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City University of New York Graduate Center

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Robert Alford, an esteemed political sociologist, died Friday, February 14, in New York of pancreatic cancer. He lived in Manhattan, and also maintained a second home in Avery [Calaveras Co.], California. Although 74 years old, the cancer caught him suddenly and unawares in the midst of his very active work as Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Professor Alford was at the time of his death working along with his former student and Canadian

scholar Dr. David Peerla on developing a new theory of misinformation, using Enron, other corporate scandals, and contemporary politics to examine what he considered an emerging phenomenon in our society. "On the one hand, more information is now produced and consumed than in any previous era. On the other hand, much of that information is fictitious and fraudulent," he stated in *Ideology and the Politics of Information: The Case of Enron*, a paper jointly authored with Peerla. "The case of Enron, and subsequent

corporate bankruptcies and scandals, is an example of the systematic falsification of information, or (to reverse it) the production of misinformation. What is striking is how little this phenomenon is recognized, let alone explained or theorized, in all of the theories of information that we have examined." He went on to analyze the way in which the crisis in Iraq diverted media attention from the administration's circumstantial connection to the corporate scandals.

A dedicated and involved teacher and researcher, Professor Alford was renowned in his field, respected by his colleagues, and deeply appreciated by his students. In 1997, he was awarded the Distinguished Contribution to Teaching Award from the American Sociological Association, and he was particularly known for his understanding, insights, and explanations of how sociologists go about doing their work.

His landmark 1985 book *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, the State and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press), written with a former student, Roger Friedland, was an extremely influential analysis of theories of state action, democratic participation, and class politics. Published in 1975, his book *Health Care Politics: Ideological and Interest Group Barriers to Reform* (University Chicago Press) presaged the politics of health care that emerged more than a decade later. The book won the C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems for the best book published in the United States during 1975 in the area of social problems. He also made a pioneering contribution to the study of social class and voting in his book *Party and Society* (1963), which examined the relation between class and political parties in the U.S., Canada, Britain, and Australia. In all, he wrote, edited or contributed to dozens of books and articles. Until he recently turned deaf, he was an accomplished pianist and

played with a professional quality string quartet. He also enjoyed working with his hands and even once built a harpsichord. He just recently built a second home for himself and his partner, Noll Anne Richardson, on a family ranch in Avery.

The idea of craftsmanship extended from his personal life into his professional work. "He frequently drew the analogy between intellectual life and craftsman's discipline and urged students to approach research with a craftsman's marriage of inspiration and technique," said Philip Kasinitz, Executive Officer of The Graduate Center's Ph.D. Program in Sociology.

At the time of his death, he was also collaborating with another former student, McMaster university professor Neil McLaughlin, building on Professor Alford's book *The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence* (Oxford University Press, 1998) to write an expanded version of his theoretical argument for a multi-method approach to social sciences. This work would, according to Dr. McLaughlin, "summarize his very original and important perspective on the relationship between theory and research in the social sciences." Another project he was working on was *A Handbook of Political Sociology*, to be published by Cambridge University Press and co-edited by himself along with Thomas Janoski, Alexander M. Hicks, and Mildred A. Schwartz. The book features over 30 original chapters

assessing the field of political sociology.

He spent his early career at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he rose to the rank of full professor, from 1961 to 1974, then joined the faculty at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was also a Visiting Professor at the University of Essex, England; Columbia University; and New York University. He came to The Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 1988 as a Distinguished Professor in the Ph.D. Program in Sociology and also served as Executive Officer of the program from 1988 to 1992.

Bob Alford was an astonishingly original and independent-minded sociologist whose work will continue to influence the field. To those who knew him, he was also a loving and honorable man, an attentive teacher and mentor, and an irreplaceable friend," said Distinguished Professor Frances Fox Piven, who is on The Graduate Center's doctoral faculty in political science, as well as sociology.

In addition to Richardson, he is survived by his first wife, Gloria Alford; second wife, Nayra Atiya; step-daughter, Katie Walker (Atiya's daughter); three children by his first marriage, Heidi Alford (of Portland, Oregon), Jonathan Alford (of Oakland, CA), and Elissa Alford (of Northampton, MA); siblings Dorothy Walker, sister, and David Alford, brother; two grandchildren and seven nieces and nephews.