

Findings for April 2012 Summative Conference

Teaching Preparation in the JTS Doctoral Program

At the Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary, we believe that successful training of doctoral candidates includes preparing them to be effective teachers, in academic as well as other settings. To that end, we encourage our doctoral candidates to serve as both Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Course Instructors during the course of their studies. Those who receive funding are required to TA for at least one course. Because our doctoral students teach in a variety of educational settings upon graduation, including college and university departments of Religious Studies and/or Jewish Studies, Seminaries, and public institutions such as museums, we stress the importance of effective teaching to our students and strive to assist them in cultivating the tools they need to be successful pedagogues.

JTS students are eligible for teaching assistant positions after they have completed their comprehensive exams, although some serve as grading assistants while still in coursework. When a student becomes a TA, we encourage the faculty member teaching the course to serve as a mentor to the graduate student. Because the cohort TAing at any given time is so small, we cannot sustain a full-fledged teacher-training course. Students who TA are mentored individually, and we encourage faculty to include their TAs in the processes of preparing syllabi, creating class assignments and evaluating exams. Most students also have the opportunity to teach a class or part of a class, or hold review sessions before exams. Students get feedback from their advisors throughout this process. Doctoral students generally serve as teaching assistants first in an undergraduate course within the student's area of focus, such as Bible, Jewish history, or Jewish literature. Most of our doctoral students serve as teaching assistants for 1-2 courses during their graduate studies.

Doctoral candidates who have served as teaching assistants are then also eligible to teach their own class, again, often an introductory undergraduate course in their area. However, some students nearing the completion of their degree who have demonstrated particular strength in teaching also have the opportunity to teach a specialized course in the Graduate School. This involves developing a course proposal for approval by the Committee on Instruction, crafting the course syllabus, and compiling course materials. All students who teach their own course are observed by the Dean of the Graduate School and/or their faculty advisor, and are provided with feedback soon after the observation takes place. Currently, approximately 10% of our students teach their own course at JTS, though others serve as adjuncts at other institutions of higher education and gain additional teaching experience through those positions.

Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work

The Wabash workshop held at the Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) sought to assess how well we prepare our doctoral students for teaching in higher education institutions upon completion of their doctoral studies. The two-day workshop convened a group of recent alumni, faculty advisors and The Graduate School administrators to discuss the strengths of our program and areas for further growth. We held a variety of sessions dedicated to aspects of teacher training and the importance of mentorship in such preparation.

Because of the grant, we were able to successfully reflect on best teaching practices at JTS and to identify those areas in which we could improve our mentoring of doctoral students to help them become stronger teachers. Alumni stressed the excellent education they received while in their doctoral studies – they gained a broad and deep knowledge of Jewish Studies and felt that this offered unparalleled preparation for developing numerous courses spanning the Jewish experience. They also felt that the close mentoring relationships they developed with JTS faculty members were and continue to be pivotal to their success as educators. Many keep in close contact with their advisors after they complete their studies and begin their professional careers; they find this continual guidance invaluable as they navigate the waters of academia.

The alumni also pointed out areas in which we could better prepare our students for teaching careers. They felt that they would have benefitted from more explicit reflection by faculty members on how they develop, teach, and assess their courses, including the construction of syllabi, classroom teaching strategies, and the evaluation of student work. We learned that faculty supervision of TAs and doctoral student teaching is uneven. Some excel at this task while others need guidance to effectively assist their students. We need to educate our faculty on how to best help their students become great teachers. All faculty need to share their “best practices” with their doctoral students in a clear and consistent manner. The Graduate School also needs to develop a more systematic way to support doctoral students while they are serving as teaching assistants or course instructors. For example, we need to find ways to routinely share knowledge about utilizing technology in the classroom, assessing students, and managing the classroom environment.

The Wabash Workshop provided an optimal forum for conversations about how JTS trains its doctoral students for teaching careers, and we concluded the meeting with concrete ideas for moving forward with our teacher training and mentorship of students. These next steps include creating a Graduate Student Handbook which outlines advisor-advisee expectations at each stage of a student’s degree progress. We will also work to provide all doctoral candidates with opportunities to serve as teaching assistants and course instructors during their time at JTS. Finally, we are developing new programs and seminars featuring our most successful faculty and alumni that highlight best teaching and mentorship practices for current graduate students.