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Western Michigan University

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Survival Strategies for Black Arts Faculty on Predominantly White Campuses

Trudy Cobb

Western Michigan University

“A candid look will be taken at the pros and cons of being an artist of color working in a predominantly white institution of higher learning . . . The session will not sugar-coat the realities of being a minority in a sometimes marginalized unit of a university.”

The realities of being a *minority* in a *majority* environment are simplified for the faculty in the performance and visual arts. It is difficult to determine how the work of an artist compares to that of a scholar whose work is published in a permanent format. The work of a performing artist changes with each performance and ends at the close of each performance. The artist/faculty are always striving to ensure that the value of their work is not overlooked and undervalued by the college and university administration. The 1998 Conference of the International Association of Blacks in Dance included a panel discussion on Black Dance Educators at White colleges and universities. The panel discussion was videotaped and segments of the tape will be used in a workshop to provide a backdrop for analysis of artist/educator experiences on predominantly white campuses. Although the panelists are all dance artists, their experiences are transferable to other arts disciplines.

A candid look will be taken at the pros and cons of being an artist of color working in a predominantly white institution of higher learning. Issues covered will include understanding departmental and university policies, the value of mentorship, how to avoid becoming pigeon-holed, what resources are available and how do you access them, the value of networking within and without the arts and techniques of self-preservation. There are a myriad of opportunities that may be available to a faculty member, but where does one begin looking to find those that apply to the arts.

The session will not sugar-coat the realities of being a minority in a sometimes marginalized unit of a university. Negative and unpleasant occurrences will be reviewed and ways in which to understand the reasons for such incidents will be explored.

Suggestions and tips will be offered to assist in avoiding, warding off and/or foreseeing negative circumstances. Personal stress can be relieved, if one is able to reduce the number of negative encounters he/she has to navigate through.

Strategies to reduce your workload will be shared. Although many individuals outside of higher education think that being a faculty member is a "cushy" job, we know differently. Some of the assignments that we are given or asked to take on are not essential to our value to a university. Faculty members of color are asked to serve on every diversity and retention committee. The arts faculty also are expected to actively engage in the recruitment of students of color. This can mean a considerable amount of work and time

away from our studios. Tips will be provided to assist one in determining which assignments have the greatest career value.

What should one do during their summer break? After an intensive academic year, most of us need a break from the hectic schedule of teaching, creating, mentoring students, evaluation and committee work. One must not rest for long, because create or perish applies to arts faculty. What sorts of activities should be given serious consideration? Professional work during the summer can affect one's ability to gain tenure and/ or promotion.

PRESENTER

Trudy Cobb, Associate Professor of Dance at Western Michigan University has studied many styles and techniques of dance including Dunham technique with Clifford Fears, jazz with Pepsi Bethel, Bucket technique with Garth Fagan, African dance with Chuck Davis and African American dance styles with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Cobb earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in dance at the University of Michigan and a Bachelor of Science in Dance Education at Eastern Michigan University. She toured and performed with The Bucket Dance Theatre and continues to perform as a soloist or with other artists under the auspices of Trudy Cobb & Dances. She has been a faculty member and/or guest artist at SUNY Binghamton, Memphis State University, SUNY Brockport, Arizona State University, Overton High School in Memphis, Saginaw High School for the Arts, Central Michigan University and at Wayne State University. She has collaborated with composer, Michael Holober (NY) and orchestral director, Timothy Perry (NY); percussionist, Yeshwua Israel; playwright, Karen Annette Brown; choreographer, Linda K. Simmons; and the director, Von Washington. She has directed "Ain't Misbehavin" for the Cider Mill Playhouse (NY); choreographed "Purlie" for Phoenix' Black Theater Troupe, "Black Nativity" and "Once on This Island" for Kalamazoo's Civic Black Theatre and received a grant to set an evening-length work to Stevie Wonder's "Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants." Cobb continues to choreograph for the concert stage and musicals. Having served SUNY-Binghamton as associate dean for academic affairs and Western Michigan University chair of the department of dance, she is frequently invited as a presenter in the areas of arts administration and arts education as well as dance technique. Her research area is the preservation of African dance forms by regionally-based African American dance companies.