

Dec-1996

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Recommended Citation

Levin, William C. (1996). Fulbright Fellowship: Semester of Dr. Leatitia Wirht-Beek at Bridgewater State College Fall 1996. *Bridgewater Review*, 15(2), 23-24.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol15/iss2/14

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People who teach and conduct research for a living must constantly renew their opportunities for learning. Academics know that it may make for a soft life to always teach the same texts, conduct the same sorts of research and speak to the same people, but it is death on the life of the mind, and, inevitably the career. The Fulbright Visiting Scholar program is one of the best ways of broadening and changing the intellectual surroundings of academics from around the world.

During the fall semester of 1996 Bridgewater State College was host to visiting Fulbright Fellow Dr. Leatitia Wirht-Beek, a lecturer and researcher in sociology at the University of Suriname. Dr. Wirht-Beek's residency at the college provided the mix of learning and teaching that is the aim of Fulbright fellowships. There is such a rich variety of scholars taking part in the Fulbright program that each of their stories deserves individual telling.

Suriname is a small country (population just over 400,000) on the north-east, Caribbean-Atlantic coast of South America, tucked between Guyana on its east, French Guiana on its west and Brazil to the south. It was a Dutch colony which was given partial independence

between the end of World War II and 1975. Suriname's multi-ethnic population includes Blacks (locally called Creoles, a term rooted in French-Caribbean racial history, and referring to a mix of French and any of a number of African slave trade populations), East Indians, Chinese, Indonesians and a strong, remaining, Dutch influence. Dutch is the official language, although English study is required after the seventh grade, and the native Surinamese is the language of the street. Given its geography, there is also good advantage to speaking Spanish and Portuguese. Dr. Wirht-Beek's career and interests reflect the complex mix of forces at work in the development of such a country.



After WWII the Dutch began preparing Suriname for its eventual independence by granting the people partial independence and creating a national planning office staffed by Surinamese. After gaining its full independence, Suriname's first elected government was still heavily influenced by its recent colonial past. It was conservative by the standards of a Surinamese population eager for the changes they associate with independence. The Surinamese military was among those segments of the population agitating for improved working conditions, including worker organization. In 1980, when the government failed to respond, the military allied with a segment of the socialist movement in a bloodless coup. The newly formed government

sought the participation of a wider range of Suriname's citizens, including more young and female people. Letitia Wirht-Beek joined the new government as a junior staff member in the National Planning Office, a position she was to hold for four years.

In this position Dr. Wirht-Beek was in charge of the data base on relations between Suriname and the Netherlands. She and a small staff responded to daily requests from government offices for educational, cultural and economic data used in the planning process. She was, therefore, in an excellent position to study how the planning process worked and did not work in a developing country as her new government conducted relations with the Dutch government and her South American neighbors. At the same time she was developing her research skills. Three years after leaving this position (in 1984), she would use what she learned in government service to earn a graduate degree in sociology.

After this first job in government, Dr. Wirht-Beek took a high school teaching job for its superior pay and security. (This is another clear difference between Suriname and the United States worth noting.) For two years she taught sociology and conducted research, (not normally a part of an American high school teacher's job) mostly in the area of school enrollment. For example, she tracked the school enrollment rates of the various Surinamese ethnic groups, documenting the strong increase in the late 1980's of East Indians in the educational system generally, and of Creoles and females in higher education specifically. During this time she also prepared to do the graduate study that would lead her to her present university position.

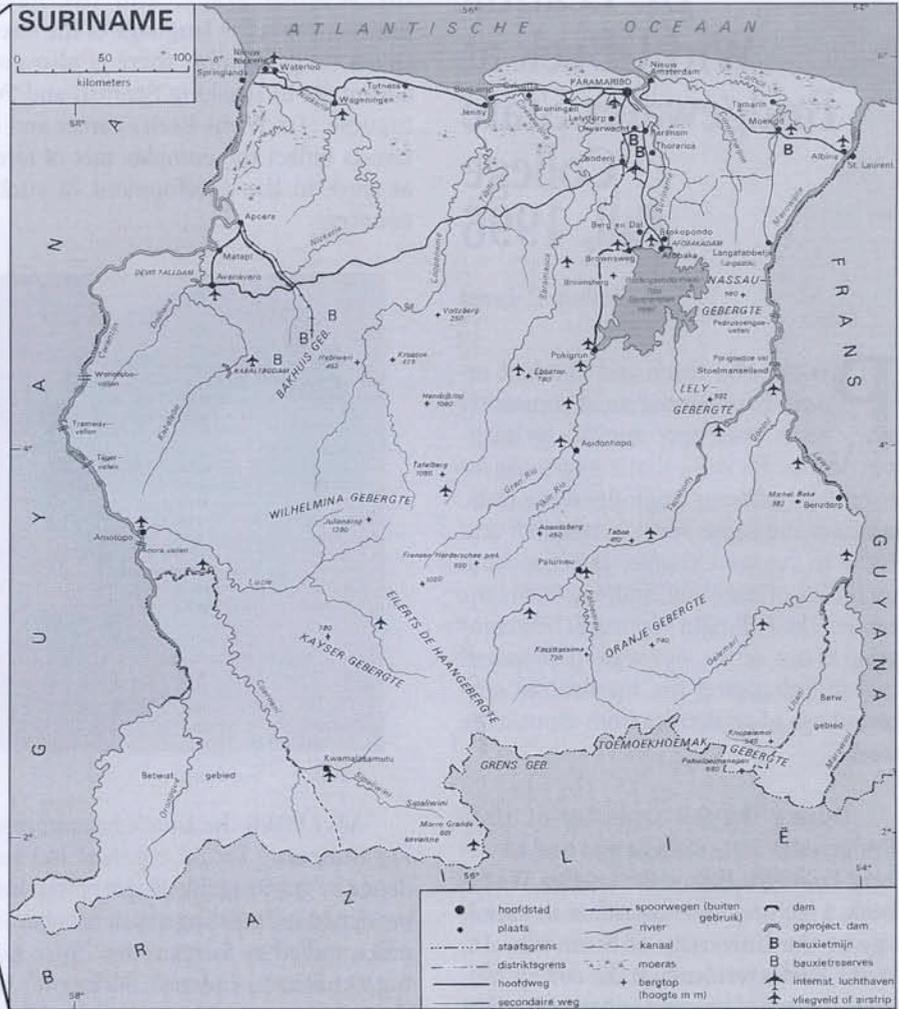
Dr. Wirht-Beek's 1987 Doctoral Dissertation, a study of the creation, operation and fate of her country's planning office, drew on her four years of service in government. Examination of the operation of the planning office in Suriname left her with a strong belief in its importance in a developing country. She ar-

gued that such an office could only do its job if it were placed very highly in the government structure. This was because the design of new societies is a multi-disciplinary task, touching on every area of social and governmental life including education, the economy, transportation, health and so on. Subordinating a planning office to the influence of various government departments would not only limit its access to information, but also subject it to the narrower interests of various departments.

office generated a number of the own ideas for development projects. She also continued to conduct the research that had become a critical thread running through her career. In this case, she focused on differing rates of employment among Surinamese women and men, and on the effects of ethnic group membership on male and female economic well-being.

of the Department of Sociology, a position to which she will return after completion of her semester abroad at Bridgewater.

According to Dr. Wirht-Beek the Fulbright semester she has spent in the United States has accomplished for her and for Bridgewater State College just what was intended in its guidelines.



Since completing her doctoral degree, Dr. Wirht-Beek worked again in government as a staff member of the Social Planning Division of the National Planning Office. There she was responsible for reviewing proposals for development projects in the areas of education, health, housing and social services, with a special focus on womens' and population issues. One example of the kind of project proposal she reviewed was a request for funding (from the Dutch), for construction of a rural school in a previously unserved area of the rain forest. Dr. Wirht-Beek would be called on to evaluate the need for the new school and the feasibility of its successful operation in light of issues such as transportation, teacher availability, impact on the local economy and culture and so on. In addition her

In 1993 she moved to a position as a full-time researcher at the University of Suriname, continuing her studies of gender (with an examination of government policies toward women in her country) and education (with a study of education among ethnic groups such as the native Amerindians in the Surinamese rain forest areas). After adding some lecturing to her responsibilities at the university, Dr. Wirht-Brown was asked to serve as chair

Dr. Wirht-Beek has learned from the people she has met here and from the resources we have, and has left with us an understanding of her life and career which we certainly would not have had without her visit.