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mentor highlights

Dr. **Lawrence C. Reardon** (known by Chris, his middle name) is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and holds as well the Hood House Professorship for 2009–2011. He is the incoming chair of the Department and has been at the University of New Hampshire since 1991.

Below is an edited correspondence with Dr. Reardon about his own research and his mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

Inquiry: What is your current research?

CR: I have just completed a journal article and am working on a book chapter and a book manuscript to develop ideas about elite learning. In the article, for the top German journal on China, I have analyzed Chinese elite attitudes toward religion. In a chapter for a book on President Obama's foreign policy, I am analyzing paradigm change. I am using these theoretical arguments to finish a book manuscript on Chinese foreign economic policy from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. This is a continuation of my first book, which argued that between the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 and Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Chinese elites agreed on a long-term, inwardly oriented strategy to obtain an independent, strong, and self-reliant China. However, elites disagreed on the specific inwardly oriented strategies to achieve this goal.

In the second book, I argue that these leaders realized that the state's long-term development paradigm and strategies were seriously flawed, and they engaged in an eight-year search for a new paradigm and appropriate strategies. The book is based on fieldwork in China between 1984 and 1988 and subsequent follow-up visits while I have been here at UNH.

Inquiry: Did your undergraduate studies point you toward this area of research?

CR: When I was an International Studies major at Johns Hopkins University, I was very interested in studying China. Unfortunately, Hopkins did not offer Chinese language studies. I did take two courses on Chinese politics, in which the professor focused my arguments and opened my mind to alternate political views. Unfortunately, he became very upset when I joined the Army ROTC program in my sophomore year, as he was a strong believer in Maoism and a prominent anti-Vietnam activist. The professor gave me my only “C” in my undergraduate career, which could have ended my interest in China.



Chris Reardon on the Changjiang (Yangze) River in China.

Fortunately, I had simultaneously taken a small undergraduate/graduate seminar on African economic history with one of the world's top experts, Professor Philip Curtin. Curtin met weekly with each of the three undergraduate students, and we presented papers analyzing the arguments of the weekly readings. He helped me hone my ability to analyze an argument and allowed me to develop my own point of view. He was one of the three people who had a transformative influence on my academic career. Although he was a very important academic, he had not forgotten the importance of teaching and encouraging undergraduates.

My interest in economic history was strengthened during my junior year abroad at Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy. While most of the courses dealt with Western Europe, I focused on European countries' relations with their former colonies.

Looking back, I was lucky to have several professors who expected that their undergraduate students could do graduate work. They respected their students, and, in turn, I highly respected them. Secondly, I had a chance to study abroad and explore my interests in economics and politics, including giving a paper at an international conference in the Netherlands. Finally, I had found a topic that fascinated me: the role of economics and politics in a country's development.

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

CR: Based on my student experience in undergraduate school, a professor must encourage students to develop their own views of the world and to be self-reflective. He/she must encourage students to develop strong arguments to support these views while always remaining open to changing them. Most of all, a professor should convince the students that they have the ability to do superior work and can exceed their own expectations.

The mentor benefits by vicariously enjoying their enthusiasm for research and by seeing the world from a different and perhaps new perspective. Mentors thus can avoid boredom, and can continue to be excited by new discoveries and new avenues of research.

Inquiry: Please describe some memorable mentoring experiences or mentees.

CR: I really enjoy students who are self-starters and need just a little push here and there. I want students to develop their own paths and not necessarily copy my path. I guess that's a difference between the social and the natural sciences. I have had several students who have taken several of my courses and then pursued graduate work using quantitative approaches. I do qualitative studies, but I am thrilled when students find their own way and are successful. As the Chinese say, *qingchu yulan*, or the student often surpasses the teacher.

Inquiry: What are some difficulties or problems you have had in mentoring undergraduates?

CR: The more difficult students are those who lack confidence and have the ability to take the next step. You present them with the options available and bolster their self-confidence. You provide them with a different view of who they think they are and make them realize their potential. Sometimes they make mistakes, but you are always supportive. It really is a form of academic parenting.

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

CR: First, expect that motivated undergraduates can do graduate work as long as you are willing to put in the time to teach them basic argumentation skills. They must be encouraged to explore their own interests, and a mentor should not force upon them a point of view.

Second, students who are not initially motivated to study are not necessarily lost, but need to be encouraged to discover that academics can be fascinating and that they need to discover their own path.

Third, students who cannot be motivated should be encouraged to take time off, get a job, and pay their bills. In several years, should they see the importance of an education, they can start again at university. Most “nontraditional” students return to school hungry to learn and make fantastic students.

To read more in this issue about Dr. Reardon and the Confucius Institute, go to the feature article.

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