



BROWN

Department of  
Religious Studies

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative, Round 2  
Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology & Religion  
Nov 2012  
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### Teaching Preparation in Brown's Doctoral Program

#### Overview:

Teaching preparation in Religious Studies at Brown takes place in several formats. Primary among these are the Teaching Assistantships required of all doctoral students, and the extensive teacher training certificates offered through Brown's Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, which is voluntary, but highly recommended. Additionally, Religious Studies doctoral students have a variety of more informal venues for teacher preparation, including department workshops and faculty mentoring.

#### Teaching Assistantships:

Humanities doctoral students at Brown are presently required to serve as Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants or Proctors for their second, third, and fourth years of the doctoral program (their first year is a Fellowship with no additional university responsibilities beside coursework and academic study, and their fifth year is a Dissertation fellowship). Ordinarily, Religious Studies graduate students serve as teaching assistants for most, if not all, of these 6 semesters, although some occasionally have other appointments. TA assignments are of two types. On the one hand, graduate students are required to serve as TAs for courses in their areas of specialization, in order to gain experience teaching basic courses in their fields. These assignments are made whether or not the size of such courses would otherwise support a TA appointment. On the other, graduate students are assigned as TAs for courses whose enrollments require additional staffing for sections and grading, or for faculty who are deemed in need of classroom support for other reasons (such as extensive administrative work). The department makes every effort to conform TA assignments to the expertise and interests of graduate assistants. Sometimes, however, students are asked to stretch, to TA for courses outside their expertise, but within the department. Additionally, students are sometimes assigned to TA for courses related to their expertise, but outside Religious Studies, in departments such as Classics, Philosophy, Anthropology, and so forth. Very occasionally, the Graduate School has asked us to assign a student to a course fairly far from their area of expertise when University teaching needs make this necessary, and we try when at all possible to accommodate such requests.

As teaching assistants, Religious Studies graduate students are expected to perform a variety of tasks. Ordinarily, they lead discussion sections for lecture courses (something the faculty member generally also does), and are responsible for grading the work of students in their sections, and for meeting with students about papers, projects and coursework generally. They are usually asked to prepare and deliver at least one lecture for the course, and they often assist in the logistics of the course, such as helping to set up and maintain course websites, researching and securing materials for the course, and other mechanics that are inevitably part of a teacher's responsibilities. They are emphatically not

expected to do ordinary clerical work which is the responsibility of the department's two administrative staff.

The Department of Religious Studies has long considered the training of future teachers to be best undertaken through an apprenticeship model. Faculty devote considerable attention and effort to mentoring their teaching assistants, through such practices as weekly meetings with TAs, visits to TA sections, and others. Faculty guide the students in their preparation of class lectures and offer them extensive feedback on their performance. In addition, TAs are evaluated by students in Brown's formal processes, and students receive both the results of those evaluations, and counseling, as necessary, from the faculty in response.

#### Teacher Training through the Sheridan Center:

In 1987, Brown formally established a Center for the Advancement of College Teaching under the direction of Harriet W. Sheridan, formerly the Dean of the College at Brown. Among Sheridan's major goals was preparing graduate students to teach in higher education. Renamed in 1997 as "The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning," the Center currently offers extensive teaching training for graduate students, including a Certificate program of four progressive levels: the Sheridan Teaching Seminar; the Classroom Tools Seminar; the Professional Development Seminar; and the Teaching Consultant Program. Each certificate entails a year's worth of seminars.

While the Sheridan programs are voluntary, we urge our students to take as many of the Seminars as their schedule permits, and many, if not most, doctoral students in Religious Studies complete several certificates. A few of our students have completed them all. Religious Studies faculty sometimes participate in these programs, for instance, as reviewers of student interview preparations, or as workshop participants.

Those students who complete enough of these seminars are eligible to apply for the Wheaton-Brown Fellowship in their 6<sup>th</sup> year, a program with nearby Wheaton College that allows a dissertating student to spend half-time working on their research, and half-time teaching at Wheaton, with the mentoring of Wheaton faculty. Several Religious Studies doctoral students have had this opportunity in the last decade, although recent changes to the program may make it more difficult for them to do so.

#### Additional Teacher Training:

Since the Sheridan programs are not discipline specific, individual faculty continue to mentor their own teaching assistants and graduate students, with particular attention to the issues relevant to teaching Religious Studies, everything from the content of syllabus construction, to managing the personal issues some students face when encountering the academic study of religious beliefs and practices. Periodically, the Department runs workshops for our graduate students focused on a range of issues that arise in the teaching of religious studies. The Graduate School conducts an initial orientation session for new teaching assistants at the beginning of each academic year.

Last, although it is not part of our formal program, many of our graduate students have various opportunities to teach on their own, as their work progresses. Some offer courses through Brown's Continuing Education programs, whether during the academic year, or over the summer. Such courses are proposed by the students and vetted by the Department, but they do not ordinarily entail faculty supervision. Many of our advanced graduate students obtain part-time teaching positions, usually at area colleges such as Connecticut College, Stonehill College, Wheaton College, University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and others, where they have the opportunity to construct a syllabus, and take full responsibility for teaching one or more courses before they find regular faculty appointments. Here, too, they regularly avail themselves of the mentoring of their Brown advisors.

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Our Wabash Conference:

1. What We Learned From Our Alums:

- That they generally felt reasonably well-prepared to teach
- That they liked our apprenticeship model, and our teaching of pedagogy through ‘modeling’.
- That they appreciated the opportunity to TA outside their fields (even when they resisted it as graduate students)
- That they highly valued the programs run by Brown’s Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning
- That they highly valued their opportunities to work as Writing tutors for the Writing Center, which helped many of them prepare for teaching students with weak writing skills
- That they didn’t feel well-prepared about many of the nuts and bolts of being a college professor (apart from teaching)
- That they didn’t feel as well prepared to develop syllabi
- Nor to teach students very different from Brown students
- Nor to do advising, whether of undergrads or graduate students
- That they would have liked to have done more in the classroom as TAs (or at least, in hindsight, they wish they had)

2. Desiderata for the Future (both immediate – this year, and going forward)

The Wabash Report, written by Gene Gallagher, nicely consolidates these observations. In general, we concur that we need to focus on three areas:

- More consistency in the training of TAs, or at least, more reflection and deliberation on the diversity of approaches faculty may take both to their own pedagogy, and how we train TAs to teach.
- More attention to particular aspects of teaching preparation, especially syllabus preparation, but also how to teach diverse student populations, how to do academic advising, how to do non-academic advising and crisis management if necessary
- More attention to helping advanced graduate students find opportunities to teach their own courses before they have regular teaching positions

Related to these, we have a fairly long laundry list of specific ways to do these that we are currently discussing:

- Meetings for faculty supervising TAs in any given semester, to discuss common expectations and compare practices.
- Assist graduate students in forming an ongoing graduate teaching seminar on their own
- invite back alumnae/i every other year or so to hold a session like the last session of our Wabash conference, where current graduate students hear from alums, and have the opportunity to ask about their own concerns: if it’s not feasible to do all of this in person, consider video-conferencing events
- teach graduate students how to write exams and other assignments
- help graduate students with access to syllabi data bases, and consider developing a data base of our own alumnae/i syllabi
- conduct workshops on how to find adjunct appointments
- conduct workshops on how to deal with student crises, in concert with the counseling center
- develop a program for graduate students to visit department courses
- consider a workshop for transitioning from graduate school to being a faculty member