

Caring Geography

The question of balance has often loomed large in my conversations with colleagues and students as we struggle with how to live a full and rewarding life while being engaged in demanding careers. Most worrying is that students tend to raise this question after having observed me for some period of time! In my conversations with many of you, I find that a large number of us are deeply involved in care-work, not only as parents, but as care-givers for those who are sick and/or aging.

While society has begun to respond to issues of child care and the education of our children, many families are still left with difficult challenges and responsibilities due to dramatic cost increases and benefit retrenchments in health care and retirements, compounded by substantial reductions in social welfare provision by the U.S. state. In this column, I want to talk about the importance of "care-work": the diverse activities that sustain people or bring them pleasure including child-rearing, domestic work, care-giving for the sick or elderly, community activism, education and consumption. We can strengthen geography, and make whole lives possible, by respecting and accommodating care-work as part of the way we conduct our discipline.

It may seem odd to raise this question of how we create balanced and fulfilling lives since many of us are attracted to geographic work (especially academia) by the flexibility and freedom it offers. And yet, in our fast-paced, fully-wired, technologically-enabled lives, this can be "freedom" to work all of the time. The imperatives and sensibilities of our flexible, globalized U.S. culture present real challenges to creating meaningful balance in our lives. I see several contributions from thinking about how care-work is integral to our lives as geographers.

If we take seriously the profound connections between the many roles we play in our lives, we can build stronger institutions, healthier departments, and even better theories and courses. I suggest that

we have a great deal to gain from shifting away from thinking of a rigid separation of public and private spheres and instead viewing the many elements of our lives as inseparable, as all fundamentally contributing to our individual creative work, and even more importantly, as fundamental parts of society's work. We can strengthen departments and collegial relationships and can contribute to the health of our discipline over the long haul if we take the care work of life seriously. How you might ask? Here are some ideas.

First and foremost, respecting care-work will help to build healthy departments. As a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 9, 2004: C4) points out "...no one survives a forty-year career in this business, or any, without confronting personal tragedy." One of the central challenges for us as a profession going forwards is to figure out how we can construct spaces in which people feel valued for engaging in the care-work which sustains our lives and our very society. If we recognize that the pressures of care-work are societal and not merely personal versus career choices, we will think differently about how we evaluate and reward each other and about how we advise and support our students.

Care-work is society's work because we are living in a political-economic context that presents real challenges to welfare states, public universities, geography departments, and to households and families. Specifically, under flexible accumulation and globalization, we are witnessing the state's reconfiguration of social policies as well as retrenchments in benefits provided by corporations and institutions as they adjust to global competitive pressures. These shifts are accompanied in North America by the devolution of social welfare provision to non-governmental

organizations, charities, communities, and families, all of which are less well resourced and less publicly accountable than the nation-state. These shifts place additional burdens on us all, coupled with demographic forces such as aging baby boomers and their parents who are living longer but with fewer resources to rely on. All of this is coupled with the rise of a political culture which stresses paid work as the key site of personal worth and that in the process, devalues care-work.

Second, our geographical research and teaching agendas will expand if we attend to the fundamental importance of care-work. A focus on care-work encourages more research on health and disease, on the restructuring of educational systems and

welfare programs, on questions of how, and where, we provide care for our aging population and on the restructuring of social policies across the globe and their implications for social justice. We would pay more attention to the shifting dynamics of social reproduction and to children as neglected subjects of geographic research and teaching. Of course, all of this is in addition to ongoing, vibrant work on environmental protection, conservation, and sustainability—other crucial aspects of caring geographies.

Third, taking seriously the value and centrality of caring work to our lives will help us to build a more diverse discipline and to create more inclusive workplaces. Researching and teaching about care-work focuses attention on women, immigrants, and underrepresented groups, who often are most often involved in caring work and/or political work in their communities. We can attract and retain a diverse range of people in geography if we respect and value the full range of contributions people make to departments, to communities, to teaching, and to research agendas.



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I urge you to strengthen geography by engaging with care-work in constructive ways. We can construct professional environments that take seriously the challenges of dual career couples, of the oncoming wave of aging loved ones and the inadequacies of our health care and

social support systems. We can be vigilant in protecting policies that provide professional leave to engage in care-work and we can support our colleagues in taking advantage of these opportunities. Finally, respecting and understanding care-work supports and nurtures our colleagues and

our professional relationships as we cope with these complex and multiple challenges in our lives. ■

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New relationships were also established between geographers and researchers from other disciplines around the common-ground themes of the conference. Other disciplines represented by minority scholars at the conference included, among others, sociology, history, law, anthropology, political science, religious studies, landscape architecture, geosciences, economics, urban planning, health sciences, African American studies, global studies, woman and gender studies, public policy and administration, American studies, ethnicity studies, peace studies, and environmental science.

An additional tangible outcome of this conference was the surprise announcement of a gift of \$450,000 in GIS software to Howard University on the last day of the meeting by ESRI's Todd Rogers. Rogers, a widely respected African-American leader in the field of large-scale GIS applications, noted that as he was participating in the

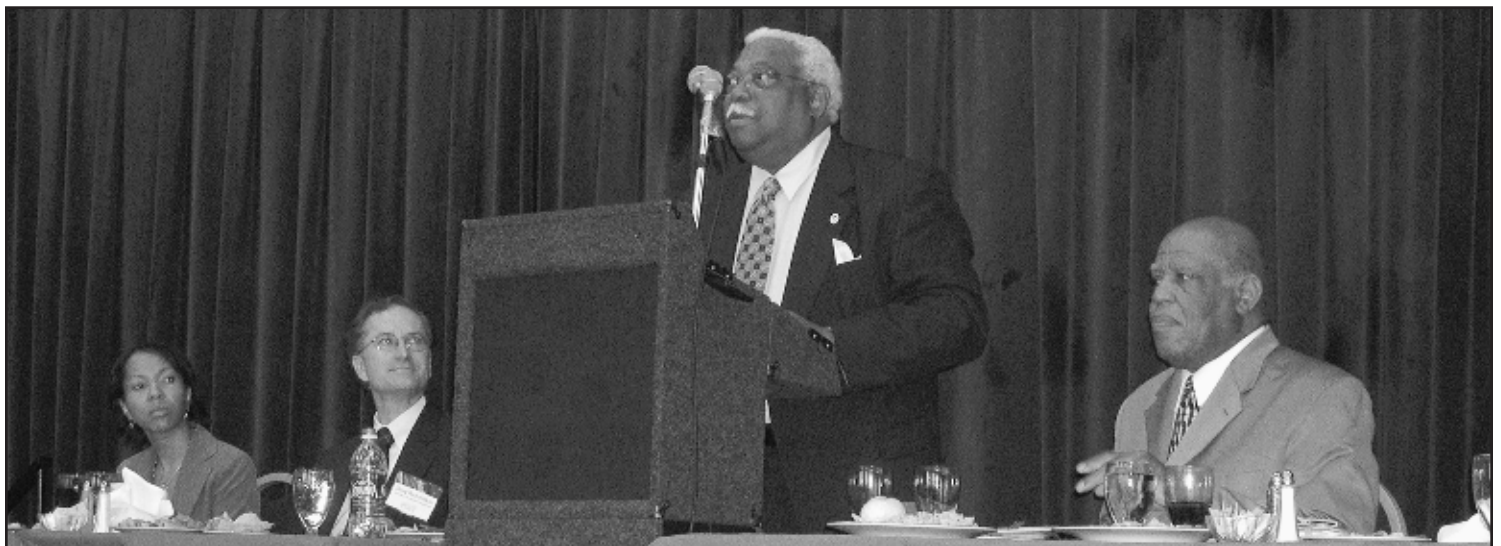
conference he was struck by the disparity of the geography based resources available to Howard students, and those at the U-Penn's Wharton School, where he had been visiting the previous week, and as a consequence decided to arrange this donation so that the minority students and faculty at Howard might have access the same level of resources as their counterparts at Wharton. Howard University's Vice-Provost of Research Orlando Taylor welcomed the grant as an important step in enabling Howard to expand geographic teaching and research capabilities across many disciplines at the University.

The AAG is continuing to build on this conference and on our previous work with Howard University, via joint research proposals, mentoring programs (which work both ways), and regular meetings to explore and develop ways in which geography can play an expanded role at Howard and other

minority-serving institutions in the U.S. and around the world. These bridges are also being designed to help bring more minority students and faculty to our geography departments and to address the important diversity needs of U.S. geography at all levels and in all sectors of employment.

Several geographers attending the Race/Ethnicity and Place Conference, among them Past AAG President Larry Brown, commented that this was the best conference they had ever attended. There was indeed a general consensus of something important happening at the meeting, a sense of auspicious beginnings. It will now be up to all of us—working together—to ensure that these beginnings are carried through to real and meaningful endings. ■

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Howard University Provost and Chief Academic Officer Richard English addresses the Race/Ethnicity and Place Conference. Seated from left: Terrolyn Carter, Program Manager for Graduate Education at Howard University; Douglas Richardson, AAG Executive Director; and Orlando Taylor, Dean of the Graduate School and Associate Provost for Research at Howard University.