

ASLE Graduate Student Mentoring Program Articles

Narratives From the Field

(ASLE News Fall 2004)

Last year I put out a call for narratives from mentors and mentees describing their experiences in the ASLE Mentoring Program. Now is the time to share some of these stories. In this newsletter, Henrik Otterberg and Mike Branch's reflections offer an inspired example of the kind of exchange the Mentoring Program was designed to promote. Do be in touch if you would like to be added to the list of available mentors, or if you are interested in the opportunities of working with a faculty mentor.

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As a doctoral student of Literature with a keen interest in the pastoral tradition and landscape description of pre-modern writers in the late 1990s, I attended a joint Nordic-Baltic symposium on literature and nature in Tampere, north of Helsinki, featuring a talk by one of the American founders of ASLE, Michael P. Branch. During the course of the Tampere symposium, Mike and I came to discuss Thoreau, on whom both he and I had done work in the near past. I inquired if he would be interested in reading some of my texts for comments and criticism, and he generously offered me his mentorship. Since then, Mike has been an invaluable support to me—as a friend, colleague, critic and editor.

He has directed me toward ecocritical literature of relevance to my studies; he has introduced me to reviewing for American journals; and he has given valuable advice on conference papers and assisted my application to the recent ASLE biennial conference, held in Boston in 2003. Mike has been instrumental in aiding me in my PhD work and future publication plans, offering wise writing strategies and stressing a proper focus on the immediate issues at hand. At a time when academies and faculties frequently fight over narrowly anthropocentric theoretical trends, young ecocritics may feel marginalized. In my experience, the ASLE mentorship program—to rephrase the traditional dichotomy—offers the green-leaning student an ideal nature-nurture relationship.

—Henrik Otterberg, Department of Literature, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

The main purpose of the ASLE mentoring program is and should be to nurture the work of graduate student scholars in our field—particularly those working within institutional settings that provide them little support or encouragement. However, the mentoring experience can also be very valuable for faculty scholars. Having mentored several students through the ASLE program, my own experience suggests that there is often as much in it for the mentor as for the student—that, indeed, it is not unusual for the student to become a kind of mentor to the faculty adviser. I have worked with students in environmental history and environmental ethics, thus freshening my own contact with these cognate

fields, and often compelling me to rethink the disciplinary relationship among ecocritics and scholars of other (green) stripes.

At the moment I have the privilege of mentoring Henrik Otterberg, a gifted student completing a doctoral degree in his native Sweden who maintains strong interests in American environmental literature. The idea, of course, is that I help advise Henrik's work in this area and, when possible, create professional opportunities for him. In practice, however, my association with Henrik has made me more aware of how environmental literary studies are practiced abroad and has also provided me a valuable understanding of how the American ecocritical enterprise is perceived by our colleagues around the world. In helping Henrik I have been helped by him, and I have found our correspondence (concerning matters ecocritical and otherwise) informative and refreshing.

The faculty end of the mentoring program works extremely well for faculty scholars who teach at institutions without graduate programs, and who therefore miss the opportunity to work with advanced graduate students. It works especially well for those who wish to advise in any area in which they actively research but do not have the opportunity to teach. Even for those of us who mentor graduate students as part of our daily work there is a special pleasure in working with students beyond the borders of the home institution—or, indeed, beyond the borders of the discipline or the nation. Mentoring is our opportunity to create the vital interdisciplinary, international, and intergenerational bonds that strengthen our community and our work.

—Michael P. Branch, Department of English, University of Nevada Reno

Narratives From the Field (ASLE News Spring 2005)

In the last *ASLE News*, Henrik Otterberg and Mike Branch's reflections offered an inspired example of the kind of exchange the Mentoring Program was designed to promote. In this issue, Jeanne Sokolowski and Scott Slovic provide another glimpse into the rewards of mentoring for both the mentee and the mentor.

Interested in the Mentoring Program? Contact me at [mlong \[at\] keene \[dot\] edu](mailto:mlong@keene.edu).

—Mark C. Long, Keene State College, Coordinator, ASLE Mentoring Program

I'm just starting my PhD program at Indiana University Bloomington and I come to the advanced study of literature with a slightly unusual background: I spent three years teaching in Japan and then one year doing research for my Master's thesis in education on a Fulbright grant in Seoul, South Korea. Starting my program, I wondered how I could merge my interests in 20th century literature, Asian- American writers, and Japanese and Korean language and culture with a burgeoning interest in environmental studies.

I outlined what were fairly vague research interests and was excited when Dr. Long contacted me with the information that Dr. Slovic was willing to work with me. I first contacted Dr. Slovic and asked his opinions on a paper idea I was trying to formulate—something that had nothing to do with contemporary environmental writers, but rather with Uncle Tom's Cabin. There was a great feeling of relief to know that there was someone I could run ideas past (other than my professor for the course, who, though an excellent teacher, was admittedly not conversant with environmental theory). Dr. Slovic suggested various approaches that might be useful, from looking at the novel in context of the pastoral and Georgic traditions to pairing my reading of the novel with the writings of Wendell Berry.

Funny coincidences can also arise. Over winter break, I wanted to get ahead with the reading for my spring courses, especially one in environmental criticism. Looking at the reading list, I found listed Humboldt's Cosmos, and later recalled reading somewhere that Dr. Slovic, like me, had received a Fulbright: to research Humboldt in Germany!

— Jeanne Sokolowski, Indiana University Bloomington

As someone who has often benefited from generous mentoring, I never hesitate to return the favor whenever I'm given the opportunity. It's interesting that Jeanne should mention my work on Alexander von Humboldt as a graduate student in Germany. It was during my 1986-87 stay at the University of Bonn that I first became fully aware of what it means to give and receive academic mentorship through my reading about Humboldt's work as an intellectual patron for younger scientists and writers and through the generous gifts of conversation and books that I received from Germany's foremost Humboldt scholar, Professor Hanno Beck. Professor Beck's kindness and support helped me to appreciate, in retrospect, the attention I had received from Albert Gelpi and John Felstiner at Stanford and the guidance I was soon to receive from Bart St. Armand, my dissertation advisor at Brown. Later, when I was deliberating about my possible move to the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), Bart helped tilt me toward UNR by encouraging me to take a teaching job where I could work with Ph.D. students and in this way help guide future generations of ecocritics into the profession.

Here at UNR, none of my current students are particularly attuned to Asian or Asian-American literary or environmental issues, so I was excited to hear that Jeanne Sokolowski was looking for a mentor who shared her interests in these areas. As Jeanne mentions, our initial mentoring exchanges focused on her seminar paper about Uncle Tom's Cabin, not Asia or contemporary literature. I tried to make it clear to her that I hadn't read the novel closely for nearly twenty years, but I was still willing to brainstorm a bit over e-mail and offer some suggestions about how ecocritics might approach this work. She kindly considered my ideas and then proceeded to develop her own powerful idea about how the "reflexive relationship between agriculture and slavery" emerges in Stowe's work.

It is always a pleasure to participate in give and take with energetic, committed scholars, whether these exchanges occur in one's own department or via the more abstract medium of e-mail. I'm pleased to know that my support might have been helpful. I look forward to future correspondence on topics ranging from Alexander von Humboldt to Japanese environmental writing.

—Scott Slovic, Department of English, University of Nevada, Reno

Professional Mentoring Conferences at the 2007 Biennial Conference (ASLE News Spring 2007)

The Mentoring Program and the Graduate Student Caucus will co-sponsor one-on-one professional mentoring conferences with experienced faculty and/or department chairs at the Seventh Biennial ASLE Conference at Wofford College. These informal conversations, designed to supplement the support graduate students receive in their home departments, will involve one faculty volunteer who will meet with an interested student for one hour to answer specific questions about preparing for jobs, the job market, working conditions at small and large institutions, the relationship between scholarship and teaching, and non-academic work options. Conversations will be focused by the needs of the student.

Beginning graduate students can benefit from hearing about work in the field as they begin to imagine a professional horizon beyond graduate school. Graduate students nearing completion of their programs, or those who are seeking academic positions, will find an opportunity to ask questions or talk about preparing a job portfolio.

The one-hour conferences will take place throughout the week, mostly during concurrent session slots that do not conflict with community events, including plenary talks and dinners. If you are interested in signing up for a conference, please watch for more information on the ASLE listserv once the conference program is available (April 30). If you would like to volunteer as a faculty mentor, or you have any questions about the conferences, please contact the coordinator of the ASLE Mentoring Program, Mark C. Long, at mlong [at] keene [dot] edu.

Place Matters in the Academic Job Search (ASLE News Spring 2007)

By I. Moriah McCracken

As writers and researchers interested in the environment, we recognize that human life is encapsulated and affected by the ecological systems surrounding us. We spend countless hours and semesters introducing students to the environment, so they too might appreciate how the “outer” world affects them and how they are responsible for the sustainability of the planet. But our talk of the environment often stops just short of place. That is, we don’t tell our students, or admit to ourselves, that in the academy, place—geographic and material locations— is not supposed to matter.

A myth in the academy suggests that place does not matter for weary PhD candidates embarking on their first job searches. After years of coursework and shoestring budgets, graduate students want a job, any job, regardless of location. But this statement did not reconcile with the experiences of my colleagues, and when I claimed in my dissertation prospectus that place does not matter in academia, the members of my dissertation committee protested.

So, I set out to test the assumption that place does not matter in the academic job search. In October 2006, I distributed the first of two online surveys, which provided empirical data with predictive validity

about my research population. 62 doctoral candidates in Rhetoric and Composition participated in my pre-job search survey, which asked a variety of questions about the role of place in their ongoing job searches. The responses I gathered suggest that graduate students are not quite as rootless as institutional myths might have us believe.

When asked to indicate their attachment to a home site, a majority of respondents (76%) said they are attached to where they are from. In fact, 34% of respondents selected “very attached,” and 42% selected “somewhat attached.” The respondents’ answers point to an investment in their home sites, and these answers challenge the notion that academics are attached to ideas and books, not geographical locations.

Moreover, their attachment to place appears to affect the candidates’ job market searches. When asked “How important will the geographic location of a university be when you decide to apply for a job?” 58% of respondents selected “very important,” while 6% selected “not at all important.” These numbers become even more significant when we consider that 5% of respondents indicated they are willing to live anywhere for the right job, while 71% of the respondents said there are certain places they are unwilling to live.

My initial survey data counters academic myths which suggest that PhD candidates are simply looking for employment. Perhaps this correlation is tied to the availability of jobs in Rhetoric and Composition; I cannot say with certainty at this time. However, I can report that when asked to name their top criteria for selecting jobs, 34 respondents included “geography” and/or “location” in their answers. As a follow-up to the open-ended question, I asked respondents to select the other factors that might affect their job search. From the list of 11 possible choices, 54 of the 62 respondents selected “geographic location of institution.” The location of the institution was followed in popularity by teaching load (43), salary (40), and institution type (37).

Though the specific reasons place matters may still vary widely—for some environmental considerations may be a factor while for others proximity to family members may be more important—the preliminary analysis indicates that place does matter for the PhD Candidate conducting a job search in Rhetoric and Composition. The full results of the pre-job search survey will be available through my personal website (<http://www.immccracken.com>) after March 25, 2007.

ASLE Mentoring Program Activities in Victoria

(ASLE News Spring 2009)

by Mark C. Long

The ASLE Mentoring Program, a cornerstone of ASLE's community-building efforts since the inception of our organization, continues to bolster the strong sense of community that ASLE members find so invigorating and meaningful. At this summer's conference in Victoria, the program will be offering two mentoring opportunities.

Individual Mentoring Meetings: The Mentoring Program and the Graduate Student Caucus will once again co-sponsor one-on-one professional mentoring meetings with experienced faculty and department chairs. The one-hour meetings offer mentees an opportunity to ask specific questions about the ASLE community, preparing for the job market, working conditions at small and large institutions,

the relationship between scholarship and teaching, and non-academic work options. Beginning graduate students can benefit from hearing about work in the field as they begin to imagine a professional horizon beyond graduate school. Graduate students nearing completion of their programs, or those who are seeking academic positions, will find an opportunity to ask questions or talk about preparing a job portfolio. One-hour conferences will take place throughout the week, mostly during concurrent session slots that do not conflict with community events, including plenary talks and dinners. Please watch for more information on the ASLE Listserv. If you would like to sign up for a meeting, or volunteer as a faculty mentor, please contact the coordinator of the ASLE Mentoring Program, Mark C. Long, at m-long@keene.edu.

In Conference Workshop for Faculty: While traditionally focused on graduate students and younger faculty, the Mentoring Program is sponsoring an in-conference workshop in Victoria, Staying Alive, that focuses on living an emotionally, ethically, and spiritually healthy life in academia-no matter what happens. This workshop begins with the idea that we benefit from mentoring across all phases of a career. Co-facilitators John Tallmadge and Mark Long are offering the workshop to meet the needs and concerns of our ASLE colleagues at any stage in their careers. To find out more about the staying alive project, and join the conversation, visit our blog at <http://onstayingalive.wordpress.com>.

Only Connect! News from the ASLE Mentoring Program (ASLE News Spring 2012)

By Mark Long, ASLE Mentoring Program Coordinator

Since the inception of ASLE the Mentoring Program has sought to connect graduate students with experienced faculty mentors beyond their home institutions. Mentors offer advice regarding reading lists and scholarly resources; they provide feedback on course syllabi and writing; they provide an interested colleague to listen to ideas or professional concerns; they sit on exam or dissertation committees; and they share advice regarding the job market or publishing.

The Mentoring Program has grown with the organization as well. We now offer conference-based mentoring and we actively collaborate with others to offer generative mentoring experiences to the members of ASLE:

Biennial Conference Mentoring Sessions: the Mentoring Program has offered one-on-one job information sessions at the past four conferences. These sessions are designed to welcome new members to the organization as well as to meet the needs of graduate students--including preparing for academic jobs and the job market, seeking out professional opportunities beyond the academy, balancing teaching and publishing, and making visible the working conditions in the range of academic departments and programs;

Collaboration with the Graduate Student Liaisons: the Mentoring Program has co-sponsored preconference workshops and concurrent sessions on negotiating the relationship between professional aspirations and realities, the prospects of interdisciplinarity, the futures of academic disciplines and programs, the range of academic positions and institutions, as well as the life trajectories of careers of ASLE members unfolding outside the college and university;

Collaboration with the Staying Alive Project: the Mentoring Program has extended the ASLE mentoring network to colleagues at any stage in their careers. While traditionally focused on graduate students and younger faculty, we now offer conference workshops and maintain an online conversation so that interested ASLE members can explore the opportunities and challenges of an academic career. An archive designed to share wisdom and resources for living an emotionally, ethically, and spiritually healthy life in academia is available at www.onstayingalive.wordpress.com;

International Mentoring: the Mentoring Program has responded to interest from our affiliated organizations for mentoring by developing mentoring relationships with the help of ASLE members who have worked or taught outside the US. Scholars and teachers based in the US provide intellectual contacts and mentors for graduate students and professors working outside the US; and scholars and teachers in the US continue to seek forms of mentoring from scholars and teachers in our ASLE-affiliated organizations.

The Mentoring Program will continue to support the members of ASLE through these and other activities. If you are a graduate student looking for a mentor, or wondering how the mentoring program might benefit you; if you are an ASLE member with ideas about how the program might foster meaningful mentoring relationships; or if you are an ASLE member interested in serving as a mentor, please be in touch by e-mail, m-long@keene.edu, or by phone, 603.358.2695.

Mentoring Program Activities at the 2013 Conference (ASLE News Spring 2013)

by Mark C. Long, Graduate Mentoring Program Coordinator

The mission of the ASLE Mentoring Program is to connect graduate students with experienced faculty mentors beyond their home institutions and to cultivate intellectual exchange and community among scholars at all stages of their academic careers.

Individual Mentoring (Tuesday-Saturday, various times)

The Mentoring Program is sponsoring one-on-one professional mentoring meetings with experienced faculty and department chairs. The one-hour meetings offer mentees an opportunity to ask specific questions about the ASLE community, preparing for the job market, working conditions at small and large institutions, the relationship between scholarship and teaching, and non-academic work options. Beginning graduate students may discuss work in the field as they begin to imagine a professional horizon beyond graduate school. Graduate students nearing completion of their programs, or those seeking academic positions, may explore questions about preparing a job portfolio or imagining faculty work in differing college and university settings.

One-hour conferences take place throughout the week, mostly during concurrent sessions that do not conflict with community events, including plenary talks and dinners. Mentors and mentees can meet at the ASLE registration desk in the lobby of the Kansas Union. If you would like to arrange a professional mentoring meeting, please contact the coordinator of the ASLE Mentoring Program, Mark C. Long, at m-long@keene.edu, before May 25th.

Staying Alive: A Workshop for Graduate Students and Academic Professionals

(Friday May 31, special double session: Session 6, 8:30-10:00 and Session 7, 10:30-12:00)

This conference workshop explores the opportunities and challenges of an academic career. Workshop facilitators and participants will offer practical advice and shared wisdom for living an emotionally, ethically, and spiritually healthy life in academia. The first half of the workshop will focus on the organizing fiction of academia--the model career that holds out the promise of a fulfilling life that begins with graduate school and proceeds through temporary and tenure-track jobs to the tenure review, promotion, and retirement. The second half of the workshop will focus on stages of the academic career. Participants will share practical strategies for imagining and building sustainable professional identities in particular programs, institutions and the profession.

If you are interested in participating in this workshop, please e-mail the workshop facilitators, Mark Long (mlong@keene.edu) or John Tallmadge (jtallmadge@cinci.rr.com). Graduate students and younger faculty, as well as colleagues at any stage in their careers, are invited to share ideas before the conference at www.onstayingalive.wordpress.com and consider ways to use the online forum to continue building a sustainable vision of academic life in the years to come.