

## **So many books, so little time? Reflecting on the Academic Year at Central Michigan University**

*by Mathias Wittland*

Coming to CMU from Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany I expected my academic year here to be quite intense, which turned out to be absolutely correct. I have to admit, however, that I had spent another exchange semester at Central Michigan University in Fall 2015 as an undergraduate student at the English department. This means that I was vaguely aware of the high amount of reading and writing in American higher education and I think it did not strike me as hard as my fellow exchange students participating in the Joint MA Program. Despite knowing what to expect, I nevertheless chose to come to Central Michigan University because it offered me new challenges in terms of my own education as a historian as well as in teaching. In Germany I study in a conventional M.A. program but I also seek to obtain a Master of Education, the degree I would need for being allowed to teach at a German high school.

So, the program seemed – and indeed turned out to be – perfectly suited for my academic career. Being almost at the end of my studies in Germany, I am still amazed by the fact how much I have grown as a historian at Central Michigan University. Especially our *Historiography* colloquium immensely broadened the scope of my theoretical understanding of history and the seminars taught me the American way of academic writing (which I painfully experienced through the professor's devastating feedback on what I considered an excellent draft of a paper according to the German way of writing). Moreover, the relatively small size of the department and the graduate program were new to me and it was a huge advantage for me in terms of my academic development. The courses are small, the discussions are usually engaging and the feedback of the professors is individual and exhaustive. It is also more personal compared to my university at home, which leads to engaging talks and discussions with the professors and other students.

The other specific the program has to offer is the Teaching Assistant position, which I

would consider as equally pleasant and fruitful for my personal development as my own classes. Since I had taught history at a German high school for a semester before, I was not unfamiliar with the general idea and certain concepts of teaching. However, teaching – and especially grading – on college level was an entirely new experience for me. Coming from Germany with an academic focus on Early Modern and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial history of the Dutch and British empires, the first class I taught was American history through a Michigan perspective. In other words: I, as a foreigner with a completely different academic focus, had to teach American college students their own (local) history, which – I have to admit – made me slightly nervous at first. This nervousness disappeared soon, however, after I found out that my students were initially as clueless as me and – unlike me – didn't always do the assigned readings. And yet I tried to encourage them and to increase their interest in history using countless teaching methods and respecting the students' feedback. Whether or not I succeeded in sparking a general interest in history, it is just amazing and wonderful to see that a teaching method works or that many students follow and participate in the discussion. Such small successes and the friendly and positive evaluations really make teaching what I want to do as a job and I am extremely thankful for the fact that the Joint MA program confirmed this again for me.

As eye-opening and as fascinating both of these aspects – the learning and the teaching – are, as intense and time consuming are they as well. On the one hand, this means that I sometimes would have liked to have more time for my students to prepare lessons in greater detail and write exhaustive comments under their papers or even discuss their papers with them in person. On the other hand, it means that I did not have time to visit as many places in Michigan and the United States as I would have liked to. Being busy with my own classes and the teaching, I never reached a point when I had nothing on my mind and felt somewhat guilty when I took a day off. Yet, this feeling is becoming a bit better in the second semester and with a road trip during spring break lying ahead, I feel like I can control my workload much

better after last semester. So yes, there is never enough time to read everything you could read but I guess one thing the program taught me as well is to sometimes just take the time you need.