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Jeannie Sowers: Associate Professor, Political Science Department, UNH - Durham

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Jeannie Sowers

—Brigid C. Casellini

Dr. Jeannie Sowers is an associate professor and the master of arts program director in the Department of Political Science at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). She has worked at UNH since 2006, specializing in Middle East and comparative environmental politics.

Below is a correspondence with Dr. Sowers 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?

JS: I work on activism and protest in the Middle East, the politics of natural resources, and environmental issues, human rights, and economic development in the region. My undergraduate major definitely influenced my decision to study Middle Eastern politics in graduate school. At Harvard-Radcliffe I majored in social studies, an interdisciplinary major that emphasized the study of history, economics, and classic texts in social theory that helped establish the modern social science disciplines. The experience opened intellectual horizons that I didn't even know existed, and I loved it.



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

JS: The purpose of working with undergraduates, in my view, is to share the intellectual excitement that comes from exploring new ideas about issues that really matter to ordinary people living in the Middle East. I hope to help students appreciate how much there is to learn from taking seriously the ideas, aspirations, and conditions of people living elsewhere. Once students begin to follow their own passion, finding an idea or topic that inspires them, then they are able to share what they find with me and with others.

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

JS: Each time I've had the opportunity to work with a dedicated undergraduate student, it has been very rewarding. I have had students work on women's rights in Cairo, constitutional reform in Morocco, women's movements in Morocco, and Islamic finance in Egypt and Jordan. All remain very memorable for me!

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

JS: Doing research in the Middle East and North Africa is a challenging experience for everyone, whether students or seasoned scholars. Some of the difficulties that we encounter result from unpredictable events far beyond our control, such as when the Egyptian military overthrew the elected government in July 2013. One of my students had to leave the country as a result, and conduct research in Jordan instead. More routinely, though, I try to prepare students for the cultural differences that they will encounter, and emphasize that they need to remain flexible, patient, determined, and open-minded.

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

JS: Most of the students that I work with conduct field research abroad. It is very important that they take the time to think through their experience and their findings once they are back. I thus prefer that students commit to completing a significant project based on their field research, such as an honors thesis combined with an Undergraduate Research Conference presentation, if they work with me.

Dr. Sowers mentored *Inquiry* authors Trevor Mauck (2008) and Austin Perea (2014).

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