

How to Find Mentors

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As graduate students, many of you began to develop significant personal and professional relationships within the historical profession. Never fear, you will continue to benefit from these relationships even as you pack up your things and head to your first “real” job within the profession. Those who mentored you in graduate school will likely continue to do so. There is little doubt, however, that you will need some support and assistance as you learn the ropes at your new campus or public history institution.

Think of More Than One Mentor

While in graduate school, you may have had one main mentor (often your advisor), in professional life you probably need to expand your number of mentors. There are multiple facets to most historian jobs, particularly in academia, and so you may want to think in terms of multiple mentors. Obviously, you will not meet all of these people and cultivate all of these relationships immediately but over the next several years.

The best first step is to do a basic self-examination, preferably after a month or two at your new job. What do you find that you really need help with? Do you need someone to advise you about office politics? Teaching strategies? University administrative culture? Juggling family and career? The local community? Prioritize your needs, decide what your mentors and friends from graduate school can help you with via phone or e-mail, and then figure out which of your new colleagues to call on for some advice.

Also, many of us tend to think of mentors as people who are older and wiser, perhaps because of the graduate student-advisor model. You will likely find, however, that you end up relying a lot on the advice and assistance of newly hired people like yourself who are tackling the same challenges.

Mentors in Your Department

Surely one of the most obvious and wisest things to do in seeking a new mentor is to take time to get to know your new colleagues. Say you are looking for someone to advise you about your scholarship. If you are at a large institution, you will soon discover which of your colleagues has research interests that are similar to your own. You may find that these colleagues are the best people to give you advice on developing your courses or charting your research agenda. At smaller schools, you may find that you alone represent your century or topic, so that you will have to rely more heavily on your colleagues and mentors from graduate school for advice on your particular field.

The person who advises you on your scholarship will undoubtedly also have some suggestions about your teaching in the field. Yet, a lot of your questions and concerns about teaching may well be generic or related to your specific institution. You may well find a department colleague who specializes in another academic field will be a good mentor to you in teaching.

Perhaps one of the most pressing needs for a historian at a new academic job is to learn the ins and outs of department and university politics. The minefield at your particular institution will have some unique characteristics that you will do well to learn from someone who has experience there. Listen and observe. You will do best to seek out those with extensive service, not necessarily those with the most vocal opinions. It won't take you long to discover who is willing to provide guidance and invaluable institutional knowledge of your university or public history institution as a whole. In the area of university politics, you will probably find that you will also benefit from sharing information and concerns with your colleagues who are also new to the university.

Mentors from Other Departments or Institutions

For those in academia, one of the benefits to you of the university-wide service required for tenure is the opportunity to meet and learn from colleagues in other disciplines (as do the new faculty orientations that most universities hold every year). In the course of your committee service, you may well find a mentor in another department. Such a friend and adviser can provide a fresh perspective on your own department and on the university as a whole.

Other places to think about when looking for a mentor outside of your academic department include various women's organizations and faculty/staff committees related to women's issues. Check to see if your school has a women's center, an equity office, a president's commission on the status of women, an association of faculty women, or similar organizations that you could become involved with.

Historians at public history institutions do not usually have such varied options at hand. They do, however, have access to local, state, regional, and national history-related organizations that provide opportunities for service and forums for meeting colleagues from other institutions who might become mentors. State museum associations, local history organizations, and such national groups as the American Association for State and Local History and the Organization of American Historians are always looking for public historians interested in volunteering for various committees and working groups.

In addition, historians both within academia and outside of it will want to think about community organizations that offer opportunities for service and fellowship. Chapters of the American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters are two good examples of such organizations.

Tables Turned

Be advised that even as you are developing relationships with mentors to help guide you through your new professional life, you will soon find yourself sought out by graduate students and younger professionals as a mentor. Think about what helped you the most as you faced the challenges of graduate school, and try to be as helpful as you can be within the constraints of the numerous obligations you have to fulfill as a young professional. You will have to discover how best to strike a balance between offering a helping hand (and in a larger sense giving back to the profession) and becoming

overwhelmed by all of the demands on your time. Make decisions about your time and stick to them. You don't have to give in to the assumption of 24-hour access that comes with the electronic age. If you don't want to read and respond to e-mail from home, don't do so. Just be sure to let your graduate students and fellow colleagues know the parameters for your mentorship of them.

Resources

American Association for State and Local History Mentoring Program Web Site, <http://www.aaslh.org/mentor.htm>. As of 1/23/09, this program is in a holding pattern while improvements are made.

Melanie F. Gustafson, *Becoming a Historian: A Survival Manual—2003 Edition* (AHA Publications, 2003).

Robert J. Menges, *Faculty in New Jobs: A Guide to Settling In, Becoming Established, and Building Institutional Support* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

Constance B. Schulz and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, eds., *Clio's Southern Sisters: Interviews with Leaders of the Southern Association for Women Historians* (Univ. of Missouri Press, 2004).

Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct—2005 Edition (AHA Publications, 2005).

Emily Toth, *Ms. Mentor's New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

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