Doctoral Mentoring Award Statement: Leslie E. Anderson, Department of Political Science, October, 2013

I have found mentoring doctoral students to be one of the most rewarding parts of my job. I began doing it very early in my career at the University of Colorado, while still an assistant professor. When I came to Florida in 1995 I found that UF offered me an unusual opportunity to develop this particular skill because of the number of students interested in my field and area of work. Far from seeking to create clones of me, I have approached each of these students as a distinct, precious, creative young mind requiring from me a unique blend of nurturing and pressure, hand-holding and letting go. To succeed each must be driven by their own inner curiosity, bolstered by a sense of self-confidence that they can do original research. My role is to guide them in developing the confidence that they can do original research and to clarify for them the best ways to confront the challenges that lie ahead in following their curiosity. To aid in these endeavors, both with my own students and those of other faculty, I have used a series of metaphors. These metaphors illustrate the perspectives I bring to doctoral mentoring.

The Tool Box

Soon after my arrival at UF I was asked to design an introductory doctoral class, "The Conduct of Inquiry." It introduces students to the many different methods political scientists use to collect data. I call this "the tool box." I ask students to learn how to use each tool in the box because knowing how to use all those tools will maximize the chance that they will follow their own curiosity toward an original intellectual puzzle rather than allowing the methods they know to dictate the question they ask. Both individually and in teams, the students carry out hands-on research projects using a variety of data-collection methodologies. They report their projects to the class, exploring out loud what they did, how they did it, what they did wrong and what they did well. Together the students engage in dialogue about the strength and limitations of each method. They discuss how they are good at some methods and not at others and what types of data collection best suit their own personal styles and intellectual interests.

Finding the Edge of the World

In year three students in our department take comprehensive exams. It is a grueling, frightening process for many. I tell them that in the 15th century scientists thought that the world was flat and that if we sailed too far we would fall off the edge of the world. Similarly, students testing through comprehensives need to know where the edge or end of knowledge is in their field so that they can define a dissertation project that lies outside the boundaries of knowledge. Therefore, in their own field, they need to know where the edge of the world (knowledge) lies, not so that they can avoid it but so that they can sail boldly beyond it and chart a new study that will contribute to new knowledge and move the edge of established knowledge further out. Once they understand why they are being put through this demanding comprehensive process they become eager to demonstrate that they do, indeed, know where the established body of knowledge ends and where they can make a new contribution of their own.

An Oversized Jacket

After comprehensives students write a prospectus that charts their dissertation project. This is a difficult moment for the students because they embark on their first solo flight, doing original research on their own and alone. I encourage them to follow their curiosity and to define

a question without fully knowing how to map unchartered terrain. I tell them to think about the prospectus as an oversized jacket, one that fits them roughly but that allows them room to grow. A mildly charted prospectus gives space for the students to change their approach when they make an unexpected discovery. An oversized jacked allows the student to adapt their study design in response to unforeseen problems that emerge in the course of research and discovery. Knowing that the prospectus need not be exact makes it easier to write. Most importantly I want the project to help them to find their own inner "voice," as a scholar and writer.

Launching from Cape Canaveral

Our profession is extremely competitive and jobs scarce, especially in recent years. Once students land an academic position they face a rapid treadmill on their way to tenure. There is rarely time while on the tenure clock to start, finish and publish a totally new project. So I ask them to think about their dissertation project like a rocket ship launching off from Cape Canaveral. Lift-off must be powerful enough to exit the Earth's atmosphere and also to reach a destination in outer space. Similarly, I want the dissertation to ask a major scholarly question, one that gives the student's career not only enough power to get the PhD but enough umph to take them all the way to tenure. A major question will give them a book and multiple articles, a tenurable record in most political science departments today. By contrast, a small project may earn the PhD but not generate enough publications for tenure. I explain that the dissertation is not just the end of graduate school but the beginning of a scholarly career. Knowing how far they need to go with that first solo project helps them to look beyond the PhD and graduation and to think of themselves as budding scholars.

A Learner's Permit

Finally, as the students move toward finishing the dissertation they sometimes experience trepidation over the role of their dissertation committee. They may be eager to shed the committee, including me as the Chair; or they are worried about going on without us. I explain that the dissertation committee is like being fifteen and having a learner's permit. One learns to drive while having an adult in the front seat. Similarly, having a committee allows one to do the first research project while being carefully guided. But soon all the dissertation committee members will step aside, just as the adult got out of the car. One must drive – and do scholarly research – alone. Again the image helps them see both the need for the committee and the need for the committee's role to end.

Most of my doctoral students finish their degree and place in the academic world. They are creative, productive, and continuously eager about their scholarship. My relationship with them has continued beyond graduation. I still read their work, help them place their books, write letters of reference and counsel them through job opportunities. The relationship does not end when we walk across the stage. Instead, as I tell them, I then become their career mentor.

Today I write this statement while being the Graduate Coordinator for our department, a position I enjoy because it gives me opportunities to mentor more students than I have previously done through classwork and supervising dissertations. We cannot know what the next generation of explorers and scholars will face in the world of higher education. The best we can do for them is to train them broadly, give them a wide variety of tools through which to do research, guide them carefully and send them forward with their curiosity, creativity, and self-confidence intact. That is the best preparation we can give them for a world ahead and still unknown.