

## **Beyond Degrees: Leadership, Learning, and Social Change**

This reflection highlights the academic journeys of Dr. Monique Guillory, Dr. Ronald Stewart, and Dr. Daniel Kotzin—three educators who have shaped higher education through leadership, scholarship, and resilience. Dr. Guillory questions the relevance of intellectual life today, Dr. Stewart exemplifies perseverance through adversity, and Dr. Kotzin connects personal history to broader social issues. Together, their stories affirm education's lasting value as a tool for personal growth and social change.

Dr. Monique Guillory's question—"How valuable is intellectual life today?"—is both timely and thought-provoking. As a leader with over 30 years of experience in higher education, she carries significant weight with her perspective. Her recognition of self-made individuals like Robert F. Smith and Mr. Bees highlights the evolving nature of success in today's world. Still, her reflection on the diminishing value of a doctoral degree raises an important debate. While she may argue that advanced degrees are becoming less relevant, I believe intellectual life and formal education still hold intrinsic value—beyond financial return. Education fosters critical thinking, curiosity, and ethical grounding, qualities that are increasingly necessary in a fast-changing global society.

Dr. Guillory's own achievements stand as a testament to the enduring power of education. As the newly appointed President of Dillard University, she exemplifies how intellectual pursuit and leadership, with an impressive academic and professional background rooted in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), can drive institutional and community transformation. Her

Ph.D. from NYU and her work in higher education policy, accreditation, and student success reflect a lifelong commitment to academic excellence. This underscores that while the pathways to success may be diversifying, the foundational role of education should not be dismissed.

Her insight into generational shifts and the way we access and validate knowledge today also highlights her awareness of broader societal trends. Dr. Guillory acknowledges the growing gap between traditional educational experiences and the current digital, self-directed learning environment. Yet, she also advocates for compassion and inclusivity, especially when speaking on issues like homelessness—emphasizing the importance of recognizing each individual's contribution. In this, she reminds us that education should equip us not only with knowledge but also with empathy, adaptability, and a sense of moral responsibility. Her leadership at Dillard University is likely to reflect these values, ushering in an era of innovation while staying grounded in purpose.

Dr. Ronald Stewart's journey is both inspiring and deeply personal for me. Hearing about how he overcame discrimination and economic hardship to complete his Ph.D. resonates with my own experience of arriving in America with no financial security. Like Dr. Stewart, I too had to depend on others during my early days, uncertain of what the future held. His story of starting graduate school with only \$300 in his pocket reminded me that perseverance, self-belief, and dedication can overcome even the most challenging circumstances. His words—“You've got to be dedicated, determined”—echo strongly in my own academic path and aspirations.

What struck me most was Dr. Stewart's advice about staying focused and working in sequence—completing coursework before moving on to the dissertation and not letting advisors hinder your progress. His disciplined approach reinforces the importance of structure and accountability, especially in a Ph.D. journey that can often feel overwhelming and isolating. He reminds us that others have succeeded before us, and we, too, can push through with discipline and motivation. His practical wisdom, grounded in lived experience, is a powerful guide for any student, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Dr. Stewart's lifelong commitment to social and racial justice, along with his dedication to student success, shows the depth of his character and impact. As the founder of the African American Male Empowering Network (AAMEN) and a beloved professor at Buffalo State, he has a legacy that goes beyond academia—he's helped transform lives and build community. His recognition by city and state leaders underscores how meaningful his work has been, not just in the classroom but across Buffalo. His journey reminds me that earning a Ph.D. is not just about personal achievement—it's about lifting others as you rise and using education as a tool for lasting change.

Dr. Daniel Kotzin's story reflects how personal and academic history can deeply intertwine to shape one's path. His journey into American history, particularly Jewish and immigration history, seems rooted not only in intellectual curiosity but in a personal connection to the stories he studies. I found it particularly moving how a single book by Melville helped him choose between studying American history and literature—it shows how powerful literature and learning can be in redirecting one's life. Like Dr. Stewart, race did not seem to be a direct barrier in his academic path, but his work on ethnic and

immigrant histories reveals his deep understanding of marginalization and identity in America's past and present.

What inspired me most about Dr. Kotzin was his focus on connecting history to real-world issues. His admiration for Judah Magnes—a figure who worked to unify Jewish communities—highlights Kotzin's interest in bridging divides, a value that seems to resonate with his open, possibly liberal stance on complex issues like Palestine and Israel. His approach to historical teaching, especially on challenging topics like slavery and Japanese internment, shows his commitment to presenting history truthfully and sensitively. I admire his ability to bring difficult history into the classroom while encouraging critical thought and empathy.

Dr. Kotzin's practical advice about publishing and research stood out as especially helpful for anyone pursuing academic writing. His suggestion to always follow your sources and remain flexible with your research path is wise and applicable across disciplines. I also appreciated his thoughts on the value of written letters—how they offer something tangible and personal, unlike the fleeting and public nature of blogs and emails. He closed with a quote that deeply resonated with me: "Leadership is really about listening and making a team." That belief in collective strength and collaboration is something I hope to embody in my own academic and professional journey.

The stories of Dr. Guillory, Dr. Stewart, and Dr. Kotzin each highlight different yet equally powerful aspects of what it means to pursue knowledge, overcome obstacles, and lead with purpose. Dr. Guillory challenges us to reconsider the role of intellectual life in

today's world, without losing sight of the ethical and critical capacities education develops. Dr. Stewart reminds us that resilience, focus, and community support are vital in the face of adversity. Dr. Kotzin demonstrates how academic inquiry, grounded in personal and historical truth, can foster empathy and inspire action. These reflections reaffirm that education is not merely a credential—it is a transformative process that shapes leaders, uplifts communities, and drives meaningful change in society.