach, I reluctantly say at a college and, more reluctantly, at a law school. You see, sadly, people value postsecondary teachers less than they value K–12 teachers. This dismissal of our value is due in part to a general lack of understanding of our hard work.

As a result of the presidential election, there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of higher education in this country. Some may question the worth of higher education or its “return on investment,” yet its value is obvious to those denied access to higher education in the past. As the role of college and university educators will no doubt continue to be part of our national discourse, we need to acknowledge what they do to serve America.

Educators are charged to do three things: to teach in their subject areas; to advance knowledge through research and scholarship; and to provide service.

My observations here focus on the service component, which can be very time-consuming but often matters the least to committees that evaluate faculty members for tenure and promotions. Much has been written about the huge service obligations placed on female faculty and faculty of color. While service obligations are often distributed unfairly, I posit here a reframing of these service obligations to help faculty members like me, a faculty woman of color, forge ahead.



To examine my years of service you could look at my [CV](#). You will see the usual faculty involvement on committees and in community groups. You will also see other extensive service, such as my student mentoring. But a better way to examine my service is to take a look at one wall of my office, which my students and I call the “Wall of Fame.”

This “Wall of Fame” started several years ago when I was in a post-tenure slump. Questioning my calling, I started to ask, “What is this institution I serve?” I started to reflect on the great impact my professor mentors had and continue to have on my life. My wall of fame developed like a quilt from those scattered thoughts.

As I worked with diverse students and other mentees, I participated in their development and saw them overcome huge obstacles to their success. Some obstacles involved academic work or writing. Some involved health and family matters. Other difficulties came from prejudice and bias. I engaged with my mentees as they continuously overcame these challenges and continued on the

road to success.

When my students and mentees e-mailed me “pictures” of their successes, I did two things. First, I responded with my characteristic “YAY!!” Then I printed out the pictures documenting their success and taped them to what eventually became my “Wall of Fame.” I added to the wall pictures of some family members and friends with encouraging stories of resilience.

When I walk in my office in the mornings, I glance at the "Wall of Fame." The wall reminds me of my hours of service *and* my students' great accomplishments. These accomplishments include graduating, receiving judicial clerkships, winning writing competitions, publishing, making academic presentations, passing bar exams, advancing in their careers, serving others and growing in that service, celebrating marriages, and rejoicing with children born or growing up. Their joy brings purpose to my academic work and service.

Nowadays, as current students and mentees share what seem to them to be insurmountable obstacles, I get up from my seat at my desk, walk over to them, lift them gently by the arm, and walk them over to the "Wall of Fame." Somewhere on the wall is the story of another person who overcame similar struggles. This shows students that they can make it, too. Students inevitably say, "One day, I will make it to your wall of fame, too." And, invariably, they do.

The "Wall of Fame" has grown, and I now see how it resembles a quilt: a quilt to warm when academia and educational institutions and our society more broadly are cold places; a quilt to comfort when one is engaged in what seems to be an unrelenting struggle; a quilt of memories to forge resilience in the face of challenges; a quilt created from seemingly random pieces woven together that tell a beautiful story about learning, service, mentoring, resilience, commitment, struggle, equality—overcoming one day, and never giving up on today or tomorrow.

When people ask me during these times what do I do of value as a professor in higher education, I will smile and reply, "YAY for me! I help make beautiful quilts!"

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January 5, 2017 in Diversity, Teaching. Tags: faculty of color, mentors, service, students of color

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