

**Summary of Findings**  
**Graduate Program Teaching Initiative Summative Conference**  
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Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion  
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During 2011 we held 16 “Teaching Initiative Gatherings” to assess the teaching preparedness of doctoral alumni/ae who have recently been hired in teaching appointments. In 2012 we will hold six more such gatherings.

Each of your schools held one of the 2011 Teaching Initiative Gatherings. The gatherings took on a different shape, reflecting the culture and goals of the individual programs and leadership. But at their heart they all asked, of alumni, “How are we doing?” “How did we prepare you for the teaching that you are doing, and how did we not?” and “What more can we do to help you transition into this faculty life?”

What I will be doing this morning is presenting a summary of what we learned from our visits. I’m hoping that this will also serve as a summary of the documents that you have read that describe the various programs and findings from the Teaching Initiative Gathering. Later this morning you will have a chance to talk at the tables about your program and what you would like to improve. And this afternoon we will offer a set of topics that cover the range of factors we think are important in teaching preparation within doctoral programs, and you will be able to look more closely at two of those aspects in workshop sessions

But for now, let me summarize what we observed during the gatherings in 2011. As we attended the teaching initiative gatherings and read the reports from all the schools, consultants, and Wabash Center staff, the first and most important thing we noted is: **1) *The teaching culture within the doctoral program matters a great deal.*** By teaching culture, I mean the way that teaching is done by the graduate school faculty, the way it is talked about in everyday faculty and student

conversations, the way it is treated as a future profession for the graduate students, and so on. The teaching culture is a powerful and implicit part of all doctoral programs, and it differs from place to place. A program's teaching culture is shaped fundamentally by the whole faculty and by whether the doctoral faculty members take seriously the teaching of their own students. Are there teaching conversations that are happening informally and formally among the faculty? Can the doctoral students hear that conversation and are they able to participate in it? Is there a measure of transparency among the doctoral faculty about why they have made certain teaching choices within their subject area? Do graduate students hear from the doctoral faculty about why they have structured their own syllabus a certain way? Is teaching valued and rewarded within the institution, or is it devalued and spoken of as something they wish were less? Is there a variation in the pedagogy modeled within the doctoral classes?

This all relates to the explicit and implicit goals of the doctoral program: We heard from schools who thought about the fact that their students were going to be teachers from the moment of admission decisions, through the structuring of the program, to keeping up with their alums after they were placed and were calling for advice about assignments and syllabi. And we also heard from schools where teaching was what the alums called "the dirty little secret" – treated as that aspect of the job that no one really wanted to do and that the graduate school faculty tried to get released from. Most of the doctoral programs were somewhere in-between, and some programs had a range of attitudes, varying internally according to particular discipline areas.

But the bottom line is that the teaching culture of your schools, of your doctoral program matters a great deal. How the faculty think about and prepare for their own teaching is clearly communicated to the students, and how a school values or de-values that part of the job shapes the culture in such a strong way that a structured teaching preparation program can do little to counter that culture, for good or ill.

Leading from this first finding is the second: **2) Different structures for teaching preparation can produce similar benefits.** Each doctoral program has a different way of formalizing the teaching preparation of their graduate students. There are pedagogical theory courses, teaching and learning colloquies, workshops around particular topics, teaching assistant and mentoring programs, programs that work well with their teaching centers on campus and those that mostly ignore them. This variety of structures and methods does not produce starkly different results. Having *something that is valued* seems to be the most important thing, because it signals to the doctoral students the importance of teaching in their future jobs. Having *something that is done well* is even better. The choices about what to have and how to structure it need to be congruent with the goals of your program, the places your graduates are generally employed, the skills of your faculty, and the resources of the school. *There is no one template for success.*

That said, let me highlight some important elements that stood out in the programs that we visited:

- **Learning about course components:** Graduates clearly gain by hearing about the specifics of classroom design – how to set goals for a course, build a syllabus, align assignments with the goals, and build in assessment of student learning. This can be handled through a formal course, through symposia that gather TA's, through faculty syllabi colloquies, through all-university workshops with new or about-to-be teachers. But talking about the basic components is key to their learning to analyze and think about the steps of designing and teaching a course.
- **Teaching philosophy:** Somewhere, some time, in some way, ask your doctoral students the question as to why they want to teach. Give them time to talk with current faculty about why they are teaching and their philosophy of education. What are the hopes that they have for their students? Why do they think their subject matter matters? See if you can enable them to think about their goals for student

learning. Help the doctoral student shift from thinking about teaching as “dumping all that I, the learned, have learned onto the un-learned” to an educational philosophy with hopes and goals for the students who will be taking their classes. Why, for the students’ sake, do they want to teach?

- **Theories of learning:** In the conversations about why they want to teach, help them begin to understand the various ways that students learn. This can be done through an engagement with the range of learning theories, through a set of questions around classroom teaching styles (what do students learn when you have a classroom conversation, a group project, or a direct presentation of material?), or through conversations with them as TAs. But ask what the real learning is that is associated with method a, b, or c.
- **Facilitate reflective engagement with teaching questions:** Beginning teachers are in the midst of new experiences that they need help sorting and understanding. The more you can facilitate their active engagement with those experiences – help them interrogate them so they can be explored and examined with others – the better. Some schools have the benefit of a very strong grad student culture where those that are teaching study and prep together and can talk about their experiences and be resources for each other. Others develop informal forums or teaching seminars where TAs or doctoral students who are adjuncting can bring in particular problems or talk about a specific issues. Again, it can be done in a variety of ways. But a reflective consideration of the actual practice of teaching will develop their capacity to be a good teacher in whatever institutional context they happen to get a job.
- **There is no substitute for actually designing a course and teaching it:** Engagement with the issues of teaching, with course design components, with a teaching philosophy and a theory of

learning happens best when there are real students in front of you. This is the constant conundrum of your programs. There is good reason why some of your schools have not constructed a deliberate program of teaching preparation: until you know who you are teaching – what students in which institution – it is very hard to design classroom experiences or to see how projected teaching plans might succeed or fail. Teaching “in theory” is often a vacuous enterprise. And there are variations between your programs as to what teaching is available to your students. Some of you have undergraduate courses that are dependent on graduate student teaching. Some do not have undergraduates within your institution at all. Do what you can to facilitate your doctoral students getting into the classroom and then use those teaching experiences as real learning laboratories as best you can.

- **Find someplace in your program where the grad students learn to exegete the context of their teaching:** If they are TAs, have them look at the institutional mission, demographics and abilities of the students; if they are adjuncts at another institution, have them do a study of that institution and its ethos and culture. One of the programs had an assignment as part of a pedagogy class, for the doctoral students to think about their own undergraduate experience compared to where they would hope to teach and to draw out comparisons of the departmental programs, emphases, role of the religion department in the school, etc. Teaching must be situated within the particularities of the institution, the department or school goals and curricula in which the course is located, and the abilities and background of the students that will be in the classroom. Figure a way to give your doctoral students the ability to recognize those realities and to adjust to them.

How many of these elements can be required components of your program, how they will be shaped, what ones need to stay informal or optional, will all depend on

your program, faculty, and resources. But the more the program is designed in a way that helps these things happen and explicitly values teaching, the more learning about teaching occurs. A pedagogy course that is introduced into a culture whose subtext implies that teaching is a waste of time will be treated as a waste of time by the grad students.

One of the most frequent ways that schools think of preparing future teachers is to have them serve as Teaching Assistants, or TAs. Our third observation is that **3) Teaching Assistant programs are all too often used as ways to help faculty handle their workloads rather than ways to prepare or train future teachers.** This can be seen when there is a lack of orientation or training of the faculty members who supervise TAs, when TAs are used only to do the grunt work of a class (such as marking exams) and not given a chance to contribute to the design or content of the class, when there is little genuine supervision or feedback given to the TAs about their classroom work, and when there is a lack of facilitated discussion among the TAs about the tasks they are facing and the jobs they are doing.

Thus doctoral students who are TAs benefit from the experience (as teaching experience) only if they are lucky to be TAing for a particular faculty member who cares about them and their experience or if they already have some sense as to how to use the experience for learning about teaching. Some do a very good job of seeking out conversation and colleagues. Some schools have spaces and settings that facilitate informal conversations among the TAs. Others have stellar senior faculty members that take the lead in designing and carrying out the program. But it must be seen as a way to train and form future faculty. Teaching Assistantships are an opportunity to help them think pedagogically and can give them actual experience in teaching, but the doctoral students need supervision, feedback, evaluation, and the occasion to try again in order to facilitate their learning.

A fourth reality that we encountered in our visits is that **4) the mentoring by mid- and senior-faculty members within formal and informal structures of**

*programs is extremely variable.* Doctoral school faculty members need to be oriented and developed into their role of forming future faculty. Doctoral school hiring decisions are often made because of many other factors, including their status and standing in the field and their research areas. Yet shaping future members of the profession – **mentoring** – depends on having doctoral faculty who possess the characteristics and abilities to supervise, evaluate and nurture the teaching skills of a young graduate student.

For mentoring programs to be a dependable method of formation, grad programs need a critical mass of faculty members who are invested in this process. It requires that the grad school faculty members be transparent about their teaching and that they occasionally “pull back the curtain” so their students can see the mechanics behind what they are doing and why. It asks them to be continual learners, themselves, as they reflect on their own teaching goals and experiences. It asks them to be reflectively engaged in the practice of teaching, themselves.

Some of you have talked of efforts to orient new doctoral school faculty members into this role. One of you developed a questionnaire about TAs, the way they were used among faculty members, and what kind of support or training was received. These are all ways to bring to the forefront the work that has to happen with the doctoral faculty in order to build a culture that values teaching and owns the role of forming future members of the profession.

And to be fair, teaching is not the only skill necessary to future faculty work that is often lacking in doctoral programs. Attention to the work of forming their vocation or identity, negotiating the various demands on faculty life, and the role of institutional citizenship is also underdeveloped. Doctoral programs have been built around the task of discipline preparation with the understanding that alumni/ae will learn about the other parts of their jobs after they are hired. Some of that is necessary – once one is a faculty member one in a particular institution, one has something to interrogate and reflect upon – but programs are beginning to recognize that there are some things that could be signaled earlier while they are still students within the program.

A factor that many of you named in your own findings was how important it was to **5) pay close attention to where your grads are going and value those settings as future teaching settings.** Along with this, pay attention to the type of teaching that they are being asked to do: Are they large classes, small classes, discussion seminars? Online courses? Interdisciplinary Core courses with mostly non-majors? General Education courses taught for the whole humanities curriculum? Or Advanced Courses with majors? The more you know about where your grads are being hired and what they are teaching, the more reliably you can interrogate your preparation of them. This is also the place where I want to make the speech about not assuming that the best doctoral students are the ones that will replicate you or the other faculty members teaching at your doctoral-granting institution.

We heard from alumni/ae who like teaching in small liberal arts schools as generalists within theology or religion departments. We heard from alumni/ae who value the teaching that can occur at the small and more personalized seminary or school, at schools that have strong confessional traditions, or at schools that are large and serve a regional or state population. Yet we heard from programs that are hesitant to talk about the fact that they do a good job training their alumni/ae to teach in these various settings. Too many programs and faculty talk as if most of their graduates will be teaching at the graduate school level and that the prime job would be to return and teach at that very school. In other words, some of the schools we visited had a strong culture of replication; the most valued alum would be the one that replicates the path of their doctoral mentor to their doctoral school. Yet replication is not the healthiest model for mentoring, and it can belittle the jobs and work that the majority of your program graduates do.

Find out where your grads are getting jobs, and then ask whether that is a goal you can celebrate. If not, think about what goals you have for them, and see if they are realizable and what needs to change in your program to make them achievable.



On the positive side, it was encouraging to see how **6) *some of the doctoral programs have a way of treating their subject matter that was translatable to the practice of being reflective about teaching and learning.*** For instance, a school that has a core course, taken by all doctoral students, in ethnography or in hermeneutics builds a set of skills in their students that is easily transferable to the task of reflecting on teaching (for example, ethnography easily transfers to a way of understanding their students and thinking about teaching as interpretation or translation of a discipline can build from the study of hermeneutics). Other programs taught exegesis in a way that the skills of “reading” a text could be transferred to the skill of “reading” a class or institutional context to facilitate the work of designing student learning goals.

Most of you are very good at teaching disciplinary methodologies. Most of those methodologies can be put into play as one interrogates or explores the act of teaching. Some of the same careful thinking to analyze and then scaffold a learning situation is taught in research methodology courses; some of the core skills of comparative thinking support teaching in a classroom that has differently skilled learners. The subject matters and methodologies you teach can also become foundational in your graduates’ teaching abilities. Sometimes, all that is needed is someone to make that explicit, a faculty member to say, “This is how I find that my training as a historian has helped me think about teaching.”

Foster these connections to the subject matters that you teach, make them explicit, and you can begin to see some of the analytical and constructive links already present within your disciplinary curricula.

Finally, **7) *understand the method that you have chosen for your doctoral students to learn how to teach.*** Some of the programs we observed have the ability to scaffold the coursework and the teaching experiences of their doctoral students so that they move from young graduate student toward future faculty member in distinct steps and stages. Some others throw all of the doctoral students immediately into the deep water of teaching experiences during the first year of their program. A third method might be to strengthen the informal culture so that it

becomes the space for teaching conversations. But as with any educational philosophy, there are risks and gains with every method. As program directors, deans, department chairs, you need to have some understanding of what is needed to support the method you have chosen and what is gained and lost within that choice. In other words, be reflectively engaged in your own choices about your program, and you will go a long way toward communicating to your doctoral students about the reflective engagement with teaching practice that they need to exercise while teaching.

In conclusion, let me say that ***in every school, alumni and alumnae were able to make their way through the program with clarity about their future goals and the training they needed.*** As you well know, there are those who make the most of the opportunities in front of them and who seem to absorb all that you give them in such that they wonderfully translate the things they learned into their work as a teaching faculty members. Yet in every program there were also people who fell through the gaps, missed out on opportunities, or who had advisors and mentors who were not helpful in thinking about or reflecting on teaching. They often did not complete the program, or, if they graduated, they changed jobs frequently, did not get tenure, or dropped out of the profession altogether. We recognize that this is the reality of education, especially of doctoral education with its high stakes of high cost and hard demands. While we are hoping to minimize the number that fall through the gaps and increase the number who succeed, we recognize that we are working with organic systems – cultures and people – that do not, in the end, succumb to routinization. That is actually something we celebrate – teaching is about the transformative possibilities of our humanity and our cultures – even while we look to be better at the way we educate and mentor future members of our profession.