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### Nick Smith: Professor of Philosophy

Erin Trainer

*University of New Hampshire*

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## Mentor Highlight

### Nick Smith

—Erin Trainer

Nick Smith is professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of New Hampshire. Below is a correspondence with Dr. Smith about his own research and his mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

**Inquiry:** What is your area of research? Did your undergraduate studies point you toward this topic? What interests you most about it?

I am trained as a philosopher with a law degree, and I sort of backed into becoming an expert on apologies. When my students are doing advanced undergraduate research with me, I often explain to them how the topic of apologies was once a very small part of a different project. But as I tried to figure out apologies, a few paragraphs became a chapter in my dissertation, which became an article, which became a book, which led to another book. Research often works this way—what seems like a narrow side bar can become multiple books. So whenever someone says, “I’m not sure this topic is ‘big’ enough for a thesis,” I warn them that they might be working on it for decades!



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

In my experience, all students really benefit from having multiple professors who are personally invested in their success. We excel at this in the philosophy department, which is one of the reasons why we have the pleasure of working with such exceptional students. Mentoring is many different things: encouraging high school students to engage big ideas, helping first-year students learn how to overcome nerves in class discussion, advising cohorts how to make the most of UNH (study abroad!), being a sympathetic adult who remembers that college is rough at times, helping to imagine and navigate post-UNH opportunities, and advising mid-career alum on their professional options. And that is just a fraction of the mentoring that happens beyond the formal study of philosophy. There is

a tendency to think of mentoring as the advanced/capstone interactions, but those are just some of the fruit of much earlier work building relationships with students.

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

I was a little jealous sending Andrew Ware to study at the Center for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge. *When can I go?*

I was actually encouraging another student to apply for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) when Eden Suoth popped his head in to tell me he was awarded a Fulbright to study apologies in Indonesia.

Taking a group of mostly philosophy majors to study the dark legacy of communism for a semester at the formerly Karl Marx University in Budapest was a remarkable experience for all of us.

***Inquiry:*** Please describe any difficulties or problems you have had in mentoring undergraduates. What advice or tips would you give a faculty member new to undergraduate mentoring?

It takes a considerable investment of time and energy to really get to know students. Sometimes at UNH, the students can seem like an undifferentiated hoard. It takes a lot of work to sit down with them, learn who they are and what fires them up, and realize that they are all dynamic young people looking for guidance. And although professors don't always like to think of it this way, students are paying a lot of money for our help. I'm always thinking of what I'd like professors to do for my own kids.

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