

## Teaching Preparation in the Baylor University Doctoral Program

The doctoral program at Baylor University accepts students into four areas: Biblical Studies/OT, Biblical Studies/NT, Church History, Theology. All PhD students we enroll already have completed at least one masters degree in Religion (MDiv or MA, though more have done an MDiv). We provide full tuition scholarships plus a stipend as a graduate assistant. This assistantship obligates each student to 15 hours / week of work for a professor in the department for up to five years. Students take course work for three years, though the third year typically involves a smaller number of courses while students ramp up preparation for prelims at the end of their third year. At that point, they formalize a dissertation topic and mentor, though most have already determined their mentor as they advance through their program.

The structure of the BA at Baylor involves 6 hours of religion courses for every freshman at Baylor: a one semester course on the Bible and a one semester survey of Christian History and Theology. This requirement means that we have a significant number of freshmen service courses where we can utilize doctoral students to help teach those courses. Most of these courses have between 50–60 students. For over a decade, we have been developing a formal mechanism for preparing students to step into those classrooms. For several years now every student who will be teaching a course for the first time has to register for a teaching colloquy taught by one of our departments recognized leaders in teaching undergraduates. Prior to the Wabash Center Teaching Initiative, students took this colloquy while they were teaching their course. Students receive instruction and exposure to various topics related to instruction and the classroom environment: pedagogical models, learning styles, legal aspects, philosophies of teaching, and practice in the art of teaching.

Typically students, then, do not teach before they have completed their own course work and have passed prelims, demonstrating a proficiency in their field of research. We then provide them an opportunity to teach the freshmen survey courses as part of their graduate assistant responsibilities. While they are teaching, we also – in conjunction with the teaching colloquy – provide a faculty member to organize peer group sessions. Those teaching their first set of courses meet every 1–3 weeks throughout the year to share experiences, raise questions that come up in the classroom, and have at least one session with the faculty member going over a recorded session of one of their classes.

## Summary of Findings for Baylor University

The teaching colloquy at Baylor was 10 years old, so the Wabash Center's GPTI grant allowed us a chance to reflect about the effectiveness of the program and changes through the years. In consultation with the sociology department, we developed a questionnaire for alumni from the last 40 years to assess how our students evaluated the program's efforts in the area of teaching preparedness, both from those who had participated in the teaching colloquy and from those who went through the program prior to the colloquy's establishment. We then returned 10 alumni to campus, representing a cross-section with at least two alumni from each area from the last five years.

From the questionnaire we culled several conversation themes that centered on differences between those who had taken the colloquy and those who had not. These themes included reflections on the teaching colloquy structure, course mechanics, teaching outside one's area of research specialty, and contextual issues. We explored these issues in small groups of faculty and alumni. We then held a plenary session where issues that arose were shared with the group. Both the online questionnaire and the campus conversations provided evidence that the colloquy has had a positive impact on our alumni's sense of preparation for teaching.

First, from the online questionnaire submitted to approximately 300 alumni, we learned that, in several areas, those who had taken our teaching colloquy felt better prepared than those who had not taken the teaching colloquy. These issues included: a higher concern for student learning; perception of ability to demonstrate interest in the course topic; perception of ability to inspire interest in a topic; confidence in their ability to organize a course; confidence in professor's preparation for class; ability to explain course requirements and to construct exams; ability to construct effective assignments; professor's ability to affect student learning by utilizing effective methods; and sense of readiness to join a faculty. Also, the importance of faculty mentors for teaching was considerably higher for those who took the teaching colloquy, even though the role of specific colloquy assignments was negligible for those taking colloquy;

Much of the feedback that came from the 10 alumni who visited campus coincided with the results of the online survey, but the conversations in both the large and small groups provided a significantly different, and more dynamic, lens on the data. These conversations produced significant insights that can be grouped into several categories based upon feedback from alumni and faculty, including: pedagogical issues related to the colloquy's structure, the role of faculty mentors for graduate assistants, the changing role of teaching loads, and the need for preparing future faculty whose profile more accurately reflects a changing population in terms of gender and ethnic diversity, as well as providing them with the ability to assess the nature of the student body at various institutions.

Alumni expressed confidence in their ability to prepare courses when called upon to do so. While most spoke of a steep learning curve in their first year, alumni expressed appreciation

for the basic skills developed in the program and in the colloquy. Nevertheless, some issues arose that require exploration in the ongoing shaping of the colloquy. Several alumni expressed frustration at taking the colloquy while they were teaching since, especially at the beginning of the semester, they were dealing with issues that would have been better done in advance of their teaching experience. We have subsequently adjusted our teaching colloquy based on this feedback by moving it to the spring semester before students teach.

One recurring motif from alumni that had probably been underestimated in setting up these conversations related to the importance of mentoring in the formational process. Because our focus had been on the teaching colloquy in setting up the questionnaire, it was important to hear from some alumni how much they had learned about teaching from the faculty with whom they worked as graduate assistants even before they took the colloquy. Other alumni had little or no guidance from professors on how to think about these issues. In a similar vein, alumni commented on the importance of allowing them time each semester to make a presentation to the class, and not only when the professor was out of town. Areas of conversation included:

1. Faculty surprise at the extent of online teaching expected from recent graduates;
2. The difficulty for alumni of adapting to new teaching environments with respect to student demographics and the effects upon expectations of professors;
3. The advantages of requiring graduate course work outside the Department of Religion structured into our program;
4. And the degree to which the “Teaching” Colloquy has focused upon issues related to job searches, perhaps at the expense of more exploration of diverse pedagogical styles and different types of classes (freshmen service courses vs. upper level courses).

In sum, the Wabash Center’s GPTI allowed us to formalize a review process of our decade long teaching colloquy. Largely, this review confirmed the effectiveness of the colloquy, especially in instilling confidence in our alumni concerning their own ability to construct courses, develop appropriate assignments, and institute suitable instruments for measuring student progress. This review also provided input from alumni regarding how the teaching colloquy could be improved. Some of the suggestions have already been implemented while others remain topics of conversation and assessment. In the process of these conversations four additional issues came under discussion to which we are also in the process of developing responses: 1) highlighting the role of mentoring graduate students as teachers from the beginning of their program; 2) helping graduate students develop skills in exegeting the context of their teaching in terms of institutional expectations, and in the intellectual ability and college preparation of the students themselves; 3) determining the extent to which conversations regarding approaches to employment should be integrated into or disentangled from the teaching colloquy; and 4) the need for students to reflect upon the type of courses they might be expected to offer (i.e., freshman courses versus upper level courses, courses within their area of specialization versus courses outside their area of research, and the appropriateness of lecture formats, seminars, small-group assignments, and online skills).