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An Ethos of Care

Emily Skop, Martina Angela Caretta, Caroline Faria and Jessi L. Smith offer other scholars engaged in research collaborations a pledge to help foster and sustain more equitable relationships.

By

[Emily Skop \(/users/emily-skop\)](#), [Martina Angela Caretta \(/users/martina-angela-caretta\)](#), [Caroline Faria \(/users/caroline-faria\)](#) and [Jessi L. Smith \(/users/jessi-l-smith\)](#)

// October 15, 2021

[Collaborative research \(https://ori.hhs.gov/education/products/niu_collabresearch/index.html\)](https://ori.hhs.gov/education/products/niu_collabresearch/index.html) can be intrinsically rewarding and highly impactful, especially as researchers from multiple vantage points pose new questions, explore new dimensions of complex problems and accelerate discoveries. Collaborative research also has the potential to improve diversity, inclusion and equity in science and the scientific workforce, which, as a recent editorial in [Nature \(https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05326-3\)](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05326-3) argues, is “the right thing to do -- both morally and to help build a sustainable future for research that truly represents society.”

However, power-laden dynamics among collaborators, exacerbated by the [continued neoliberalization \(https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/05/03/neoliberal-academy-age-trump\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/05/03/neoliberal-academy-age-trump) of the academy, can also raise many challenges that often go unaddressed, which in turn can stymie progress in achieving both scientific and societal goals. Indeed, the “business” of higher education, which includes benchmarking, ranking metrics and myriad other [often biased \(https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.3001282\)](https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.3001282) measures of productivity, transforms the potential richness of research collaboration into quantifiable outputs, fundable ideas and a “return on investment” mentality that raises the bar and narrowly defines what counts in the working lives of scholars.

At the same time, what may have started as collaborations born out of mutual interests can turn into high levels of competition that can reinforce [“unkind and aggressive” research conditions \(https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1755458621000074?dgcid=rss_sd_all\)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1755458621000074?dgcid=rss_sd_all), [disadvantage racial and ethnic minority faculty \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/06/07/nonwhite-faculty-face-significant-](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/06/07/nonwhite-faculty-face-significant-)

[disadvantages-tenure-track-opinion](#)), and further an academic culture that embeds [a sense of isolation and loneliness at work](#) (<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319642239>).

Thus, as we and other researchers in the United States and throughout the world participate more in [team science](#) (<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/19007/enhancing-the-effectiveness-of-team-science>), we should ask ourselves the following: How can we foster and sustain more equitable relationships with our research collaborations?

We can draw inspiration from feminist, antiracist, queer and antiableist efforts to imagine and strive to create other, ethical ways of being in the academy. This wide-ranging body of work explores more general [notions of care](#) (<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/matters-of-care>), in knowledge production, including [cultivating prosocial working cultures](#) (<https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/117/39/24154.full.pdf>), [building supportive academic environments](#) (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cag.12275>), [valuing “slow scholarship.”](#) (<https://utorontopress.com/9781487521851/the-slow-professor/>) [practicing effective mentoring](#) (<https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/the-science-of-effective-mentoring-in-stemm>) and [making laboratory culture more inclusive](#) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1111/gere.12369>).

A common thread throughout this work is the vital need for scholars to foster ethical and equitable relationships with one another and nurture just academic futures. That means advancing not simply relationships where [liberal notions of meritocracy and equality dominate](#) (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02681-y?utm_source=Nature+Briefing&utm_campaign=f22eda1ce6-briefing-dy-20200924&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c9dfd39373-f22eda1ce6-43631569), but rather those that are forged in [recognition of the historic and enduring academic legacies of inequity, injustice and intellectual exploitation](#) (<https://ecoevorxiv.org/4a9p8/>) and that act to [redress those injustices](#) (<https://www.pnas.org/content/117/27/15378?fbclid=IwAR35UV0UQBb8Ex>). We must forge new modes of research collaboration that both question those parts of academic culture that we want to change and that further encourage more inclusive scholarship and caring relationships.

An Ethos of Care Pledge

We take this opportunity to offer other scholars engaged in research collaborations an “ethos of care” pledge that we ourselves use to set new norms and new strategies around collaboration.

Establishing and maintaining collaborations depends on the ability and willingness of scholars to work together and create mutually agreed-upon goals and responsibilities. We argue that collaborations benefit from honestly discussing each of the 10 points outlined in the pledge at the

beginning of any collaboration. We encourage research collaborators to revise any of those 10 points so as to tailor the pledge to suit the specific needs of each of the individuals and the team.

We also contend that collaborators must have regular and frequent communication throughout their work together, particularly regarding their respective expectations and obligations. Revisiting and revising the pledge according to the changing interests of the participating scholars and the team are vital to accomplishing agreed-upon goals.

This pledge can also serve as a prompt for navigating difficult conversations around the inherent imbalances of power, acknowledging the vulnerability of various collaborators and the potential consequences for everyone involved. Whether the collaborators decide to sign written agreements based on these prompts and/or other elements typically found in a memorandum of understanding is a decision for the collaborators to make together -- although [such more formal agreements are considered a best practice \(https://wcrif.org/montreal-statement/file\)](https://wcrif.org/montreal-statement/file), especially for longer-term collaborations. With that in mind, we offer the following ethos of care pledge.

In our work together, we promise to:

1. Center our academic pursuits around a feminist ethic of knowledge production -- one that recognizes the long-standing inequities and injustices of academe.
2. Embrace an explicitly antiracist, feminist approach that highlights the compounded academic pressures and hypervisibility/invisibility of BIPOC scholars.
3. Develop, promote and reward strategies to do academic work that centers social justice imperatives.
4. Make space to hear and learn from uncomfortable, innovative and transgressive ideas.
5. Create transparency and fairness by setting, communicating and respecting clear boundaries. Take time each year to reflect and revise these boundaries in recognition that over the course of our personal and professional lives those boundaries adapt and change.
6. Protect our mental, emotional and physical well-being and growth in the research process by supporting each other's professional and personal aspirations.
7. Share and rotate the labor of intellectually joyful and tedious tasks.

8. Mentor up, down and across professional and personal life-course stages to unsettle hierarchical relationships and promote an ethos of care.
9. Disrupt perfection: share insights and experiences overcoming challenges, failures and rejections as well as motivations, successes and ambitions.
10. Humanize our work by valuing the intellectual and ethical centrality of friendship, connection and responsibility.

A pledge like ours offers a starting point for collaborators to reflect on the norms of power and resolve to disrupt and transform those norms in a mutually beneficial, evolving and inspiring manner. We want to find ways to challenge the ever-present logic of collaborating in a neoliberal academy and introduce alternatives. As [Sara Ahmed \(https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-promise-of-happiness\)](https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-promise-of-happiness) warns, to do so also means fundamentally upturning the very foundations of neoliberal definitions of academic happiness: discarding ranking, productivity and influence for another, more caring, vision -- equity, justice, reparation and new and radical transformative academic futures. Given the [COVID-19 pandemic's outsize impact on minority-identified and women scholars \(https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/13/ensuring-pandemic-doesnt-negatively-impact-women-stem-especially-those-color\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/13/ensuring-pandemic-doesnt-negatively-impact-minority-identified-and-women-scholars), leaning on our collaborators is more important than ever. So let us pledge to take care of each other as researchers.

A commitment to an ethos of care with our current and future collaborators can further define what it means to partner on research -- not just in terms of work productivity but also in feeling cared for. This should be imperative for *all* researchers, if we are to create diverse, inclusive and innovative knowledge centers that respond to our world's most urgent challenges.

Bio

Emily Skop is professor in the department of geography and environmental studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Martina Angela Caretta is senior lecturer in the department of human geography at Lund University. Caroline Faria is associate professor in the department of geography and the environment at the University of Texas at Austin. Jessi L. Smith is associate vice chancellor for research and professor of psychology at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. The authors also want to acknowledge all their collaborators over the years, without whom they would not fully understand the importance of creating meaningful partnerships.

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