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Doctoral Mentoring Essay, 2016

Doctoral students begin their training with formidable challenges ahead of them—completing their courses, passing their comprehensive exams, presenting at conferences, publishing articles in scholarly journals, writing an original dissertation that contributes to their fields, learning to teach, and securing a job on the highly competitive academic job market. Then, as young professors, they face the ultimate challenge of earning tenure, which can be made infinitely easier by strong preparation during the graduate career. All of these extremely difficult endeavors must be successfully completed in a rather compressed period of time. Given the difficulty of these challenges, it is crucial for faculty who direct the work of doctoral students to be thoughtful, strategic, and indefatigable in their mentoring of graduate students. Even while students are still in coursework, they need to understand how the graduate program works, how to successfully present at conferences, how to revise and submit essays for publication, and how to navigate the complexities of the academic job market. Equally important, however, is for graduate students to be introduced to exciting new directions in their fields and to be mentored about how to formulate research questions that will give their work momentum and make it significant to other scholars in the field. This latter form of intellectual cultivation is what can make or break an early career in a tenure-track position. Doctoral mentoring, in my view, requires a great deal of practical and strategic advice, but it also requires that the faculty member be engaged with current and emerging theories, areas, and questions in their fields.

One of the most important things that I do in terms of doctoral mentoring is to carefully design graduate seminars that immerse students in newly developing research areas, assembling key texts, and posing scholarly questions that will remain compelling for the next decade. The graduate seminar provides the first opportunity to spark students' intellectual passions and to develop the drive for scholarly rigor and innovation. I often invite doctoral students who are finished with coursework and who are writing their dissertations to come speak about their research and writing strategies—which is excellent practice for the dissertating doctoral student and quite informative and inspiring for the graduate students in the seminar. I also invite other faculty who are working on the theoretical or methodological problems we are discussing in the seminar. Dr. Stodnick, for example, visited a seminar to discuss her research. Students learned so much from her stellar presentation, but they also learned from the lively discussion that ensued, which modeled intellectual inquiry and the discourse of wider scholarly communities. Ideally, the graduate seminar is not just another course but a testing ground, springboard, and a dynamic microcosm of the state of the field.

Helping doctoral students connect with other scholars and participate in wider academic discussions is crucial, in my view, for their academic and

professional success. Graduate faculty have a responsibility to foster an intellectually-rich climate within the department and to connect graduate students to wider academic communities and scholars in their fields. I have attended and participated in the conferences organized by graduate students and given many presentations to graduate student organizations. I strongly encourage graduate students to attend lectures in the department, the university, and the metroplex, incorporating some of these events into my graduate courses by having students attend, write about, and discuss the lectures. It is not only that doctoral students are initiated into these academic discourse communities and that they learn from them, but also that they themselves become active participants, researchers, and professional colleagues--confident that they themselves have valuable contributions to make. Here are a few examples of how I have worked to integrate students into the broader culture of the discipline and to foster doctoral students' professional skills. I invited philosopher Levi Bryant to lecture to the department and to attend the seminar in which we were discussing his book. I created a faculty/doctoral student workshop on new materialism, science studies and animal studies (three interdisciplinary scholarly movements with traction in literary and cultural studies) while Hanna Sjögren, a doctoral researcher from Sweden, was visiting UTA to work with me. I have arranged the large departmental lecture symposium twice while at UTA, primarily in order to enrich graduate students' professional development. Several graduate students served on the committee with me and spent time with the many well-known scholars who came to speak. Those doctoral students and many others also had the opportunity to participate in special graduate student workshops with the speakers.

Fostering an atmosphere of generative engagement with wider academic communities and current intellectual questions--while also making efforts to connect specific doctoral students with particular scholars, conferences, fellowship and grant opportunities, edited collections and other publishing opportunities—is, in my view, crucial for the successful completion of the dissertation and long-term professional success. As Part 6 of this application explains in detail, I have also encouraged many students to present their work at particular conferences, I have helped many students revise their essays for publication, and I have arranged for students and former students to publish in important edited collections and present on stellar panels with nationally and even internationally recognized scholars, artists, and fiction writers such as Joan Slonczewski. I am very happy that I have been able to help so many current and former doctoral students achieve these important factors in professional success. The greater access I have to top-tier academic networks, the more access I can give to my students—a great pleasure for me and, as I see it, a crucial responsibility.

Perhaps the most important phase of graduate mentoring is that of supporting doctoral and postdoctoral students through the academic job market, a process that lasts an entire year or more. This process takes place in incremental steps, which I outline for the graduate students on the web page I designed for them, in order to help them plan and prepare:

<http://www.uta.edu/english/alaimo/forgrads.html>. I observe the doctoral student's teaching in the spring before the market, advise them about what materials need to be ready by when, critique their materials the summer before, discuss various situations and questions that come up during the fall, write long letters of recommendation, train students for the interview process, and then participate in mock interviews. During holiday break this year, I also met a doctoral student for an additional session in order to prepare him for a job interview at a specific college. We brainstormed about specific questions they would likely ask and discussed his answers. More training takes place once students have on-campus interviews. The academic job market is extraordinarily grueling and competitive—students need both a wealth of critique and advice and a mountain of solid support through the process. One thing that has helped many of our doctoral students is to have been included in the search process when UTA is hiring. Several of the doctoral students I direct have participated in the on-campus interview process and a few fortunate doctoral students have actually served on search committees that I chaired. That experience of interviewing job candidates and participating in candidate evaluation and selection—before they had to embark upon their own job interviews—was invaluable for them.

Most of the mentoring that I do for doctoral students, from coursework on through the dissertation, publications, and the job market, is made possible by my own research accomplishments and continued engagement and connections within my fields. It is crucial for newly-minted doctoral students to begin their careers working within current methods, questions, and theories. I am an active researcher who is invited to give plenary and other talks nationally and internationally and am in conversation with many other scholars at the forefront of their fields. I have served in important capacities within my field, having, for example, been elected to the Literature and Science Division of the MLA and the inaugural committee for Ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities. I have published two scholarly monographs (one which won the ASLE Award for Ecocriticism), have another monograph forthcoming in Fall 2016, and another new book underway. I have also published an important co-edited collection, and have another edited volume forthcoming. My c.v., included with these materials, should provide evidence of my academic achievements.

While I have focused mainly on mentoring graduate students as researchers in this essay, I would like to add that I also train them as teachers, by incorporating pedagogical discussions in my classes, by discussing teaching techniques and course creation one-on-one with them and, most importantly, perhaps, mentoring them on how to best represent their teaching on the job market.. I have also had the great pleasure of teaching collaboratively with Matthew Lerberg, when he served as a teaching assistant for a 200-person lecture course a few years ago—we both learned so much from that experience! I have taught our department's graduate seminar on "Literary Pedagogy" several times, training graduate students in both theoretical and practical dimensions of teaching. I hope that I model best teaching practices in my courses. I have been quite fortunate to win several teaching awards at UTA, including the Regent's Award, and the induction to the Academy of Distinguished Teachers. I believe

that the best teaching grows out of considerable thought and careful reflection. That sort of intellectual focus on teaching is exemplified by two essays I have published and forthcoming, about the pedagogical strategies for teaching the environmental humanities. I often encourage doctoral students to include a chapter on pedagogy if it fits within their dissertation, or to publish separate articles on pedagogy I work extremely hard in my own teaching and am very impressed by the teaching of my current and former doctoral students—they are dedicated, skillful, effective, inspiring and truly innovative. I am thrilled to hear about the new courses they are designing, their interdisciplinary range and creativity, and their many, carefully executed, service-learning initiatives.

The selection criteria for UTA's doctoral mentoring award includes several categories that are best addressed by others in their letters of recommendation. I do not want to ignore those categories here, however, as they are quite important, so I will briefly say that I attentively monitor the progress of doctoral students, and offer honest, constructive feedback at all stages—from coursework, through comprehensive exams, the dissertation proposal, the drafting of the dissertation, the dissertation defense, the preparation of job market materials, the preparation for job interviews, and the progress toward tenure. I am nearly always available for graduate students--answering most emails immediately; offering extensive written feedback on papers, dissertation chapters, potential publications, and job materials; meeting with students face to face during office hours or coffee meetings; and meeting up with current and former doctoral students at conferences. Offering constructive feedback is essential for doctoral mentoring—such feedback must be respectful yet incisive. I try to be very supportive and empathetic even while challenging students to make their arguments more nuanced or complex. I offer counterpoints or ideas for further research, identifying potential problems, but being careful to give people the space to develop their own solutions, arguments, and positions. As an active scholar and researcher myself, I am able to sincerely empathize with their frustrations and understand their scholarly difficulties. I think it is important to respond to graduate students as quickly as possible to keep up their momentum toward completion. I hope that graduate students know that I have their best interests at heart, and hope that they find me to be honest, accessible, and supportive.

Since 1994 I have directed the work of eight doctoral students to completion, with two more that will finish in February 2016. Several of these PhDs are now tenured faculty members; one is currently up for tenure; one is chairing her department; others are currently on the academic job market. I am proud of their many accomplishments in the areas of research, publishing, and teaching. They have won awards for academic excellence and for teaching excellence. They have published books and articles, created compelling new courses, led service-learning initiatives, and have been effective administrators. I am very proud of their accomplishments and look forward to seeing even more!