

Kenneth M. Roemer

Mentoring Philosophy / Student Accomplishments

There are certain advantages to – how shall I say it – not being young. My 40-year tenure at UT Arlington has given me the opportunity to interact with graduate students in many different ways. One result has been the way I view mentoring graduate students. I tend to look at, but also through them. I certainly look at (and listen to) their current aspirations and interests. But I am also imagining what their possibilities might be as beginning students, as students beginning short research projects, as dissertation writers, and as researchers, collaborators, and teachers during and after graduation.

From 1975 to 1977, I was Assistant Dean of the Graduate School; and from 1985 until 1992 and then again during the spring of 1996, I was Graduate Advisor for the English Department. In the former position my mentoring role was indirect and closely related to the late stages of graduate study: I wrote the Graduate School's first full manual for thesis and dissertation writers. The latter position put me in almost daily contact with graduate students. My favorite part of that job was the initial meeting. The variety was challenging and stimulating: 22 year-olds fresh from B.A. graduations, public school teachers (often motivated by the "Career Ladder" program of the 80s), community college and small liberal-arts college teachers, and change of life students, including one well-off accountant who always wanted to be a teacher. Some of these students had clear notions of potential dissertation topics and mature expectations about the (fierce) national market for tenure-track positions. Others could barely articulate why they wanted to pursue graduate studies. Basing my advice on their admission materials, our program requirements, and our discussions, I made recommendation about our program. But I had to go beyond suggestions about specific course recommendation and possible career goals to considering how becoming a graduate student might impact their work and family lives. These "nonacademic" discussions were crucial, since many of our graduate students were and are part-time students with demanding out-of-class responsibilities.

My mentoring role in graduate classroom contexts is more focused on pedagogical, graduation, and research objectives. I model a combination of lecturing, small-group-issue and problem-solving sessions, and class-discussions techniques. Many former graduate students, for example Hannah Goolsby a former teacher at the AISD high school level, and Bridgitte Barclay currently at the tenure-track college level at Aurora University, have told me that they have used my pedagogical strategies in their classrooms. One of my main classroom contributions to facilitating timely progress toward graduation is my emphasis on examinations. I am one of the few English professors who routinely gives semester and final exams. Because exams are often rare in English graduate classes, the time between the students' last undergraduate exam and their comprehensive exams may be three-to-ten years. My exams help to prepare them to pass their comps the first time, so that retakes don't delay their progress toward their degree.

My research mentoring occurs both in courses and, of course, while directing theses and dissertations. Whether the project is a class research paper or a dissertation, my initial meeting with students typically focuses on two areas: articulating significant questions that will drive the research and establishing an appropriate scope and focus. For example in Barclay's dissertation on utopian writing by women in the United States, we realized that she had to limit her historical scope. Since typically scholars had focused on the nineteenth century through 1920 and then again on the 1970s through the present, we decided that the real need was an examination the interim period. My next step, which is typical especially with dissertation writing, is to, not only make the student aware of relevant scholarship, but when possible to put them in touch with leading scholars in the area. In Barclay's case this was Lyman Tower Sargent, the premier bibliographer of utopian literature; almost two decades ago in the case of a student interested in American literature, it was Malcolm Cowley (an important literary figure in the early 20th century who advanced Faulkner's reputation; the student published his interviews with Crowley); and currently, for another student, Bethany Yardley, it is the editor of an important journal that was one of the first outlets for contemporary American Indian writing. Then comes the challenge of helping the students through drafts and helping them to identify possible publication outlets for seminar papers or chapters of dissertations.

I have been pleased that five of my Ph. D. students have completed their dissertations in the past five years and that the five Ph. D. students I am directing now are making progress. I am also pleased that several of my students have published articles in respected peer-reviewed journals, articles that began as seminar papers or dissertation chapters. For example, Maggie Dyer and Jonathan Wilson (forthcoming) published articles in the leading American Indian literatures journal *SAIL*, and Bridgitte Barclay and Barbra Chiarello published in the leading utopian studies journal, *Utopian Studies*. Dr. Chiarello's article on the *Diary of Anne Frank* was reprinted in Harold Bloom's *Literature of the Holocaust* collection (Bloom is one of the best-known American humanities scholars).

Another stage of mentoring is helping students to obtain jobs and establish careers. I encourage students who write excellent seminar papers and dissertations to present papers at conferences (just recently, for example, Dr. Peggy Ruff's conference experiences have reinvigorated her interest in Native American literature). The conference contacts can be invaluable. I also offer advice about job interviews. The combinations of strong dissertation writing, teaching experience, and good interviews have helped all six of the students who have completed dissertations with me since 2004 to obtain or get offers for tenure track positions or to advance in the positions they already have: Dr. Jason Huddleston, Associate Professor and Chair of Communications, Tennessee Temple; Dr. Kristin Rozzell, offered a TT position, University of the Virgin Islands, but teaches at DePaul; Dr. Peggy Ruff, Senior Professor and Chair of the English DeVry; Dr. Jonathan Wilson, Assistant Professor, Eastern New Mexico; DeJuana Montgomery, Associate Professor, Southwestern Assembly of God; Dr. Bridgitte Barclay, Assistant Professor, Aurora.

For the first time in my academic career I have recently initiated another form of mentoring – collaborative projects -- that offer research experience and improved qualifications for employment for our graduate students. Beginning in 2009, I used my own professional development allocation for research assistants (Bethany Shaffer and Lorie Jacobs) to work on my digital archive of tables of contents of American literature anthologies (www.uta.edu/english/roemer/ctt). In 2010, I obtained a COLA Interdisciplinary Seed Grant to continue work on the project; almost 80% of the grant went to the same two students. We improved the archive and wrote a major grant application to NEH, which unfortunately was not funded. We also collaborated on a paper delivered at a national conference of anthologies. The revised paper was accepted by the organizer of the conference who was also the editor of a collection on anthologies (the editor has yet to find a publisher for the collection). Most recently Ms. Shaffer and I have collaborated on an article on the anthology inclusion of Southern literature, in particular one Southern writer, William Gilmore Sims. We submitted the article to a peer-reviewed journal.

Obviously what my 40 years of graduate mentoring has taught me is that mentoring is an ongoing *process* that in each case evolves through early speculation about motives and interests, proceeds through specific degree and research goals, and, I hope, culminates in rewarding collaborations and careers for my students.