A Few Thoughts on Graduate Mentoring

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A Few Thoughts on Graduate Mentoring

Abstract
Mentoring graduate students is a far different task than teaching undergraduates, involving a different set of skills and a high level of long-term commitment. This article discusses a number of principles important to the task of mentoring, from choosing one's students well, to loving what you do, and helping students to navigate the realities of the job market. Additionally, the article examines the problems and possibilities of advising students in agricultural/ rural history, an area with which many of our peers in history departments are largely unfamiliar.

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | Cultural History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | United States History

Comments
A Few Thoughts on Graduate Mentoring

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In 2000, I came to Iowa State University, and joined the History Department to work with the Agricultural History and Rural Studies Program. Although I had mentored master’s degree students at Illinois State, I had never previously worked with Ph.D. students. (Illinois State was in the process of phasing out a doctor of arts or D.A. program, a different creature altogether.) Unfortunately, there is nothing in graduate education that really prepares a person to advise their own Ph.D. students. I was, however, fortunate to earn my Ph.D. while working with one of the best graduate trainers in the business, Allan G. Bogue, the now-emeritus Frederick Jackson Turner Chair of History at the University of Wisconsin. Al Bogue never sat down to teach me how to work with graduate students, but he did demonstrate by example how it should be done, and done right. I had the great good fortune of being his fiftieth student (more or less), and I defended my dissertation just weeks before he retired. I benefitted from decades of experience and the dozens of students that had gone before me. Some of Al Bogue’s lessons were quite direct. He was fond of repeating, “Get rid of the passive voice,” “Don’t think of this as your dissertation – it’s your book,” and “I know you’re writing about dust storms, but I still want to see a human actor in every single sentence.” All of these directions resulted in a far better dissertation than it would have been otherwise, and a quick path to publication. Most of the lessons I learned about mentoring, though, were delivered less directly. I learned by watching his and other faculty’s interactions with graduate students. Over the last ten years, I’ve had the opportunity to put my observations into action, and to develop my skills with my own students. Fortunately, I have largely directed exceptionally well-prepared and motivated
students who have not felt compelled to test the limits of my preparation. They’ve taught me a great deal about “what works” too. I feel reasonably comfortable in proposing six principles of graduate mentoring: choose your students well; love what you do; lead by example; emphasize a balanced life; be realistic about the job market; and provide structure, then step back.

**Choose your students well.** A good mentoring experience begins with admissions (recognizing, of course, that the degree of participation in admissions allowed by schools varies). While it is always nice to see very high grade point averages and excellent GRE scores when you look at a student’s admissions file, these are only a small part of the equation. I would also like to see excellent letters of recommendation, attesting to the enthusiasm, hard work and creativity of the young scholar in question. I also want to read a statement of interest indicating a strong desire to study rural and agricultural history and a solid understanding of what is available at my institution. I never want to feel that a student is applying to graduate school just because they can’t think of anything else to do with their life, or that they are choosing this program because they don’t think they can get into Yale. I prefer to admit the student who calls or comes to campus and demonstrates that they have a good background in history and a real commitment to graduate education, in spite of the hard work and uncertain job prospects ahead of them. While students can improve their writing and analytical skills significantly during the graduate education process, it is almost impossible to teach someone enthusiasm and commitment. I do have one caveat, however. Admitting a student with somewhat immature writing is one thing, admitting a student with significant deficits in writing is entirely another. If you take your work as a graduate advisor seriously, a student with a serious writing problem will test your love of your job to the limit.
Love what you do. This might seem to be too obvious to mention, but it’s important. When you take on a new graduate student, you are taking on a long-term responsibility. When we teach undergraduates, we often only see them for a semester, and may not have a great deal of one-on-one interaction. Graduate students present a completely different situation. Master’s students will be with you for approximately two years, and doctoral students for many more – sometimes most of a decade. Seeing a thesis or dissertation to its conclusion, and the student on to employment, is a commitment to the long haul. If you do not love graduate advising, and you are not enthusiastic about seeing a student through this process, everyone involved in the process is going to be miserable. What could be a long but interesting journey is going to turn into a forced march. If you don’t embrace the prospect of long-term relationships and commitments, then graduate advising is probably a career path to avoid.

Lead by example. I can hardly expect my students to take their work seriously if they don’t see me taking my work seriously. Part of leading by example is reading their work quickly and providing criticism in a timely and constructive manner. But it also means leading by example in every aspect of my life as a teacher/scholar. On a regular basis, I talk with them about what I am doing in the classroom. Nearly twenty years in, I am still writing new lectures, developing new assignments and discussing new books. I write articles about successful experiments in pedagogy. I want them to know that preparation doesn’t end after five, ten or fifteen years in the classroom. The nervousness doesn’t either. With beginning teachers, I share my continuing first-day fears and teaching anxieties, not to scare them, but to assure them that it is normal, and that they can use that anxiety to improve their classroom performance. When you cease to face a classroom with a little bit of trepidation, it’s probably time to retire. I also let my students know about my new research projects. As they develop ideas, I develop ideas. As they
work on chapters, I work on chapters. I try to show all of them the research notebook that I have kept for the last sixteen years, a running list of projects imagined, developed, abandoned, and completed. Today’s niggling question may be tomorrow’s article or book, or the project I suggest to a graduate student, looking for a research topic. They also need to know about service, and to see me doing the work of the department, the university and historical organizations. As much as we may wish otherwise, universities do not run by themselves. Acculturating students to the profession means giving them an accurate picture of what is required to be a working historian. Life will be much easier for them after graduation if they understand that being a historian might be the best job going, but it’s still a JOB.¹

**Emphasize a balanced life.** A very important part of advising is to demonstrate to students that with good organization and a lot of forethought, even as graduate students they can lead well-rounded lives that include friends, family and activities completely unrelated to their lives with history. One of the moments from my own graduate school experiences I remember with extreme frustration is when a fellow grad student told me that her advisor had warned her that as a faculty member she would never again have time to read the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. Her work would be so overwhelming, he warned, that she’d never have time for interests outside of history. Then, I thought it was a terrible thought to put in a student’s head, and I feel the same way now. It’s a recipe for burnout and dissatisfaction. As a graduate student, I knew that my advisor’s life went well beyond history. Al Bogue is married to Margaret Beattie Bogue, who had her own career in history (although nepotism rules at the University of Iowa in the 1950s and 1960s forced Margaret to take a hiatus of several years before she was able to come back to academic work). They raised three children (an undertaking made somewhat less complicated by that enforced hiatus). They also trained a houseful of Samoyeds, and all of Al
Bogue’s graduate students were acquainted with Leon, his gentle giant of a dog. The Bogues modeled a balanced life for their students.

I believe that it is important that my students know that I am a wife and a mother, that I love to bake and read mystery novels, and that I have a garden (badly maintained, but a garden nonetheless). They also know that I do not check my e-mail on evenings or weekends because of my life beyond campus. While I love my job, it isn’t the sum total of my existence. Equally, I don’t want graduate school to be the sum total of my student’s lives. I want them to play softball, try yoga, and spend time with their friends. That does not mean, however, that I invite my students in to share all of the aspects of my off-campus life, or that I want to involve myself in their personal lives. I need to maintain enough distance that I can, when necessary, impose some discipline, such as reining in their writing or speeding up their progress toward a degree. I am more successful getting results as a friendly but serious advisor, than as a friend.

Be realistic about the job market. This is one of the issues that concern me the most about what I do. I am training students for a job market that is difficult, at best. Even so, Iowa State University graduates do fairly well in the job market, and most of the students graduated in the last decade are currently employed in academe, while a few are in positions outside of the academy that make use of their skills as historians. When prospective and continuing students talk to me about the job market, I always emphasize that finding a job may be difficult, and that it will require them to work hard to develop a balanced curriculum vita, full of evidence of professional development. Budget issues notwithstanding, we try to get all of our doctoral students into the classroom as stand-alone teachers before graduation. We encourage them to attend conferences and present their research, especially at graduate student-friendly conferences, such as those of the Agricultural History Society or the Missouri Valley Historical
Association. Most of them submit papers for prizes and for publication early in their careers. Many win fellowships and grants, even if they are the small prizes awarded by organizations such as the State Historical Society of Iowa. Most of my students will end up in jobs where they will have to find the funds for research on their own, and now is the best time for them to learn the skills involved in grant-writing.

Hard work, however, will only get a person so far. I also emphasize that a willingness to go anywhere and teach anything may be required to get that first job. My advisor encouraged his students to follow this path twenty years ago, and it is even more critical today. In the last five years, we have revised our program so that all of our graduates are either broadly trained in U.S. or European history, in addition to having training outside of their major fields. In the past few years, that has meant graduating individuals who could teach, for example, U.S. history and Latin American history, or modern European history, plus Latin America, the U.S., and the ancient world. Experience tells me that my students will not be going into jobs where they will be free to specialize – particularly in agricultural and rural history. Instead, they will be going into jobs that require them to be generalists who sometimes get to teach in their specialty. Given that situation, they need to prepare broadly for their exams, and to choose dissertation topics that can be defined in many different ways. One of 2010’s graduates wrote a dissertation that I would define as environmental/political/policy/rural/agricultural/twentieth century U.S. history. Rural and agricultural history, it turns out, is an excellent vehicle for broad preparation.

**Provide structure – and then step back.** Inevitably, it is the student who either finishes or doesn’t. As much as an advisor might like to drag a student to the finish line, it cannot and should not be attempted. My job is to let my students know what my expectations are, and to believe confidently that those expectations will be met. From the first day of a masters or
doctoral program, a student needs to have their questions answered. What are the requirements? How quickly must those requirements be fulfilled? What standards does the department uphold? Just how “perfect” does this work have to be? When it gets close to defense time, students may need a calendar, actually marked in red with deadlines for chapters, bibliographies and first and final drafts. I kept just such a calendar in the last year of my graduate program. As a dissertation or thesis comes to completion, I am a coach and a cheerleader, but the student has to reach the goal.

I know that my department’s program is working if students are making good progress, and are graduating on time. Success is also measured in graduates finding employment reasonably quickly after graduation, and finding respectable venues within which to publish their work. Sometimes success is also measured in letting students go, either to find a new school or a new career, when they find themselves veering away from their path toward a degree. I listen, provide a considered opinion, and then support them in the choices that they make. If they are wavering due to lack of confidence, I try to provide a realistic assessment of their situation and options. Sometimes that means encouraging them to finish, and sometimes it means watching them go.

**About advising rural/agricultural history students.** Each of these points speak to mentoring/advising in general. What part of this mentoring/advising relationship, you may ask, is directly related to my involvement in a rural/agricultural history program? Probably the most important issue is being realistic about the job market, and realistic about the academic world into which my students will graduate. Rural and agricultural history is a relatively small specialty, and it is also a somewhat quirky one. While the occasional history department advertises for a specialist in rural and agricultural history, positions are few and far between and
per decade can be counted up on the fingers of one hand. Even in farm states and within land grant universities, departments rarely consider agricultural history when a position opens. As a result, students must from the very beginning think of themselves and their work in broad terms. When they think of fields of study, dissertation topics and self-descriptions for job applications, they must prepare to define themselves and their work as broadly as possible. Students who think of themselves primarily as rural and agricultural historians must also become environmental/policy/New Deal historians, or gender/cultural/19th century specialists. While this is a particularly important exercise for students in smaller specialties, I think that this is good practice generally; I’ve chosen to redefine myself several times over the last twenty years. Job possibilities and publishing opportunities can take a scholar in directions that he or she never could have imagined, whether it is early or late in their careers.

Aside from preparing broadly, I also believe that a specialty in rural and agricultural history also demands that a student prepare better. If a student’s work is not the obvious “flavor of the month,” it is imperative that in other ways they present themselves as the obvious candidate for the fellowship or the job. Strong professional development and a balanced C.V. are the best ways to get a file moved from the “no” category to “maybe,” and then “yes.” Students need to know why it is important for them to go to conferences, apply for fellowships and devote time to stand-alone teaching. Knowing that you have something to prove, and directing that knowledge and the energy it produces into action can be a powerful springboard for a young scholar’s career.

None of this is meant to imply that the study of rural and agricultural history is unimportant or marginal. We know that it is anything but. The problem is with the uninitiated and uninformed, who may never have even thought about the contours of life outside of the
nation’s major cities. All it takes is a few minutes of browsing in the literature of any one of our sub-fields to realize that rural and agricultural perspectives are often absent from the scholarship or presented incompletely or inaccurately. A quick look at most university course catalogs will equally prove that the material we hold so dear is rarely taught, while many other, arguably less central offerings abound. We are in the rather bizarre position of having to be cheerleaders for our sub-discipline – bizarre, because the field is such an old and established one. Anyone who went into women’s history in the 1970s and early 1980s knew, to some extent, that they would have to cheerlead for their chosen field. Many departments had to be dragged kicking and screaming into offering classes and hiring new young historians in the field. Agricultural history, on the other hand, has been around for generations, which is perhaps part of the problem. As David Danbom recently noted, agricultural history has long since developed into a field hardly recognizable as the history of “agricultural politics, economics and technology” that predominated in the past.\(^2\) The problem is that even though agricultural history as proved “absorptive and accommodating,” many of our academic peers don’t know it.\(^3\) We and our students are defining yet another new rural and agricultural history, reinforcing gains made in the last thirty years.\(^4\) Refreshing what is often perceived as old, reaffirming its importance and reminding others of the field’s metamorphosis into the new and relevant is essential to helping our students make their way as rural and agricultural historians.

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I owe an enormous debt to Al Bogue’s good advising. Working with him, especially in the years just before his retirement, provided me with the benefit of much accumulated wisdom and experience, and perhaps a bit more tolerance than I deserved. When I’m having qualms about a hard-headed student, I need only remind myself of my own insistence to him, in year
three of my graduate program, that the reading list for the “History of the American West” class really needed updating. Looking back, I’m surprised at my own audacity, and even more surprised that he agreed, and let me help select books for the semester. He could have been offended, but he wasn’t, and we had a productive semester working together as professor and teaching assistant. He still laughs about it – while I cringe, just a little. Because we worked together, instead of the relationship being a one way street, with him doling out wisdom and me absorbing it, we’ve been able to forge a long-term, productive alliance that has extended beyond my years as a student. The person who was my advisor still is an advisor, but he has also become a valued colleague. I seek his advice on matters of departmental politics and career development. He still reads my work, but I also read his. Ours is the longest working relationship that I have ever had. My hope is that, if I do this right, I will develop long-term working partnerships with my own students, just as my work with Al Bogue has.

Notes

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1 I owe my own awakening to this reality to Deborah Cobb-Clark, a labor economist, who I worked with at Illinois State University.


3 Danbom, 173.