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Inquiry Journal Spring 2022

Inquiry Journal

Spring 2022

Paul Robertson: Lecturer in the Department of Classics, Humanities, and Italian Studies

Brigid C. Casellini

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Recommended Citation

Casellini, Brigid C., "Paul Robertson: Lecturer in the Department of Classics, Humanities, and Italian Studies" (2022). *Inquiry Journal*. 1.

https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_spring_2022/1

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In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus departs for the siege of Troy, he leaves his friend Mentor, a wise, older man, in charge of his son and palace. Mentor is to watch over and guide the young Telemachus. In the seventeenth century, Mentor became a verb, *to mentor*, with its current meaning of individual guidance of a (usually) younger, inexperienced person by an older, more experienced teacher or tutor. Here we profile two University of New Hampshire faculty members who have frequently mentored undergraduates, including *Inquiry* authors.

Mentor Highlights: Paul Robertson

—Brigid C. Casellini

Paul Robertson is a lecturer in the Department of Classics, Humanities, and Italian Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Below is a correspondence with Dr. Robertson about his own research and his mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

***Inquiry*: What is your research focus? Did your undergraduate studies point you toward it? What interests you most about it?**

I study the role of religion in human cognition and culture, especially in the ancient Mediterranean. I started college as a physics major with the intent to become an engineer, and then pivoted to a dual major in classics and religion. I've always had a strong interest in the intersection of the humanities and sciences. How did the evolution of the human brain contribute to religious thinking across the human species? How did ancient philosophy synthesize religious meaning and scientific materialism? In these areas you can study a million different things: why are people religious and where did religion come from, how did Greece and Rome play key roles in the shaping of religious and scientific thought for the centuries that followed, what can ancient wisdom teach us today about finding meaning and happiness? I think we can help find answers to these questions by drawing from and integrating disciplines ranging from literature to philosophy to biology to mathematics.



Dr. Paul Robertson

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

There are many different kinds of mentoring relationships, but I focus on collaborative undergraduate research. I want to do something novel and interesting, and ideally, I want to publish it. I want my student's name and my name to be right next to each other in print.

So, a primary purpose of this type of mentoring relationship is to co-produce and co-publish something that we think is significant and that is stimulating to both the student and me.

A colleague also taught me this: Collaboration should involve different skills, different interests, different contributions, different expertise. If you're interested in the same stuff with the same background there's no point in working together, because you won't learn much from each other and you'll accomplish nothing too different than if you'd worked alone. Therefore, another key purpose of a collaborative mentoring relationship is for you both to learn from each other—different questions, different ways of understanding the material, different life experiences, and different ways of seeing the world.

***Inquiry*: What different types of mentoring experiences have you had (i.e. through courses, independent studies, grant-funded projects, presentations, etc.)? Please describe any especially memorable mentees.**

I could talk for days about all the amazing and very different students I've had the opportunity to collaborate with. We've especially worked through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research programs: SURFs, INCOs, URAs, you name it. I think the Hamel Center is one of the best resources on campus. Every student should look into these programs—you can get paid to do research with a faculty member! My students have travelled to attend prestigious national conferences, they've presented posters at research meetings, and they've even given talks to an audience of academics.

Several students and I have co-authored articles which we published in academic journals. Michael Miller ('21) was a dual major in humanities and chemistry who received a URA to run a study with me based off one of his course projects. We published the article in the *Journal of the Cognitive Science of Religion*, coming out in 2022. Michael then went off to get his Ph.D. at the University of Oregon in chemistry. Michael really understood the value of both the sciences and the humanities, and Oregon's Ph.D. selection committee did too. A current student, Ashley Roy, is a specialist in data analytics, and we've done several semesters of independent studies applying statistics and data visualization techniques to ancient religious and philosophical literature. We had a grand time figuring out how to code the Bible's literary style into Python. We published one paper together in a collection of essays titled *Digital Biblical Studies*, and just finished another one for submission. Ashley's now off to get her master's degree in business analytics at Boston College. A third student, Camden Roy (no relation to Ashley), has done the full gamut at the Hamel Center (INCO, URA, and SURF) working on ancient esotericism and Irish mysticism. Camden presented our paper at my field's major national conference last November, and we've just submitted it to an academic journal for publication. Camden also just got accepted into a doctoral program at Rice University, his top choice, straight out of undergrad. He's getting paid to get his Ph.D.! Doing research with faculty members will open doors you never even knew existed.

***Inquiry*: Have you experienced any difficulties or problems in mentoring undergraduates?**

One of the problems for undergraduates is time management, especially over the course of a long timeframe. To do a bigger project, for example something that you want to publish, you must consistently block out time to make progress each and every week over the course of many months. However, students have a great deal of other commitments (school, work, family) which can also change over the course of a year, so sometimes a project will lose momentum, or take much longer than anticipated, or simply fizzle out altogether. To complete an ambitious project, you need to really want to do it, to work all day on your job or other schoolwork and then spend your entire Tuesday night or Saturday

afternoon taking one more step forward on your research. And then do it again the next week! But of course, where there's a will there's a way. Those students I mentioned above (Michael, Ashley, Camden), were all so phenomenal in this regard, to have the desire and will to achieve something ambitious.

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

The student must be the one with the desire and interest and energy to do their side of a project, but one way you can help as a mentor is to provide structure. At every meeting, provide the student clear tasks to accomplish ahead of your next meeting. By breaking down extended goals into medium- and short-term ones, you help the student not become overwhelmed with a large project and in the process help teach them about how to create their own structure around the completion of any other large task they face down the line.

I would add that it is extremely important to take time to develop a clear question or idea to pursue. My most successful students spend literally an entire semester, sometimes two, just reading and note-taking and forming ideas and drafting up reflections on what they've read. Don't just start going with a project for the sake of doing it. Show your student the correct process: Get a strong handle on the primary sources (data) and secondary literature, ask a variety of questions, explore hypotheses, and only much down the line do you start writing or formally producing anything. Take the time and effort to lay the proper foundation.