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History

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mentor highlights

Cathy Frierson

Professor Cathy Frierson has been a member of the Department of History at the University of New Hampshire for twenty years. From 1995 to 2001 she was also Director of the Center for International Education.

Below is a correspondence with Professor Frierson about her own research and her mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

Inquiry: What is your current research? Did your undergraduate studies point you toward it? What interests you most about it?

CF: My current research focuses on transitional justice and the rule of law in post-Soviet Russia. I am examining the origins and record of the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression. This law was one of the last laws to be introduced by the Soviet government on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. The post-Soviet Russian government confirmed the law, expanded the categories of beneficiaries, and has devoted judicial and financial resources to its implementation.

As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in the early 1970s, I majored in Slavic Studies. I read the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn (then the most important Soviet dissident author writing about Soviet political repression) in courses in political science, history, and literature. I also first studied the Russian language at UNC.

Inquiry: What is the purpose of a mentoring relationship? What should the student and you gain from it?

CF: The mentoring relationship has many purposes. At the relationship's inception, its primary purpose is to recognize, affirm, and encourage the development of the student's talents. As the student and mentor work together to define the student's research project, the relationship introduces the student to steps in the research design process—from formulating the research question through identifying sources and methods to establishing a timetable for planning, research, and writing. During the research experience, the mentor introduces the mentee to existing research on the research topic and guides the student toward a deeper knowledge of the given discipline and topic. I believe the mentor must both encourage and discipline the mentee's enthusiasm by reminding her or him that the research must



Dr. Frierson and Kathryn Beaulieu '13 meet in Moscow spring of 2012 to discuss Kathryn's proposed research on the influence of Byzantine law on Russian law.

have a product. Research activity does not equal research productivity. Receiving research support through a fellowship obligates any scholar, whether undergraduate student or senior professor, to produce research results (even if they are negative results) and to disseminate them.

The mentor should receive financial compensation for the expertise and labor she or he provides to the mentee's education and training. A mentoring relationship should also refresh or enrich the mentor's knowledge of the research topic, methods, sources, and ways to access research materials. In my subject area—the history of modern Russia and the Soviet Union—the sources, methods, and access have shifted and expanded dramatically over my 20 years at UNH. Working with UNH students as a mentor has enabled me to explore along with them the limits of the possible for a foreign scholar pursuing research in a rapidly transforming polity. Finally, establishing research contacts inside Russia for UNH students expands my own network of partners in research.

Inquiry: Please describe some positive, memorable mentoring experiences or mentees.

CF: Two memorable experiences illustrate the mentoring relationship's capacity to instruct an undergraduate in the positive and negative realities of doing research in Russia. The first introduced Andrew McKernan '09 to the rewards of research in Russia. In fall 2007, I was in Moscow on a brief research trip; Andrew was in St. Petersburg that fall as a Study Abroad student. I had identified a potential Russian mentor in Moscow for the IROP research proposal Andrew was then developing. The potential mentor and his fellow-scholar wife invited us to their apartment for an interview and de facto oral language exam. They welcomed us into their spacious, Stalin-era apartment. We sat around a kitchen table laden with cookies, pastries, and a cake baked by the hostess, with a samovar and a pot of tea. For over an hour we had a vigorous discussion in Russian of Andrew's proposed topic. I observed with satisfaction how our host's eyes widened and his attention sharpened as Andrew described his research question and readings-to-date in fluent Russian. Andrew and I were the beneficiaries of Russian hospitality at its finest, and we got to see the inside of a grandiose Stalin-era apartment to boot!

But the second experience, alas, involved the negative aspects of doing research in Russia. In summer 2008, I was in St. Petersburg when another IROP mentee, Sarah Gormady '09, arrived for her research summer. On one of the first days of her first trip to Russia, Sarah and I were walking together along one of St. Petersburg's most famous and beautiful canals. As we walked along a narrow sidewalk, a Russian male pedestrian verbally accosted Sarah, and then ran his hands up and down her body as I shouted at him in Russian. What an introduction this was to the reality of being a woman trying to do research inside Russia! Regrettably, I was not surprised. In my nearly 30 years of conducting research in Russia, I have been the victim of sexual harassment during almost every research trip, some involving drunken men, others my putative research mentors. In fact, this reality had led me to identify only female research mentors and contacts for Sarah for her research experience.

Inquiry: Please describe any difficulties or problems you have had in mentoring undergraduates.

CF: The most persistent problem for me in serving as a mentor for undergraduate researchers is gauging the degree of guidance, advice, and discipline I should adopt in working with young adults who are eager to undertake a serious, independent research experience, yet are novices.

Inquiry: What advice or tips would you give a faculty member new to undergraduate mentoring?

CF: My tips for prospective mentors are:

Understand that the application phase for undergraduate programs is labor and time intensive. A successful proposal requires at least a full month to six weeks to prepare, including three to four conferences for the mentor and student to refine the proposal.

Enforce a timetable of incremental research products to ensure the student's progress toward research results she or he can disseminate at the end of the project.

Be receptive to the student's enthusiasm and curiosity, attentive to the student's anxieties about independent research, and supportive of the student's forays into research collaboration and methodologies that may be new to her or him, and perhaps to you as well.

Tap your rich resources among colleagues at your home institution, elsewhere in the U.S., and abroad as you and the student design and pursue the research project.

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