



[Home](#) > [Publications & Directories](#) > [Perspectives on History](#) > [Issues](#) > [Summer 2018](#) > AHA Today Posts, June 2018, Continued > Cultivating Mentoring Relationships in Grad School

## **AHA TODAY**

# **CULTIVATING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS IN GRAD SCHOOL**

*Sarah Mellors | Jun 14, 2018*



### **IN THIS SECTION**

About  
Research  
Teaching & Learning  
Professional Life  
All Topics  
Magazine

Mentoring relationships in graduate school—be it a master’s or a doctoral program—are critical for success and yet are often difficult to navigate. While we’ve all heard horror stories about “bad” advisers, students have more agency than they realize. During my five years as a doctoral student at the University of California, Irvine, I’ve developed mentoring relationships that have not only enabled me to overcome myriad obstacles, but that will also guide me in the coming years as I transition into a faculty position. I hope that my experiences can help other budding historians optimize their mentoring relationships and get the most out of graduate school.

# The Graduate

Over time, I've learned the value of being up front with my advisers about my needs and expectations. This has helped me build confidence and preempt miscommunications. As a new graduate student, for example, I was unsure who to turn to with particular problems I encountered and even which questions were suitable to ask. I didn't know how to write a historiographical essay and was unfamiliar with many of the conventions of grant applications. I soon learned that it was well worth the effort to identify the person best suited to help me and then to direct specific questions or demands at them. For example, I discovered that one of my advisers often thinks in terms of the big picture and isn't hesitant to reach out to colleagues on my behalf, while the other is meticulous and gives detailed feedback on my writing. Rather than expecting both advisers to fill multiple roles, I learned to exploit their individual strengths. Relatedly, one of my advisers is deeply committed to public intellectual life, something that also interests me. Once I let my adviser know that I would welcome chances to engage the public, he made sure to bring to my attention any opportunities that arose.

Finding mentors other than my primary advisers has also helped me withstand the emotional rollercoaster that is graduate school. While my advisers are interested in my personal life, and I am comfortable confiding in them, having other people to turn to when things get rough has been essential in helping me maintain a productive,

professional relationship with my advisers. Indeed, I can vouch from personal experience that having multiple mentors is vital for surviving graduate school. I've sought advice from secondary mentors—faculty in other departments and even at other universities—on everything from strategies for a successful campus visit to help accessing restricted Chinese archives. Having secondary mentors is particularly important for students in marginalized positions whose official advisers may be ill equipped to help them overcome certain barriers. That said, studies show that women and professors of color, especially women of color, bear the brunt of providing mentorship to students who cannot find it elsewhere. Students should be cognizant of the ways that their mentors are also facing institutional challenges to advancement.

Cultivating a diverse support network, including those of your peers, and learning to find answers to generic questions independently, can also help foster healthy adviser-advisee relationships and ensure advisers take the questions directed at them more seriously. When I wanted more feedback on teaching strategies, for example, I enrolled in elective courses dedicated to pedagogy and curriculum development available through my school's Center for Engaged Instruction (many large universities have or are developing similar teaching-focused centers). I also attended discipline-specific events hosted by the history graduate student association, and sought regular advice from more senior students. When I had questions about expectations for qualifying exams or structuring a research year abroad, senior students advised me about the right questions to ask, when to ask them, and whom to ask.

This fall, I'm starting a new job as an assistant professor at Missouri State University. As a faculty member, I plan to empower my students through

knowledge about the numerous resources available to them. At present, I work at my university's Graduate Resource Center where I help students with all forms of academic writing from graduate school and grant applications to dissertation revisions. I also counsel students on a wide range of other issues, including qualifying exam preparation, time management methods, and even email etiquette—problems that are important and often simple to address but that too many students are afraid to ask about. In transitioning from being a “regular” graduate student to a mentor of sorts, I have learned through trial and error how to answer many of the questions that have long puzzled me.

Indeed, unless you come from a family of historians working in the academy—and sometimes even if you do—the best strategies for overcoming hurdles particular to graduate school are not initially obvious. Unfortunately, first generation and minority students may have to overcome certain obstacles not faced by their peers, and this is where alternative forms of mentorship become crucial: help from department faculty, faculty from other departments, disability services, the campus multicultural center, the counseling center, and even financial aid services. By rendering academia more transparent and making my students aware of useful resources early on in their academic journeys, I hope to foster a more equitable learning environment.

Graduate school is a patchwork of inspiring and rewarding moments juxtaposed with bouts of self-doubt and disorientation. I've found that one of the best ways to arm yourself to face these challenges is to develop an arsenal of resources that you can turn to in hard times, as well as people you can share your successes with. Taking a proactive approach to building relationships with advisers, cultivating relationships with mentors both inside and outside

of history, drawing on relevant campus and community resources, and seeking help from more advanced students have radically enhanced my academic life and mental well-being. I hope that these insights prove as useful for other history graduate students as they have for me.

*Sarah Mellors, AHA councilor at large, will be assistant professor of history at Missouri State University starting August 2018. She studies gender, sexuality, and the history of medicine in modern China. She completed her PhD in 2018 at the University of California, Irvine. Her dissertation examines contraception in 20th-century China.*

This post first appeared on *AHA Today*.

Tags:

[AHA Today](#)

[The Graduate](#)

## COMMENT

Please read our [commenting and letters policy](#) before submitting.

### AHA SITE MAP

About  
Research  
Teaching &  
Learning  
Professional Life

### GET INVOLVED

Why  
should I  
join the  
AHA?



### CONTACT

Phone: 202.544.2422

Email: [info@historians.org](mailto:info@historians.org)

400 A Street SE

[All Topics](#)  
[Magazine](#)  
[Full Site Map](#)

How can I  
support  
the AHA?

Washington, DC 20003

© 2020 American  
Historical Association