

Stepping focus of Conference

by Chris Gale
Staff Writer

Scholars and artists from the United States and Mexico gathered at Virginia Tech Friday and Saturday for the First National Conference on Stepping.

Kirsten Smith, assistant director of the dance group Step Afrika!, said stepping is a form of group dance that originated from African-American Greek letter organizations.

"You usually have some sort of vocals, singing, chants or vocal cadences," Smith said. "You usually see people moving in unison; you see high energy and you use all of your body."

Smith also said stepping is very percussive.

"The hands and the feet are the instruments as far as the percussion goes, the feet are the bass and hands are the treble," Smith said. "I call stepping explosive dance — that's where you just use all of your energy and there's no pacing it. I don't think there is anything quite like that."

Elizabeth Fine, director of the humanities program in the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, organized the conference and is also author of the upcoming book, "Soulstepping: Development and Transformation of African-American Step Shows."

"I was in a position to call the con-



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Twenty-one artists from North America participated in the First National Conference on Stepping Friday and Saturday.

Collegiate Times - Tuesday, April 10, 2001 p. 143

ference, because I was publishing my book and my research for it had given me contact with many of the people around the country doing research on stepping," she said.

"I knew that the time was ripe to address many of the issues that are emerging," Fine said.

Carol Branch, a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles who attended the conference, said she considered stepping to be an important way to maintain African-American identity.

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Stepping: Performance art growing in popularity

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"It is a way for African Americans to negotiate their place in the fraternity, on the campus and within the larger community," Branch said.

She said stepping is especially important for African Americans in predominantly white institutions like UCLA and Tech.

Fine also said stepping is increasing in popularity.

"Stepping is really blossoming and growing," Fine said. "It is being practiced by high schools, youth groups, churches and Latino, Asian and multicultural fraternities and sororities."

The history and origins of step, how step is used today and challenges facing it in the future, were the predominate themes in the conference, Branch said.

Lawrence Ross, author of "The Divine Nine: The History of African-American Fraternities and Sororities," who attended the conference said he is worried that step-

ping is becoming just another form of money-making entertainment rather than a way to serve and benefit communities.

"(African-American Greek organizations) will perform at an event where they will receive \$500 and the private promoter (of the event) will receive \$60,000," Ross said. "(Stepping) is a main component of our community service mission. We should be making the \$60,000 rather than the promoter. But priorities and consciousness about what you are doing will allow you to step back and say, 'The show cannot go on without us and therefore we need this money to do what we need to do, not a \$500 check or a shiny trophy.'"

Ross said stepping show money should be used to provide scholarships for African Americans.

Ross said he hopes more conferences such as the one held at Tech will take place in the future to ensure the role of stepping in African-American history.