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SBL Panel Mentoring

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When I was a graduate student and junior faculty member, there wasn't any such thing as "mentoring." I got no guidance about applying for jobs (I don't think that I even had a CV). At my dissertation defense, one professor commented, "You will publish!", but I had no idea how you did that. I had never given a talk at a professional meeting. Nor had I ever stood in front of a classroom to teach until the first day of my first job, at what was then Mary Washington College (and now is the University of Mary Washington—a case of "name escalation"). This is not to blame my professors: their behavior was not unusual for the era and I know that would never have meant to disadvantage me. It's rather to say that I am pretty much self-taught as a "mentor."

When I arrived in Virginia to begin teaching, Mary Washington College was an all-female institution. It was the women's division of the University of Virginia: in those days the men at Charlottesville were kept apart from the woman in Fredericksburg. I wasn't much older than the students, so it was quite easy to bond with them in various activities (this was the era of the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and Second-Wave feminism). I had been hired to start a Religion Department, so at first there was just one, "me," teaching a raft of subjects I didn't know much about. Then the department expanded to two, and then to three.

Although I still didn't know about "mentoring," I must have instinctively done some things right, as in recent years I have received letters and emails from students of that era, some of whom I can't really remember, thanking me for a brief word of encouragement that gave them the small push to think about graduate school or expand

their horizons about possible jobs. The problem of many female students in that era was their lack of confidence, both in the classroom and in their thinking about their own futures. This was the era of Betty Friedan's "feminine mystique" and Simone de Beauvoir's "the second sex." It amazes me now to think how just a bit of encouragement, a few words of praise for work well done, had such large effects, at least according to the former students themselves. I still remind myself now, that even at a different institution and in a different era, women students are often more timid than their accomplishments would suggest. For these students, encouragement and praise, helping to raise their sights, is key.

An essay in a 2013 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>i</sup> underscored how people-in-general "commonly misinterpret displays of confidence [by men] as signs of confidence." Yet, the author argues, "arrogance and overconfidence are inversely related to leadership talent." To build a group, to get co-workers to set aside their own private agendas for the common interest and good of the group, other characteristics are needed: sensitivity, consideration, humility. Why the author asks, does so much of the "lean in" literature encourage women to adopt these dysfunctional leadership traits (overconfidence, narcissicism, self-centeredness)? The author concludes that despite the real problem of the "thick glass ceiling" that women bump up against, the bigger problem is "the lack of career obstacles for incompetent men" and the tendency to equate leadership with qualities that make men more inept leaders than women. This essay, incidentally, was written by a man.

Back to my early teaching days: A few students during my years at Mary Washington College went on to seminary, and at least two remarkable students (Patricia

Cox Miller; Robin Darling Young) were accepted for Ph.D. programs at the University of Chicago. Those two had the good sense to get some extra language training as they dived into the study of late antiquity (which was not called “late antiquity” then). I kept in touch with them, celebrating the joys and successes, and sympathizing with the sorrows, in their graduate years. For many decades, I have counted them as friends.

When in 1982 I moved as a Full Professor to Duke University, I was confronted with a different situation. Now I was going to teach graduate students in early Christianity for the first time. The first female graduate student I encountered upon arrival was someone really eager to have a female professor around: Amy-Jill Levine. She reminds me that when she once asked me how she could reciprocate for the support I had given, I told her to “play it forward, especially for other women in the academy.” That seems to me good advice still today: what helpful professors did for you, pass on the support to the next generation.

The teaching situation at Duke was quite different from that at Mary Washington. For several years, there were always male students in my seminars who wanted to show everyone, especially me, that they knew more than I did; these had to be taught, some gently and some not so gently, that seminars were meant to foster mutual discussion and student cooperation. Female graduate students--and I have had a stunningly wonderful crop of them--even though they had been accepted into a top Ph.D. program, needed encouragement and often, some prodding to speak in seminars. Asking each seminar student to take responsibility for presenting reports in class on various books and articles that were “extra reading” ensured that all of them had to talk.

In recent years at Duke, the undergraduate scene has changed considerably from that which obtained in my early days of teaching. First, there is the problem of excessive professionalization and concern for high-paying careers, so that undergraduates are less drawn to courses with no future job utility, such as Religion. Here, I had to work hard to maintain students' interest about what seemed to them arcane and useless subjects.

Second, more undergraduate students today, far from lacking confidence, have perhaps an excess of it; they have been told for years how very special they were. This presents problems in the classroom, especially those inhabited by overconfident male students, who consider their own work exemplary and claim that they deserve at least "A" grades. Here, the problem for the professor is to insist on rigor and to hold firm against being swayed. One, perhaps slightly mean procedure I devised is to tell such students that I would be glad to read through their exams or papers again, but that I couldn't guarantee ahead of time that on a second reading, their grade might be lowered, not raised. Yet, even in these classrooms with over-confident students, there is inevitably a shy one in the back of the room, one who didn't take part in class discussions, but who wrote the best exam in the class. For those students, often but not always women, encouragement was due.

For graduate students, the process is obviously a great deal longer and more intense than that of the undergraduate who takes one or two courses with you over his or her four-year college experience. A would-be graduate student opts for a program where there are a few professors with expertise in his or her particular area, and these are people with whom the student will be spending a great deal of time in the next five, six, or seven years. For Ph.D. students, as most of you know, course work is only the beginning. I

have had only a few students who dropped out, usually at course-work level, when they saw what pursuit of a Ph.D. was going to entail. They probably were right to do so, to recognize that their talents might lie elsewhere. I was fortunate that I didn't have to push too hard in that direction.

Certainly a graduate student in Religion should have some familiarity with the history of the field and various methodological approaches to it. Most universities now have such a course, many require it (alas, mine does not, despite Duke University's larger reputation as theory-centered in the Humanities). Students who do not avail themselves of such a course put themselves at a disadvantage on the job-market—and for that matter, on understanding how one's chosen area of specialization fits in, or challenges, the parameters of the field.

As a student moves into the stages of prelims and then settles on a dissertation topic, the relationship between professor and student becomes more focused and intense. I think I had an easy job in this respect at Duke, for graduate students working with me usually devised wonderful projects on their own that held their attention during the often-grueling years of research and writing. Those dissertations turned into books that were published by top academic presses; I am very proud of my ever-growing stack of them.

At prelim and dissertation level, the mentoring professor's role is often to ensure that the student doesn't bite off too much. At Duke, the prelim exams are designed to ensure broad coverage of major and minor subjects, plus some plan for where the dissertation topic might be headed. Most graduate students have never written anything so large as a dissertation, and it is easy to get lost in the woods. I find in my own experience that it is better to read chapters as they are being framed and written, in order

to give feedback at an early stage. I think that professors who wait until the dissertation is, from the student's point of view, done, to offer critique do their students a disservice.

Graduate students in religion today are so anxious about the job market, which is understandable, that I think they try to take on too much. They want to teach more courses on their own, give papers at too many meetings, submit essays to journals too soon. Although I would never recommend my own training (or rather, lack of it) as a model, I think that today's students aim for quantity of accomplishments. They would be better off doing somewhat less in quantity and doing that smaller amount really well. Yes, hiring institutions want to ensure that the junior faculty they hire have some experience teaching (here, a syllabus designed by yourself is a good thing). I think the requirement for graduate students to have a "teaching philosophy" is rather silly; for one thing, having such a so-called "philosophy" is better left to those with some years of teaching behind them; and second, graduate students all write the same thing in their statements (how they seek to engage students in the classroom, etc.) But the practice seems to be endemic, so my small voice of protest is futile. Yes, having given papers at several meetings is a good thing, too. An article or two in a respected, peer-reviewed journal is a plus. But overdoing the whole thing usually results in less than a student's best work.

Job market concerns prod the mentor into further action. It is very important for mentors to take the time to write the best possible letter for each student, one that brings out the strong points and differentiates *this* student from others. Here, students can help by giving their mentors packets of well-organized information with their CVs, lists of places to which they will apply with deadlines, job descriptions, sample letters of

application, a syllabus for a course they have taught or would like to teach. Writing letters of recommendation is an extremely time-consuming, but vital, part of a mentor's life. Also, mentors can help students with their own letters of application: here, bringing out one's own readiness for the job, but avoiding those sentences that assume one already has a foot in the door and is indispensable. Somebody else is going to decide the latter.

Once a student receives one or more invitations to meet for short interviews at AAR/SBL or similar organizations, the mentor can help prepare the student to think how to explain his or her work to an audience of specialists in other fields. This is a tricky line to walk: explaining one's work in ways that are understandable to experts in *other* sub-disciplines of Religion, yet engaging for those interviewers who do know something about your specialty. I suggest having a three-or-four minute explanation of the general significance of the dissertation, with backup for interviewers' further questions. Don't get lost in the trees; the interviewers want to see the forest first. Also, have something interesting to say about a project you are imagining for post-dissertation work.

Interviewers often ask what you see yourself doing in five years. Although you probably won't know which faculty from an institution will show up to interview you, read up on the faculty, the department, and the institution so that you have some idea of what you can offer and how your work fits with others in the department. If you are replacing someone who is retiring, good to ferret out as best you can whether the department wants someone who can duplicate that professor's offerings, or wants something different. In any event, no point in offering a course on which one of your interviewers has a jealous claim!

And when you receive an invitation for an interview at the institution, all the above apply even more. Learn all you can about the institution, the professors you will meet, what kind of students attend it, the expectations for the position. I would avoid enthusing to random groups how much you LOVE professor X's work, as there well may be people in the group who hate professor X, department politics being what they are. Practice your job-talk so that you make eye-contact with the audience--but don't make your speech sound artificial. Be careful about Power Point--it can go astray and ruin an interview. Certainly do NOT make a Power Point presentation in which you simply say aloud the words on the screen.

Don't talk too fast--always a problem when an interviewee is nervous. Take a deep breath and slow down. Practice at home so you don't overrun the amount of time you are allotted, which only irritates interviewers. You've done a good job in talking to faculty and students over a meal if you go away a little hungry. Know how what you can offer fits in with the program of the department. After you get back home, write a short thank-you note to the head of the interview committee, the department head, and others with whom you had some extensive contact--but don't fawn!

There are also some less formal aspects that seem obvious to me, but which students don't always recognize. For example, if you are a woman student, do not wear a skirt that comes above your knees, especially if you are interviewing at a religious institution. Guys, dress more formally than you usually do. Don't say "like" or "you know" every two minutes. Meals while on interviews are for you to talk with the faculty and students--so don't order things that are hard or messy to eat, such as spaghetti.

And when you land a job, probably you'll be assigned a faculty mentor whose job it is to let you know institutional expectations, give advice on journals and publishers, and so on. Don't be afraid to ask. Even if your first job isn't great, it's a stepping-stone, so give it your best shot and be a good colleague.

Good luck!

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<sup>i</sup> Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?" *Harvard Business Review* Aug. 23, 2013.