



Ericka S. Garcia, Esq.

A. Felecia Epps, Dean, FAMU College of Law: A Year in Review

When it was announced that A. Felecia Epps, Esq., a law professor from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock William H. Bowen School of Law, would be the next dean of the FAMU College of Law, those of us in the public interest sector were elated. As a former legal services managing attorney in Georgia, Dean Epps has seen a multitude of different legal issues and how they hinder less fortunate individuals from pulling themselves and their families out of poverty. The reason this tie-in is incredibly important is simple: FAMU's mission is to promote and support public interest attorneys in a culturally and racially diverse environment.

As managing attorney of the Albany office of the Georgia Legal Services program, she served victims of domestic violence and families facing landlord/tenant issues, including those in public housing. The office also handled public benefits issues, including social security cases, Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and unemployment. All are areas of law a traditional poverty law legal service organization would be handling, especially in rural parts of the country.

While at Bowen, Epps was initially the supervising attorney for the Mental Health Law clinic, assisting clients with mental health issues through the criminal or civil mental health commitment proceedings. Law students worked

directly with Epps to gain the knowledge and practical skills necessary for them to thrive after graduating from law school. Dean Epps notes that "it is critical that all graduates know something about the practical side of practicing law when they leave law school." She spent a total of 16 years at Bowen, shaping the minds of future lawyers and eventually becoming associate dean for academic affairs.

When asked why she applied to become the next dean of the FAMU College of Law, Epps responded that the school is mission-driven and that this is incredibly important to her personally. Currently the school's population is 50% African-

American. It continues to be one of the most diverse law schools in the country. The faculty is also extremely diverse, which provides a unique experience for the law students. Epps is proud that FAMU's policies and mission welcome students from all backgrounds to apply, attend, and thrive in a law school environment. "Although LSAT scores are a factor in our admission's process," says Epps, "they do not tell the student's whole story, nor are they the sole determinant of a student's ability to succeed in law school."

FAMU College of Law was originally opened in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1949 but was closed in 1968 when the state universities were desegregated. When FAMU's law school closed, law books from the school were moved to the law library at Florida State University. These books were returned to FAMU College of Law in Orlando and now comprise the Virgil Hawkins Collection. Members of the original graduating classes tell the story of the school's closing when they interact with students on the Orlando campus. It was a hard blow for the FAMU community, especially graduates of the original law school. They, along with many civil rights leaders, fought to reopen the school.

In 2002, FAMU opened the downtown Orlando law school, which later moved to its permanent location at 201 S. Beggs Avenue, Orlando, in the spring semester of 2006. The school received full accreditation from the American Bar Association in 2009 and maintains that status.

"Professor Epps' ability to nurture connections with the legal community and with [the] local community will support FAMU's continued growth and impact in the region and across the state. At the same time, she is an active and engaged scholar who will focus on the student experience and support faculty members' scholarly research and service activities," said then-FAMU provost Marcella David.

One year later, this statement holds true, although Epps admits the work is just beginning. As soon as she started on January 3, 2016, Dean Epps hit the ground running. At The Florida Bar winter meetings held a mere three weeks after she became dean, Epps participated in a forum that included deans from throughout the state. She frequently speaks to students, alumni, and members of the community both locally and statewide. Her first goal is to learn more about the legal culture in Orlando and Flor-



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ida at large. Epps says that she enjoys “getting out into the community and meeting alumni. Their warm reception inspires me.”

What's next for FAMU's Bright Leadership?

Dean Epps' first priority is the academic success of her students in school and on the bar exam. “I am committed to doing everything that I can to help our students pass the bar exam on the first attempt” Epps states. She also recognizes that a robust field placement program is critical to helping law students prepare for the real world of legal practice after passing the bar. Epps says that she is “excited about the interest in field placements expressed by members of the Orlando legal community. There is an obvious need for our students to serve in the community, and there are great opportunities awaiting them.” The dean also has her eye on a professional mentorship program to pair attorneys in the community with a law student, but this program will be different from most others she's been studying. Dean Epps envisions a detailed curriculum and guidelines on what lawyers and students can expect as they go through the mentoring process together. CLE credit may even be obtained. Epps notes that “mentoring is important to success in our profession. I have received enthusiastic responses to this idea and look forward to working with the legal community to make it a reality.”


The dean also expects FAMU to be more engaged and committed to community service. Volunteers from the entering class engaged in three service projects during law school orientation this fall. Dean Epps praised the work done by FAMU students under the leadership of professor Patricia Broussard, Esq., in the annual Clean-Up Parramore Day, a neighborhood service project that was held in January. This event grows year by year. Epps proudly states that the event is a shining example of what FAMU College of Law is about. “Service is our mission.”

“We want to ensure that the FAMU College of Law, its students, faculty, and staff are good neighbors who contribute to the success of our community,” Epps says. “At the same time, we want to instill in our future lawyers and leaders a burning desire to serve the underserved throughout their professional careers.”

Calls to Action

Dean Epps encourages all members of the legal community and beyond to reach out and let her know what mentorship ideas they may have or, more importantly, what knowledge skills they want to ensure FAMU College of Law is teaching its students. Epps is in the middle of a “listening tour” and is ready to listen to feedback, whether good or not, about the ways FAMU can better serve its students and the community. You are welcome to contact her at felecia.epps@famuedu.

Ericka S. Garcia, Esq., director of *pro bono* partnerships for The Florida Bar Foundation, works collaboratively with numerous state and local legal service organizations, law schools, and law firms to increase partnerships that will help serve additional low-income individuals and families. Her current *pro bono* work includes GAL cases through the Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, Inc. and an immigration case through Immigration Equality. She has been a member of the OCBA since 2013.



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