

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative
Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion
Summary of Findings
November 2012

Begun in 2010, the Graduate Program Teaching Initiative is an effort to assess how well doctoral programs prepare their Ph.D and Th.D. students to teach. The Wabash Center provides \$15,000 grants to selected doctoral programs that demonstrate an interest and willingness to assess their program. We ask that the assessment be done through bringing to campus recent alumni/ae who hold theological and religious studies teaching positions and asking the alumni/ae questions about how well they were prepared for their jobs. The Wabash Center provides a consultant to help design the Teaching Initiative Gathering, and a Wabash Center program staff member attends as well. To date, we have been a part of 21 Teaching Initiative Gatherings. The findings from these gatherings are summarized as follows:

I. Observations about Program Structures:

- **Teaching culture:** The way teaching is carried out and valued within the doctoral program matters a great deal. Each school's teaching culture is a powerful and implicit part of the doctoral program and it is shaped fundamentally by the whole faculty and by whether the doctoral faculty members take seriously the teaching of their own undergraduate or graduate students. A well-planned teaching preparation program can do little to counter a culture that de-values the teaching of its own faculty.
- **Program Structures:** Different structures for teaching preparation can produce similar benefits. Every doctoral program had a distinctive way of formalizing the teaching preparation of their graduate students, whether this was through pedagogical theory courses, teaching and learning colloquies, workshops around particular topics, teaching assistantships, and mentoring programs. There is no one template for a successful program, only that it match well with the goals of the program, the places the graduates are generally employed, and the skills and resources of the school.
- **Teaching Assistantships:** Teaching Assistants are the most prevalent place cited by doctoral programs as the location of teaching preparation of their students. But in reality, TAs are too often used as a way to help faculty handle their workloads rather than 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 to do only the rudimentary work of a class, when they are not given a chance to contribute to the design, content, or evaluation of a class, and when there is little genuine supervision or feedback given to them about their teaching.

- **Mentoring:** The mentoring relationship is often cited by alumni/ae as the most important part of a doctoral program. Yet they gave clear evidence that mentoring by mid- and senior-faculty members was extremely variable whether it was a part of a formal or informal structure of the school's teaching preparation. For mentoring programs to be a dependable method, the doctoral program needs a critical mass of faculty members who are able to be transparent about their teaching goals, continual learners as they reflect with others on their teaching experiences, and enjoy being regularly engaged in teaching.
- **Future Jobs:** Most doctoral programs have a demographically reliable set of schools that hire their grads. The best programs know those demographics and value those teaching settings. It will also facilitate the setting of goals for the doctoral program if the school has some sense as to the type of teaching asked of its graduates: will they be teaching large classes, small discussion seminars, online courses, interdisciplinary core courses for non-majors, advanced courses for majors, or within or outside their field of training? No type of placement can be assured, but past placements can be helpful predictive.
- **Subject matter methodologies:** It was evident in visits that some programs are able to help their graduates make the leap between the methodologies of the disciplines and the practice of being reflective about teaching and learning. In some instances this was because the discipline methodology was translatable to teaching, such as using ethnographic methods to understand the student demographics of a class. Other times it was because the faculty member described how their work in their discipline helped them think about teaching.

II. Elements of Good Programs:

- **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, or however.
- **Teaching philosophy:** Doctoral students need to be asked the question as to why they want to teach. What are the hopes that they have for their (future) students? Why do they think knowing their subject matter matters? Encourage doctoral students to think about their goals for student learning. Again, this can be done in a variety of ways, including an assignment to talk with current doctoral faculty about why they are teaching and their philosophy of education.

- **Theories of learning:** It is helpful for doctoral students to 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 (eg: What do students learn when you have a classroom conversation, a group project, or a direct presentation of material?), or through conversations as they are supervised in their teaching.
- **Course design and teaching:** Student engagement with issues of teaching, with course design components, with a teaching philosophy and a theory of learning takes place best when doctoral students have to actually teach. Some programs have the luxury of a robust undergraduate religion requirement; others are isolated from undergraduate teaching and have only other graduate-level classes (of peers) that can be used as a training ground. But without actual students in a class, 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.
- **Teaching context:** One of the first steps for new teachers is to understand who their students are and what they bring with them into the classroom. Doctoral students gain from understanding that teaching is situated within the particularities of an institution and department, within a set of school goals and curricula, and must take into account the abilities and backgrounds of the students that will be in the classroom.
- **Foregrounding teaching questions:** First-time teachers are in the midst of new experiences that need sorting and understanding. Programs can help doctoral students in this task by facilitating their interrogation of those experiences with others who are teaching. Some schools have the benefit of a very strong grad student culture where grad students who are teaching can prep together and talk about their experiences. Other programs develop forums or teaching seminars where TAs or doctoral students who are adjuncts at other schools 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 future job.

Nadine S. Pence, Director
 Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion