

DU/Illiff Joint Ph.D. Program

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative
Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion

Document 1: Teaching Preparation in Doctoral Program.

Students take a required “core” curriculum. During the first quarter of the first year our Ph.D. students take a course on theory and method in the study of religion. Building upon that course, in the winter term of the second year they participate in the seminar entitled, “Pedagogy and the Teaching of Religion.” With that preparation, students in the Program are eligible to be appointed as graduate teaching assistants at the University of Denver and/or the Illiff School of Theology. Most if not all of our students have the opportunity to serve as a GTA during their time in the Program. Most students will serve four to six quarters as a GTA, usually with anywhere from two to six different lead instructors, in classes that may range from 15 or 20 students to 50 or 75, and might include or consist entirely of masters-level students or entirely undergraduate students.

In Fall and Winter quarters we hosted two GTA workshops for faculty who are assigned GTAs from the Program. We rely on those faculty to provide mentoring, models, and guidance in teaching for our GTAs beyond the Pedagogy course. The workshops were guided by Dr. Carrie Doehring and a student, Heike Peckruhn.

In those workshops we structured discussion around values, strategies, best experiences and challenges. The outcomes we aimed for in the workshops were: emphasis on the mentoring aspect the importance of taking the time to craft the mentoring; opening lines of communication; and taking the initiative to be that mentor.

VALUES: We asked faculty to reflect on what we value about working with doctoral students and suggest the following:

- Opportunity for collaborative scholarship and teaching
- Opportunity to mentor
- Opportunity to shape our discipline by mentoring future scholars

We suggested that one way to think about values is to reflect on “living out” the care with which we select students for admission, and following up on that. We encouraged faculty to think about the value of their own GTA experiences, and what difference it made to their formation as scholars and teachers. We encouraged faculty to talk about how having a GTA is a mentoring experience and how their values can inform the mentoring experience, and to think of customizing the experience for the GTA that speaks to the characteristics of the course as well as the GTA’s strengths and program.

From the GTA's perspective, it is important to be "backed up" by the lead instructor. The GTA should be invited to share expectations – is it to get comfortable with a particular classroom style? To gain experience in classroom management? To get familiar with the subject matter? To get experience in leading small group discussion? Preparing and giving a lecture? Exit the experience with the confidence of being able to teach that particular class solo? Get a handle on how to grade? (Grading must, obviously, gel with the professor's expectations: what's the ONE THING that the professor wants to see in the paper/exam?)

STRATEGIES: It was stressed that there has to be an initial investment of time, and that meeting soon after the first class, or preferably before the first class, is crucial to establish the mentoring experience. Constant communication is important, and sometimes it is necessary to "give something up" in teaching, e.g., if the GTA is willing to do so, to prepare the GTA to give a particular lecture, or completely handle some assignment. The lead instructor should be prepared to encourage the GTA to ask about things – for example, why a certain exercise or assignment was given, or what part of a lecture a particular anecdote or tangent was intended to illustrate or emphasize. The experience is also an investment for the GTA, so how can the GTA learn the most?

BEST EXPERIENCES: We asked faculty to share their "best experiences", and talk about how those best experiences can be repeated. We suggested that faculty must ask the GTA what questions they have, and also ask if the GTA anticipates any particular stressful week in the quarter. We also suggested that if they have a GTA for winter or spring, they contact that GTA beforehand and get to know the GTA.

CHALLENGES that sometimes might make it hard to live out these values are

- time
- style of teaching
- the fit between our needs and the GTA'S background and needs

Document 2: Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work

Two-Day Workshop:

We invited ten alumnae/i of our Ph.D. program who are teaching in various kinds of setting back to campus for two days in order to learn from them what we do well and what we can do better. The specific question we asked them in preparation for their time with us were: (1) How successful were we in preparing you to teach in colleges, universities, seminaries and theological schools? (2) To what would you alert our students in advance of their first teaching jobs? (3) What are the most daunting challenges you have faced in your teaching thus far? (4) What hurdles do you see looming on the horizon? (5) Were you prepared to make effective use of, incorporate in meaningful ways, new media and technologies in their teaching? How did you gain that expertise? (6) What are the sources of support upon which you have relied most as teachers? (7) What sorts of resources would be most valuable to you in achieving their pedagogical goals? (8) How have your teaching philosophies changed (or not) in light of their experiences?

In general all respondents to our request for feedback found the time on campus with facilitators, faculty, and fellow alums very productive and enjoyable (7 of the 10 participants responded). There was little consensus on what were the most and least useful sessions, with the exception of the 2nd afternoon session when alums met with current students—all found that to be very valuable. All respondents felt that they had learned a lot by exchanging ideas with colleagues over the day.

Implications for Our Graduate Program

The two most important aspects of our program that received positive feedback were the interdisciplinary nature of the program, and the core seminar in pedagogy that students take in their second year. It was clear that all the alums who had taken this seminar felt well prepared to create a syllabus and manage an engaging classroom that took into account various levels and learning styles of students. The alums who had not had this seminar wished they had. The two regular instructors in this seminar, Katherine Turpin (Ilf faculty) and Greg Robbins (DU faculty) felt the need to pay continuing attention to a couple of issues as the seminar moves forward: increased emphasis on use of new technologies in the classroom and increased focus on dealing with students with different types of learning disabilities.

There were also two aspects of the program that the alums said required more work: preparation for some of the pragmatic pieces of career development, and faculty mentoring (this was very uneven, depending on who the students' primary advisor was).

Further Steps

Of the two aspects in need of improvement in our preparation for careers in teaching, the first (pragmatic pieces of career development) is more easily addressed. As of fall 2011 incoming students are required to take a 1-hour (weekly) non-credit course offered by Miguel De La Torre (who has published a book on

faculty career development) on the nuts and bolts of career development: preparing CVs, attending conferences, getting published, networking, etc. Although anecdotal, the feedback on this class has been positive, and we will undoubtedly offer this course again in Fall, 2013.

In addition we have taken steps to regularize some of the student forums that have been sponsored by the Student Council (GSA) somewhat sporadically in past years. This fall a new faculty member at Iliff (and recent grad of our program) Sophia Shafi offered a forum on finding and securing grants. In the weeks before the AAR/SBL we provided mock interviews with faculty for students interviewing at the conferences, and mock panels at which students presenting papers (16 at the AAR/SBL this year) gave their papers and received feedback from faculty and students. In fall 2012 all incoming students were assigned a student mentor (someone farther along in the program) by the Student Council. We also initiated the GTA workshops noted above.

Richard Clemmer-Smith
Director, DU/Iliff Joint PhD Program