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John Cerullo: Professor of History, UNH - Manchester

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John Cerullo

—Jennifer Lee

Dr. John Cerullo is a professor of history at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester, where he has been since it was Merrimack Valley College more than thirty-three years ago.

Below is a correspondence with Professor Cerullo about his own research and his 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?

JC: My current research is on the history of legislative-judicial relations in New Hampshire, and specifically on the impeachment of Chief Justice David Brock in 2000. I'm interested in tensions, both theoretical and real, between the realm of law and the realm of politics. That interest itself dates back to the year I spent as a visiting scholar at Boston College Law; it was deepened through my involvement with the Justice Studies program at UNH. This project on New Hampshire, however, represents a significant departure for me, as my main credentials are in European history, not American.

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

JC: The mentoring relationship is about facilitating the intellectual growth of a specific student, through a specific research project. If the project is successful, the student can lay claim to substantive expertise in that specific area, and that is no small achievement.

During the research process, however, something bigger happens. The students learn a lot about the act of research itself: posing the right questions, finding defensible answers, sharpening them in critical give-and-take with their mentors. What that means is that the students are learning how to learn—how to teach themselves. The intellectual discipline, independence, and, especially, the confidence that emerge can last a lifetime. In addition, there is a whole set of benefits that come from the act of writing up the results of research. Clear and effective writing requires clear and effective thinking. That's why the act of writing the paper is often just as vital a part of the project as doing the research.

There are important benefits to the mentor, as well. The mentor almost always learns something new. In addition, a new and very rewarding relationship often develops between mentor and student. The student is, in a sense, no longer just a student but a kind of colleague, someone who has established something like an equal footing with the mentor in this particular area of research. That's a wonderfully gratifying, exciting thing for any teacher.



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

JC: The most memorable mentoring experiences I have had have been those that resulted in papers published in *Inquiry*, the University's online undergraduate research journal.

I can remember a student in a class I was teaching at UNH-Manchester called The "Rights Revolution." I was sharing some research I had done on a "wrongful life" case in France, which involved a child who had been born with massive neurological deficits because his mother had been misadvised by her physicians during pregnancy. The parents sued and won; the doctors acknowledged their errors. But when the child tried to bring his own action, they balked—and a large part of the public agreed with them. Their argument was that to acknowledge an actionable wrong on *his* part would confer nothing less than a "right not to be born" on handicapped persons. People feared that such a right would eventually submit the parents of handicapped children to legal liability, render physical imperfections litigable, and incentivize eugenics.

My student was herself handicapped, and found the issues involved very compelling on a personal level. She threw herself into research on the French case and into "wrongful life" actions in the US as well as into medical ethics in general. It was wonderful to watch her research and think her way to answers to questions that, for her, were anything but academic.

I had another student interested in law, and especially in 4th Amendment jurisprudence in the wake of the Warren Court's important decisions in that area. He wanted to know whether the law here in New Hampshire had tracked, or diverged from, national currents. He found a lot of surprising information, and in the process we jointly realized just how fascinating, and how understudied, New Hampshire legal history really is. That was an example of the student teaching the mentor something new.

Most recently, I had a student who did an outstanding research project in my course Europe Since 1945. I recommended he submit his work to *Inquiry*. Under their editorial guidance, he went on to publish an article on a related but entirely distinct research subject, with only the lightest supervision by me. This was a case of a student who, through the research process, had definitely outgrown his mentor. I couldn't have been more proud.

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

JC: In my experience at UNH-Manchester, most students have the intelligence and the discipline to produce an *Inquiry*-worthy research article, if they have the proper encouragement and guidance from a faculty member. Many students, however, lack the confidence, the patience, and/or the time. It can be difficult to help students see the benefits of producing publishable research. Those planning on graduate school recognize the value of publishing, but I wish a wider set of students did.

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

JC: Patience is a virtue, especially in mentoring. And it's very important not to see the student as a sort of acolyte whose achievement will reflect glory on the mentor. It won't and it shouldn't; and if you let yourself think that way, you will impose a kind of harness on the student that will be counter-productive. You've got to let the student find his/her own way, produce his/her own analysis on his/her own terms. Be prepared to argue, to critique, to brainstorm, to correct from your own knowledge and experience—but never to *tell* the student what s/he *should* be doing.

Dr. Cerullo has mentored *Inquiry* authors Devon Mercer (2006), Randall Lawrence-Hurt (2010), and Sam O'Brien (2014).