

Kenyatta University welcomes ISU alumna to make history

Mwihaki Mugenda is first female elected to honored position

By Tara Flockhart / Daily Staff Writer | Wednesday, March 29, 2006 2:00 AM CST

Professor Olive Mwihaki Mugenda, 52, made history early last week in Kenya. The ISU alumna edged past three male competitors to claim Kenyatta University's most prestigious position, becoming the first woman vice chancellor at a public university.

Only three other women join Mugenda as vice chancellors in Kenya, one of whom - Professor Leah Marangu of Africa Nazarene University - is also an ISU alumna and taught Mugenda. The remaining two women are Professor Rosalind Mutua of Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology and Professor Freida Brown of the United States International University.

Unlike Kenyatta, however, all three of these universities are private.

Francis Mwangi, an ISU graduate student in curriculum and instruction, attended college with Mugenda in the late '70s at Kenyatta University - one of Kenya's oldest universities, which has an undergraduate student enrollment of 21,000. He has stayed in contact with her ever since.

"She is very hardworking and disciplined," Mwangi said. "There's no doubt that this appointment was based only on merit and not affirmative action."

Mwangi, who said he also knows Mugenda's three primary competitors, said several things set her apart from the rest. Among these are her goals for turning Kenyatta into a modern international university equipped with research and information technology, links with many other universities and her recent experience as deputy vice chancellor of finance and planning.

"She is very far in her vision for the university," he said. "Now she needs to exploit the good will of the situation and get some leeway to select a team that will help her to accomplish a shared vision."

Robert Mazur, associate professor of sociology, said that there have been a number of changes in chancellorships and vice chancellorships at universities.

"Generally it's been a positive change," he said. "The replacement of an old order has brought a greater diversity of thought and background."

Prior to replacing her predecessor, Professor Everett Standa, as vice chancellor for a five-year term, Mugenda held many positions within the educational system.

She began as a graduate assistant in 1980 and eventually became a full professor. During this time, she served as chairwoman of the school of applied and human sciences between 1999 and 2002 and created three new departments, including family and consumer sciences and tourism.

Mugenda has remained in touch with faculty and students at Iowa State, and has made several visits to campus. She has also sent many of her students to Ames to study through the help of scholarships and summer programs.

In addition to her educational positions, Mugenda has co-authored six books, including one with her husband, Professor Abel Mugenda entitled Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.

Abel Mugenda, also an ISU alumnus, is a lecturer at the University of Nairobi. They have four children.

Mwihaki Mugenda was unavailable for comment.