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2011

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Scholar Commons Citation

Cobb-Roberts, Deirdre and Agosto, Vonzell, "Underrepresented Women in Higher Education: An Overview" (2011). *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications*. 1.

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Underrepresented Women in Higher Education: An Overview

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Schools and colleges of education are responsible for preparing pre-service and in-service professionals (i.e., teachers, counselors, administrators) to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse society. An institutional culture that is conducive to teaching and promoting diversity with social justice at its core is critical in this discussion. Central to understanding how social justice and diversity are articulated in institutions of higher education, are the experiences of female faculty and administrators from racial and ethnic groups underrepresented in the U.S. system of higher education. As of 2005, approximately 1% of full professors were Black, 1% Asian, 0.6% Hispanic, and 0.1% American Indian (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). To address the sparsity of underrepresented women faculty, we have assembled a collection of articles that examine a wide range of their experiences while working in higher education. In our opinion these articles can be informative for those scholars aspiring to enter academia or remain (i.e., tenure, promotion, retention), and for those college and university decision-makers in their efforts to sustain them. Given the themes captured by the articles herein, advancement and persistence in academia for underrepresented female scholars continue to be impressive. According to the Urban Dictionary's (1999 – 2011) website, the word "work" as in "you better work" (1999 – 2011a), or "workin' it" (1999 – 2011b), is used to give praise or approval to another person and is analogous to: What you have just said or done is very impressive. The articles reflect various meanings in the title of this themed issue. For instance, one might work in academia while workin' academia (or doing it well), as in demonstrating agency and persistence despite having to negotiate unsupportive academic climates. Other creative uses of language (metaphors, analogies) are present in this issue including academia as extreme sport, women as canaries in a coalmine, and purple and lavender to express theoretical perspectives.

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The articles in this issue represent multiple genres of research, including narrative approaches, various methods, and theoretical perspectives that reveal overarching themes such as mentorship, collaboration, longevity, resistance, and spirituality. In the article, “Purple is to Lavender: Womanism, Resistance, and the Politics of Naming,” Dimpal Jain and Caroline Turner describe how the politics of naming, bears down on them and informs their politics of persisting in the academy. They depict how they, as underrepresented or non-White women at two different points along the tenure and promotion continuum, participate in a relationship that challenges the traditional framing of mentor and mentee as giver and receiver. By engaging in the politics of naming they came to identify womanism as a theoretical refuge. Their article leaves us contemplating how womanism, if substituted for feminism, would “fit in the mouths” of other underrepresented women scholars and whether a framework of critical race womanism would produce additional challenging issues. The theme of mentoring continues in “The Spirit Bears Witness: Reflections of Two Black Women’s Journey in the Academy.” Authors Gretchen G. Generett and Sheryl Cozart describe the development of a relationship across time as professors similarly positioned along the career track. The development of their relationship occurs through informal interviews that help to bridge their personal, professional, and spiritual lives. Their description of this approach as a healing methodology contributes to understandings of the ways that non-White female scholars come to know and grow in the academy. They invite readers to explore whether the avenues for the development of deep and multiple meaningful relationships among these female scholars are constricted. While the informal development of relationships among female scholars in academia is a theme in this issue, more formal opportunities for developing communities and cultures are also presented. In “Academe as Extreme Sport: Black Women, Faculty Development, and Networking,” Dannielle Joy Davis, Cassandra Chaney, LaWanda Edwards, G. Kaye Thompson-Rogers, and Kathryn T. Gines describe more deliberate institutional efforts to sustain Black female scholars. The metaphor of extreme sport helps to draw attention to how stress and speed can impede the performance of some women scholars. Given that mentoring programs can be different in their methods, the task for these female academics is to understand the kind of support that matters most to their longevity.

In addition to faculty members, the experiences of female scholars as administrators and in other positions help to illuminate the broader academic culture and what is required of faculty who undertake these roles. In “Lessons from a Black Woman Administrator: ‘I’m Still Here’.” Joane Kilgour Dowdy and Awilda Hamilton provide some insight into the often neglected topic of how non-White women navigate academia from administrative roles. This article

raises the question of how “Willa” and similarly positioned women persist despite the odds. The longevity of Willa’s career is placed against a backdrop of statistics demonstrating the underrepresentation of women in higher education. A career trajectory such as Willa’s is significant to understanding the broad range of experiences that can coexist under the theme of work in academia. Additionally, in “Resistance Meets Spirituality in Academia: “I Prayed on it!”” by Vonzell Agosto and Zorka Karanxha, the multi-faceted role that Annie Heafy Nero plays inside and outside the context challenges the idea, that work in academia occurs only in the context of the host institution. This article demonstrates how commitment beyond career ambitions can help to sustain one’s career, especially when facing resistance from several fronts. From Annie Heafy Nero’s life history, we learn how spirituality transcends and permeates her work as well as how obstacles to career longevity can reach beyond the institution from which one works.

The question of longevity in academia is also raised in the article “The Miner’s Canary: A Critical Race Perspective on the Representation of Black Women Full Professors.” Authors Natasha Croom and Lori Patton describe the challenging future of Black women reaching the level of full professor in the academy. Their use of the metaphor “the miner’s canary” and the ill health of the canary is a call for a more systematic critique of systems of promotion and rank. The authors call for a critical race research agenda that interrogates the intersection of racism and sexism to further discuss the role of White supremacy and male dominance in the promotion process leading to the rank of full professor. In addition to the formal procedures and processes that are significant to whether non-White women scholars continue to work in academia, there are also academic spaces where racism and sexism continue to assault the development of their academic identity and sense of membership or belonging. Crystal Chambers, author of the article “Candid Reflections on the Departure of Black Women Faculty from Academe in the United States,” describes the daily microinsults, microinvalidations and microassaults against Black women faculty that appear over and over in blogs written by apparent academics. The blogs provide another context that reinforces the marginalized position that Black female faculty occupy. Comments posted in the blogs reveal racial and gender bias, and echo similar attacks that go unchecked in the academy. Another area that leaves these female faculty vulnerable and with little recourse, when their credibility and viability are threatened is in the process of teaching and evaluations of teaching by students.

We found few studies on course evaluations, especially those that compare ratings between and among Black, Latino, Asian American and White female faculty (e.g., Delgado-Romero., Manlove, Manlove, & Hernandez, 2007; McGowan, 2000). In the article “Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness: Implications for Non-White Women in the Academy” Bettye P. Smith and Juanita Johnson-Bailey add to the scant literature on the use of end of course evaluations for non-White women faculty. This quantitative study describes the effectiveness of female faculty and challenges faced by female faculty. There was a significant difference between White female faculty and non-White female faculty, where White female faculty had higher mean scores than “other” faculty. This finding can have implications for decisions concerning personnel and career advancement and can lead readers to further question the decision-making process surrounding promotion, tenure, and award systems based on performance (e.g., merit, teaching awards). Likewise, in the article “Betwixt Safety and Shielding in the Academy: Confronting Institutional Gendered Racism—Again,” Deirdre Cobb-Roberts explores her complicity in supporting institutional gendered racism while teaching a course addressing diversity issues. Through the metaphor of safety, she revisits an earlier experience where she unwittingly supported White male privilege and supremacy and suppressed her voice. In contrast, the topic of othermothering, in the article “Othermothering: A Personal Narrative Exploring Relationships between Black Female Faculty and Students,” by Lynnette Mawhinney describes a bond between students and professors. She describes othermothering as the relationship between older and younger members of a Black community where older members act as fictive kin or extended family to care for younger members in the community. Through this personal narrative, readers come to know and understand how she sacrificed her own well-being for the good of her students. The author defines the teacher-student relationship and the inherent expectations that were enacted in her environment. She concludes with an honest and critical discussion of the emotional and personal toll that othermothering, although needed in some instances, can take on faculty members to impact their self-care and ultimately their progress in academe.

This themed issue explicates the experiences of underrepresented women in higher education institutions and the externally imposed isolation and devaluing of their daily work. These articles are drawn from the experiences of Black and other non-White female faculty and are designed to provide a view of academe that is often neglected in academic literature. Further, this issue extends the discussion of the knotted trek these women face in academe which is captured in Robinson and Clardy’s (2010) edited book of autoethnographies about women in academe. The commitments and strategies these women have

undertaken help to sketch a rich and nuanced portrait of how female scholars from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are workin' academia in order to work in academia.

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