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College Teaching as Care Work

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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful for undergraduate research assistant Rhianna McConnell.

College Teaching as Care Work

In “Emerging Theories of Care Work,” England (2005) defines care work occupations as those “providing a service to people that helps develop their capabilities” and notes “all levels of teaching from pre-school through university professors” fit this definition (p. 383).

Unfortunately, care work is devalued because it is gendered feminine (England, 2005). Colleges need to actively counter the narrative that care is detrimental, peripheral, or optional for faculty. If not, faculty already marginalized by the academy do this essential work and students needing care are further marginalized as deficient.

Consider the reader comments generated by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “Thanks for Listening” (Green, 2015). Green (2015) writes about her experience with undergraduate and graduate students visiting her office to share distress and seek guidance. She identifies these conversations, the referrals to campus offices, and the follow-up to make sure student needs are met as invisible care work that is often relegated to women. Green’s article generated critical comments. One commenter wrote, “The question is... whether we want universities to ‘raise’ independent professionals or helicoptered children.” Another noted, your job is “to teach your subject, not to act as a care-giver.” The argument is both that care should not be part of college teaching and that it generates dependency. Even those commenters who admitted to gendered patterns in academic care work focused on ways to resist gendered norms and expectations, rather than identify care work as valuable. Some gave advice for how to limit engagement with students suggesting Green should tell students her calendar is booked or she can only talk and walk. They reduced the gendered labor Green describes to a personal problem she could solve with better choices.

Care work in academia generated similar reader comments in the essay, “Digging Our Heels in: Gender in the Classroom” published in *Inside Higher Education* (Gold, 2019). Gold (2019) focused on gendered care work and clearly argued that rather than being a problem, care work is an opportunity to develop deeper engagement with students. Gold identified emotional office hours sessions as “care moments” and asked, “If I can let them know that I am unequivocally in their corner, will they be inspired, in turn, to work harder or to take more creative and academic risks?” Like that of Green, Gold’s essay generated many critiques. One commentator wrote, “She clearly enjoys conforming to the gender norms” and Gold “invited” the labor of care work. Again, comments reduced Gold’s burden from structural inequality to an individual problem. In contrast, research shows women, and especially Black women, are more likely to be asked by students and the institution to do care work (Craddock, 2013; Edwards, 2003; Graham, 2013). Close relationships can promote equity and inclusion and help undergraduate and graduate students thrive; the issue is care tends to be expected of certain faculty and not others. When care is racialized, feminized, and undervalued it is exploitation (Graham, 2013).

Both Gold and Green identify care work as primarily occurring in office hours sessions involving care moments with emotional students. Care moments are important. Faculty play a critical role in making sure undergraduate and graduate student needs are identified and met. The problem with the Green and Gold essays is they identify care moments as peripheral to teaching; they happen one-on-one, in office hours, and are addressed by good listening, tissues, and referrals to student services.

The caring moment is just one element of professorial care work. Caring pedagogy is central to teaching. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) argues against the traditional mind/body split in education and for an engaged classroom pedagogy that emphasizes student well-being and care. At its core, caring teaching is a relationship approach to pedagogy where meeting students' varied needs promotes learning (Dowie-Chin & Schroeder, 2020; Jones & Shelton, 2022; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Scholars argue that care in the classroom should center "support and connections in relation to learning" (Jones & Shelton, 2022, p. 3). Suggestions for building relationships include listening, seeking student feedback, conveying to students belief in their capacity to excel, demonstrating commitment to students, sharing personal experiences and inviting students to do the same, and being accessible outside of class (Quinlan, 2016). Some of these techniques are micro-affirmations. For more time intensive strategies, faculty with some autonomy can work care into syllabi. For example, faculty can substitute a re-write/re-test instead of a new assignment. Caring pedagogy serves all students in contrast to faculty defining certain students as deficient, thus needing care.

Colleges need to institutionalize care in ways that include all faculty and students to promote equity. Support resources can be required on syllabi. Colleges can create comprehensive care-teams and streamline referral systems. Colleges can train all faculty in a trauma-informed teaching model that explains that trauma is common, it impacts learning, and can be effectively addressed with caring pedagogy (Oehme et al., 2019). Colleges can ensure equitable distribution of advising for faculty with these roles.

It is not surprising many women faculty resist the caring roles that are expected of them; they know some colleagues see care as either deleterious or optional passion projects. Scholars of care work and higher education pedagogy, in contrast, argue that care work is essential. Colleges and universities need to make it clear that care work is an expectation of all professors and good for all students by providing training and assessments to enhance care in the classroom, office, lab, and the field. At its core, caring pedagogy helps students develop their capabilities, which is essential to higher education.

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