

## **PART 2**

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### **Doctoral Mentoring Philosophy**

My experience as a doctoral mentor encompasses three specific roles: research mentor, advisor, and teacher. Although these three roles are connected in important ways, each has a function in preparing doctoral students to succeed in the program and find meaningful work beyond it. I have been fortunate enough to serve the doctoral students in English in these capacities. Below I offer some examples of my contributions to our students and the university.

#### **Mentoring in Research**

A doctoral mentor has many roles: coach, counselor, boss, and friend, but one of the most important is model. I model for my students in my own scholarship and teaching the degree of intellectual thoroughness and scholarly engagement that I expect from them. However, before we even begin talking about research, I talk to them about process. This is especially important for students who aren't familiar with the process of studying for and taking comprehensive exams or writing and revising a prospectus. I make sure that my expectations are clear: we set deadlines and regular meetings to discuss their questions and to go over my feedback on their chapter drafts. Indeed, one of the most important tasks of a mentor of doctoral students in the humanities is to encourage students to develop and pursue research projects that inspire them, even when their projects and interests are outside of my own field(s) of specialization. Unlike the sciences, where students frequently work on the research of their mentor, in English, specifically, students undertake their own research and follow their own intellectual trajectories. My research interests are broadly interdisciplinary, and, as a result, I attract an eclectic variety of doctoral students and have directed dissertations on fields as diverse as photo-textual postmodernism, maternal ethics, queer postcolonial literature, representations of disability in film, transatlantic feminist modernism, posthumanist pedagogy, and True Crime fandom. The role of mentorship in these circumstances is crucial because in order to support and advise my students, I sometimes need to familiarize myself with scholarship beyond my field. Obviously, if a student's work falls too far afield of my own, I direct them to a different mentor, but usually our differences enhance rather than limit the kinds of questions they ask in their work and the scholarship they produce.

In the 17 years I've been at UTA, I have worked with 17 PhD students, directing 10 of them and serving on the doctoral committees of another 7. I have supervised 15 MA students and served on the committees of another 9. I've nominated my students for awards and fellowships and have presented with them at conferences. I offer extensive feedback to my students on their seminar papers, encouraging them to revise and submit to journals for publication. I advise them on which journals are aspirational and which they might realistically expect to publish in. I encourage my doctoral students to conceive of their dissertations as book projects right from the start. After the defense, I invite them to my office to discuss what revisions need to be made and what further research is required to successfully publish their work. I am known for giving frank, actionable advice, so I'm frequently asked by students of other doctoral mentors for the same sort of help. During and beyond their tenure as graduate students, I encourage my students to apply for grants and postdocs, and other awards available to beginning faculty members. One of my current PhD students was recently awarded a Mellon Fellowship. I helped her with her application and gave her advice on how to navigate the professional and personal challenges of the program.

Sometimes mentoring means encouraging students to spread their wings and sometimes it means cultivating a long-standing professional relationship. Such is the case with a former MA and PhD student, who is now

the Director of the Africana Studies Program and Associate Professor at Moravian University (Pennsylvania). There is nothing more gratifying than a mentor seeing a student established in a great job, being recognized on a national level, and actively publishing. Although he is no longer my student, I am still mentoring him. A few years ago, an assistant professor in our department received a Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, aimed at supporting minority junior faculty members. I realized immediately that, as an assistant professor, my former student was eligible for this fellowship. I encouraged him to apply and wrote a letter in support of his application. He received the fellowship, which granted him a year free of teaching and service responsibilities. During this fellowship, he had several articles accepted for publication and submitted a book proposal to a major university press. Over the years, I have invited my former student to present papers on conference panels I've chaired, and we have plans to co-edit a collection on contemporary black film in the age of Black Lives Matter.

### **Mentoring in Advising**

The importance of mentoring students became most clear to me when I served as graduate advisor from 2012-2014. Prior to my appointment, the graduate program in English, though robust in numbers, had no presence on campus. Even the GTAs did not identify themselves as a cohort with like goals and needs. When I started in the position, I invited individual students to meet with me in an effort to understand how I could best serve them as their advisor. These early meetings were quite revealing. I learned that while students wanted to discuss their career plans and goals, for the most part they wanted reassurance and support. They were anxious about the state of the academic job market and their prospects for getting a job at the end of their degree; they had concerns about supporting their families on a small stipend; many had emotional and/or medical problems; and others were just lonely and lost. I don't think graduate students in English are particularly unusual in this respect. Graduate school is as much an emotional and financial investment as it is an intellectual one. What I recognized in these students was a need for community and opportunities for mentoring and support from each other. To that end, one of my major initiatives as graduate advisor was to help the students set up a graduate student organization (the EGSA, of which I am still the faculty advisor). Through this organization, in 2013 the students planned their first graduate conference, which, apart from the Covid lockdown, has taken place every year since; they organized round-table symposiums for intellectual conversation; and set up a mentoring system for new graduate students. Together we organized brown bag lunches where faculty members in the department were invited to come and speak to the doctoral students about specific topics related to research, publishing, and the job market. We organized panels of faculty to review job materials and offer mock interviews for students on the market. We started a literary magazine and received submissions from within the university and outside of it. From a social standpoint, there were pizza nights and opportunities to discuss "philosophy in the pub." In short, they created a cohort and a community that our current graduate students still benefit from.

When I assumed the advisor position, I was the sole advisor to the MA and PhD programs, totaling approximately 150 active students. I was responsible for admitting students into both programs and then advising them on their degree plans. During this time, President Karbhari introduced the goal of graduating 200 doctoral students a year. I was concerned that our completion rates lagged behind other units. I observed that while our students were completing their coursework on time, many were slow to take their comprehensive exams and even slower to produce a prospectus and write a dissertation. In order to remedy this problem, I enforced an existing policy requiring students to take their exams the semester after completing coursework. Then, after successful completion of their exams, I required those ABD doctoral students to take a prospectus writing class, taught by me, which met every other week. I assigned a number of readings related to issues such as: refining a topic, establishing effective research methodologies, setting daily writing goals, mastering fears related to the writing process, and setting and keeping deadlines. Most importantly, I set up writing groups within the class that continued

well beyond the prospectus through to the dissertation writing stage. Students wrote drafts of their prospectus and workshopped them within their group and then with the larger class. They received feedback from me and from the other students. Motivated by the mantra of “recruitment, retention, and completion,” I worked with the Assistant Dean of Liberal Arts, Les Riding-In, to recruit promising students to our doctoral program. When the EGTA system of doctoral funding was introduced in 2012, I worked tirelessly to recruit top students graduating from MA programs. There is no question that this was a busy time for me, but creating a community that had immediate and tangible benefits for our graduate student population was enormously rewarding. I am thankful to have been nominated three times by my graduate students for Outstanding Advisor of the Year. (I received an Honorable Mention in 2014.) As I didn’t win the actual award, my students surprised me with their own professionally made awards.

### **Mentoring through Pedagogy**

Like our undergraduate students, many English graduate students at UTA are first-generation scholars. They are competent readers and writers and have joined our program for a variety of reasons, but sometimes they’re unsure about the purpose of a graduate degree and have little understanding of the professional opportunities and paths available to them after they graduate. Early on their graduate careers, I work to demystify some of these processes, and I spend a lot of time helping them identify and hone their research questions and methodologies. My role as graduate *advisor* involved preparing students for professional life, navigating job interviews, preparing conference papers, and developing intellectual cohorts within and beyond the university. My role as graduate *professor* is to demonstrate to students how effective pedagogy should always be tied to scholarship and research, and to model for them best practices in the classroom. Last fall, for example, I taught a graduate seminar titled, “Diversity on the Big and Small Screen in the Age of ‘Colorblindness,’” which introduced students to the broader field of communication and media studies and explored media representations of race during the Obama to Trump era. On the syllabus, along with foundational texts in race and media studies, I included my recent book, *Imperiled Whiteness: How Hollywood and Media Make Race in Postracial America* (UP Mississippi 2023). In providing my students with the opportunity to engage personally and professionally with their teacher’s research, which combines scholarship from film and media studies, political science, and race and gender studies, I was able to help the students visualize the extensive network of texts and scholarship that grounds work in the humanities. The objective was to show the vital and synergistic way that research in the liberal arts resonates with larger public conversations and to demonstrate how and why what we research and teach has the capacity to shape those conversations. Along with giving me a 5 in every category, the students’ comments spoke directly to my intended aim. Below are two representative comments:

*“I really enjoyed going through the book “Imperiled Whiteness” and getting to talk with the professor about her book.”*

*“This course was sooo well thought out, paced perfectly, offered challenging/engaging readings and films+shows, and engrossed course discussions that are by far the best discussions I have ever experienced in a class. CHANGE NOTHING. This course was truly the best class I’ve ever been in and I genuinely have no critiques or suggestions for changing it as the course really is an amazing and - dare I say it - eye opening experience. This class is certified fresh (pun). My one critique would be: Why are there not more classes like this in the graduate program and why can’t Dr. Ingram teach a graduate course every semester?! That is not to say that there are not excellent courses or professors in the graduate programs, but I would say there are not enough courses like this course that are so crucial to the field and consequential to our education.”*

Similarly, in AY 2018-19 I designed and taught two graduate seminars—one in feminist theory and one in race theory that critically engaged with current cultural and political crises. The seminar paper for the feminist theory course required students to respond to a “Call for Papers” for an upcoming edition of the

esteemed feminist journal, *Signs*. Obviously, acceptance in the journal was not a condition for passing the class, but the students loved the assignment because they felt that it was *productive* writing, meaning it was geared toward a professional end. While none of the students' papers was accepted by *Signs*, I encouraged those who wrote exceptional papers to submit to other journals and I worked with them individually to revise them for publication. I am proud to say that 3 students had their papers published in other leading journals.

In closing, I would suggest that my mentoring philosophy is quite simple. As all three of these mentoring roles demonstrate, a good mentor is never off the clock: there are always opportunities to offer advice, always concerns to allay, and always occasions to listen. UTA students have diverse needs and I've never felt that my contribution has mattered as much as it does here. Students at UTA make me feel like I have a vocation, and they appreciate me taking the time to teach them to think critically about their world and to foster their professional development. Ultimately, that is reward in itself.