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The call from the White House aide came on a Friday morning in June, and on the following Monday, Colleen Butler-Sweet was in Washington, D.C., at the invitation of The U.S. Department of Labor, attending the White House Summit on Working Families. An assistant professor of sociology at Sacred Heart University, Butler-Sweet’s road to Washington began at a conference in New York in mid-May. In many ways, though, it had started much earlier thanks to her professional focus on changing families and her specialized work in transracial adoption.

The summit convened business and labor leaders, legislators and leading academics in a discussion on issues facing working families in America today. Butler-Sweet’s invite came as a result of her participation in New York at one of a series of local summits exploring many of the same topics. During an open forum, she explains, she came to the microphone and asked a question pertaining to paternity leave. After the session, she was approached by a White House staffer to discuss her question and background; then some follow-up emails were exchanged prior to the call to attend the conference.

“As a sociologist with a research and teaching focus on changing families, I was thrilled to participate in a dialogue that addressed themes that I discuss with my Sacred Heart students every day,” says Butler-Sweet. “I also was happy to play a role in breakout sessions focused on the gender wage gap and caregiving challenges facing families where both parents work. I left the summit invigorated by the discussion and eager to share new insights with our Sacred Heart students.”

Butler-Sweet’s teaching focuses on stresses on women and families, inequities in the workplace and sociological triggers and landmines. Addressing these concerns is critical to working individuals and families and good for business productivity and growth, she notes. The workplace and home/family model is outdated, but it goes beyond men being the “bread winners” only and working women having to spend a day in the office and then come home and do the housework, cooking and child rearing.
“I often explain to my students that women in the workplace don’t ask for what they need or negotiate as effectively as their male counterparts,” she stresses. “They’re afraid, and rightfully so, because when it comes to personal negotiation, men who ask for what they want often are seen as ‘strong’ while women are seen as ‘future problems.’ I work with my students by discussing personal strategies and opportunities for advocacy and by helping them navigate and script these important conversations.”

Butler-Sweet is only in her second year at SHU, but taught at the University of Connecticut as an assistant professor in residence prior to Sacred Heart. She has her Ph.D. in sociology from Boston University. She says she’s noticed positive changed attitudes and behaviors over the past decade, particularly in her male students.

“Young people today are more open-minded and flexible in dealing with class, race and gender issues,” she says. “With so many more women in the workforce, young fathers have become actively involved with their children and have taken on a more interactive role in the home. The bigger problem, however, is that while things at home are better, businesses—for the most part—are still practicing the ‘old-model’ behaviors toward working mothers and toward working fathers as well.

“Smart economics and strong family practices go hand in hand,” she concludes. “Among other changes, we need to shift the vernacular away from ‘working moms’ to something like ‘wage-earning moms,’ and not see it as ‘men’s and women’s work,’ but rather ‘parents’ work.’