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Marion Girard Dorsey: Associate Professor of History, University of New Hampshire

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Mentor Highlights

Marion Girard Dorsey

—Jennifer Lee

Dr. Marion Girard Dorsey is an associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been since 2003. Below is a correspondence with Dr. Dorsey 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?

MD: I am working on two book projects right now, but the primary one examines why the major western Allies (Britain, the U.S., and Canada) did not use chemical weapons during World War II. This was inspired by my first book project about British responses to poison gas (the first modern chemical weapon) during World War I. This is a particularly interesting question because poison gas had been used widely during World War I and, until then, weapons were not removed from the arsenal right after being used. (Since then, we have seen restraint with regard to nuclear weapons.) Considering all the horrors that did occur during World War II, I am curious why belligerents refrained, time and again in the face of temptation, from using chemical weapons. What historical lessons can we learn, and perhaps apply, about arms control in general?



My other project is about the integration of professionals (nurses, doctors, chaplains, and lawyers) into the modern American army. How did these professions—each with their own ethical codes and each dedicated to protecting bodies, rights, or souls—blend with an army that, traditionally, had been designed to destroy or kill? There is, in addition, my long interest and work in the history of medicine and the law (I have a law degree), so this topic allows me to blend many of my interests.

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

MD: A mentoring relationship, of course, benefits and guides the mentee, but a strong one goes beyond that. My best relationships begin by enabling the student to learn about the subject we are studying—both in terms of content and skill development. In particular, I hope that the student learns how to take on more responsibility and research on his or her own in the future. In other words, he or she learns how to be a better scholar as well as a stronger student. I like a mentee who is considering graduate school to learn about life in academia, which can mean meeting other scholars, or learning about graduate school or the work life of a faculty member. I, too, hope to learn from the student, including not only new historical material but also how to be a better teacher. A truly excellent relationship endures after the specific project has ended. It may last for years and may change lives, studies, or careers.

Inquiry: Please describe one or two memorable mentoring experiences or mentees.

MD: This summer, a student and I met in the library to discuss her work on a project. Periodically, we had discussed graduate school, but at one point during our conversation a graduate student stopped to talk. It was rewarding to be able to facilitate a conversation between a talented undergraduate and a dedicated graduate student to help the undergraduate understand how her work (and its challenges and rewards) might play out in graduate school and beyond.

Some of the best mentoring experiences have come about when students approached me, even if they had not taken a class with me. I remember a student who wanted to do historical research in Britain. We worked together, and she applied successfully for an International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) grant. As we prepared for her trip, it became clear that she had never travelled by plane nor left the country. Our preparation meetings changed to include lessons about how to get a passport, buy luggage, travel around a foreign city, etc., as well as the historical material and research skills that we normally discussed. After this student returned from Europe, she told me that now she felt she could do anything. That was memorable for both of us.

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

MD: I have been incredibly fortunate. The UNH students I have mentored have all been so motivated that it has been a pleasure to work with them. However, one of the best learning experiences for one of my students, although it was difficult for both of us, occurred when her project did not work out the way she hoped it would. She had studied World War I, developed a research question, and then found out that the material to answer that question did not exist. While disappointing and frustrating for her in the short term, she recognized that this was a “real life” experience that scholars encounter. It helped her find out more about life as an historian and provided more fodder for her to consider as she thinks about graduate school in the future.

Another challenge has been working within the short timeframe of a summer research project, especially when the student is working primarily from home in another state. We had to carefully schedule meetings and time for finding resources, and then learn to be flexible when things didn’t happen as planned.

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

If I were speaking to a faculty member new to undergraduate mentoring I would tell him or her: 1) to recognize how fortunate he or she is, and 2) to save time for the relationship. A productive mentoring relationship is one that will benefit both of you. It is rewarding to watch a dedicated undergraduate grow, especially when he or she is interested in a topic similar to yours. In addition, by learning how to teach your material and research skills to someone working on an in-depth project with you, you have to reconsider how you explain your ideas, your approach, the research project, your experiences, etc. All of this helps you reassess and improve your own teaching and research. However, breaking down the steps to research, understanding and answering the questions students have, reviewing students’ progress, and so on, takes time. Even if a student is working on part of your project, it may take more time to mentor him or her than to do the work yourself. The goal is to help the student, not to save you time.

Dr. Girard Dorsey has mentored *Inquiry* authors Jennifer Allen (2013) and Elisabeth Iacono (2016).