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The Black Professor's Burden: Teaching African-American Literature and Culture in a White Classroom

Abstract
As an African-American female at a predominantly White college, I feel the added sense of duty that other women and minorities in academia frequently feel, the pull to serve not only as a teacher but also as a mentor, advisor, and role model for minority students on campus. As one of two professors who teach African American Literature and Culture - and the only African American -I also feel, perhaps mistakenly, as if I am viewed by the White students, and maybe by the African American students as well, as the ambassador to African-American culture. I sense that the White students expect to learn everything about Black culture from me, in fifteen weeks. I am not merely teaching a subject, then, but representing it as well. As I learned over the past three years at this college, the role of minority professor at a predominantly white college is one of constant negotiation.

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Teaching an African-American literature and culture course at a rural, western New York college provides numerous and unexpected challenges. As a whole, the students, most of them coming from small, White, family communities in the region, have very little knowledge of black literature or history, and even less experience with African Americans, aside from what they see in the movies and television, or what they hear on the radio. As such, they are often excited about learning material that they have otherwise been deprived of, either because the information was not taught to them in high school - except for the occasional Black History Month unit or texts taught under the pretext of "multiculturalism" -or because they have not sought out the information on their own. These students frequently leave my classroom having gained a new perspective on a culture with which they have had little prior experience. Since many of the students in the class are studying to be primary and secondary school teachers, they also value learning material that they can then teach to their own students in the future.

What could possibly be the problem, then, with having a classroom full of (predominantly) enthusiastic students personally and professionally interested in the material? On the surface, nothing. But I feel that my perception of my role in the classroom differs greatly from the expectations that my students have for me. As an African-American female at a predominantly White college, I feel the added sense of duty that other women and minorities in academia frequently feel, the pull to serve not only as a teacher but also as a mentor, advisor, and role

model for minority students on campus. I have not shied away from this responsibility, however, as I have served as an advisor to the Black Student Union and am currently the new coordinator of the African American Studies Program. But as one of two professors who teach African American Literature and Culture -and the only African American -I also feel, perhaps mistakenly, as if I am viewed by the White students, and maybe by the African American students as well, as *the* ambassador to African-American culture. I am mindful that mine is often the only course on minority culture that the students will take, and most likely I am the only minority professor that they will have in college (and perhaps the only one that they have ever had). Additionally, I sense that the White students expect to learn *everything* about black culture from me, in fifteen weeks. I am not merely *teaching* a subject, then, but *representing* it as well.

But perhaps these expectations are merely a product of my own imagination. Real or imagined, however, these expectations inform my classroom on a daily basis. As I learned over the past three years at this college, the role of minority professor at a . predominantly white college is one of constant negotiation.

Presenter

Saundra Liggins is an assistant professor of English at the State University of New York College at Fredonia. She teaches classes in African American literature and culture, the Harlem Renaissance, African American autobiography, multicultural literature, and gothic literature.