

**Faculty of Religious Studies  
McGill University**

**Teaching Preparation in the Doctoral Program**

Role Models

Several of our graduates who attended our workshop identified the fact they had had good role models and mentors during their graduate education as essential to their preparation. Needless to say, graduate students who have been taught well are more likely to go on to be good teachers themselves.

Teaching Assistantships

For all our participants, the experience of being a Teaching Assistant (TA) to a professor was basic to their preparation. Our TA program is extensive. As the figures below show, in any given year approximately half of the graduate student body (including MA students) work as TAs. This is a major means of channeling funding support to students. At present, FRS does not have a formal program for giving graduate students instruction on how to be a TA. To date TAs have “learned by doing.”

Our policy is to assign one TA for every 60 students enrolled in a course. We have several large introductory level courses with student enrolments of two and three hundred students that are assigned four or five TAs and a range of more advanced courses with fewer TAs.

<b>Teaching Assistants</b>	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Graduate enrolment	71/71	73/80	71/69	80/82	75/79
TA in 1 Course	31	33	40	50	44
TA in 2 Courses	0	4	2	1	2

In the large intro courses, although the professor designs the course and gives the lectures, the TAs are involved in every other aspect of delivering the course. They run discussion groups, grade the written assignments, hold office hours to meet with students, answer student email, and in general act as the course’s interface with students. If the course has a website, most likely it is the TAs who manage the content of the site. Behind the scenes, the professor advises on the problems that arise: how to accommodate students who miss the deadline for an assignment, how to handle plagiarism issues, what to do with students whose first language is not English, and so on. By participating in teaching under the guidance of a senior teacher, they learn on the job the basics of teaching and of managing a course.

Teaching as Course Instructor

PhD students may apply to teach a course during the summer term. This is often their first experience as course instructor. The students submit their summer course syllabi to the Dean of the Faculty who then consults with the students’ supervisors before deciding which courses to offer.

<b>Summer Course Instructors</b>	Sum 2002	Sum 2003	Sum 2004	Sum 2005	Sum 2006
Graduate enrolment	56	65	61	64	79
Graduate Student Instructors	10	6	11	14	12
Graduate Student Co-Instructors			2	4	1
Total	10	6	13	18	13

In the fall and winter terms, FRS usually offers 80 or more 3-credit courses for undergraduate and graduate degree programs. A few PhD students are invited to teach in these courses during the fall and winter terms. Some of these courses are large enrolment courses employing teaching assistants. In these courses, the chief instructor is a PhD graduate student supervising other graduate students as TAs. In addition, in our Asian Religions area, quite frequently the Sanskrit and Tibetan languages courses (three levels) are taught by graduate students.

Once chosen as course instructor, the student is responsible for all aspects of the course from the first lecture to the final submission of grades.

F/W Term Course Instructors	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Graduate enrolment	71/71	73/80	71/69	80/82	75/79
Graduate Student Instructors	14	13	11	18	15

Again, this is a major means of channeling funding support to the graduate students. Our Wabash workshop concluded that some formal program be started to give first-time course instructors some preparatory training; the program should also provide first-time course instructors with some continuing forum for sharing experiences with each other.

#### Other Aspects of the Academic Career

Several other regular activities at FRS at McGill provide PhD students with opportunities to develop the professional skills which they will need in their teaching careers.

- PhD students are editors of the Faculty journal *ARC*.
- Graduate students are members of the Faculty Council, the Graduate Program and Policies Committee and search committees which hire new faculty. They fully participate in discussions about policy with faculty.
- FRS graduate students make presentations at academic conferences. For the Graduate Program Review which FRS conducted in 2007, an informal survey of graduate students yielded the following rough statistics.

FRS Graduate Students Conferences and Publications				
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Graduate student enrolment (F/W)	73/80	71/69	80/82	75/79
Presentations at Conferences	16	23	41	29
Articles Published in Journals		3	8	7
Book Reviews	6	7	10	7

Source: Informal survey graduate student listserv 27 Feb. 2007

Roughly speaking, between one-third and one-fourth of the graduate student body makes a conference presentation in any given year.

- FRS hosts many academic conferences, about two a year for the last five years. Graduate students participate in all aspects of their organization and management, from writing the first Call for Papers to setting the menu for meals. In addition, the graduate students annually host their own conference, with the cooperation of the Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR). McGill-CREOR Graduate Students Conferences include  
*Breaking out of Subjectivity: Contemporary Challenges in the Study of Religion (2008)*  
*Performing Self and Community: New Perspectives on Ritual Practice (2009)*  
*Sites of Transformation: New Perspectives on Religion as Revolution (2010).*

#### Looking forward

The task of preparing PhD students for a career of academic teaching continues to get more complex year by year. In response, FRS is moving towards a more formal series of workshops on TA pedagogy, technology in the classroom, etc.

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**Summary of Findings from the Wabash Teaching Initiative Workshop**

- **Role Models**  
Encourage good teaching among the faculty. Graduate students who have received good teaching are more likely to go on to be good teachers themselves.
- **Mentor and Apprentice**  
Provide opportunities to graduate students to work as teaching assistant, and later chief instructor, in a variety of courses, working as a team along with the professor, who serves as role model and mentor.
- **Community**  
Provide a physical place where graduate students can congregate and call their own. This space is invaluable, allowing for the development of a culture of intellectual cross-pollination as well as friendship among graduate students.
- **Participation in the profession**  
Provide opportunities where graduate students can participate in the professional life of scholars, such as editing a professional journal, presenting at academic conferences, organizing and hosting conferences, participating as full members of councils and committees in the department, etc.
- **Good and Bad Practice in Handling TAs Workshop**  
Conduct a workshop for professors on good practice in handling TAs. Develop written guidelines on the professor's responsibilities to TAs.
- **Pedagogical workshop for course lecturers**  
This workshop gives basic information to instructors and provides a forum where instructors can ask for advice.
- **Workshops for PhD students entering their final year**  
Create a series of workshops to provide dissertation writing support and also assistance with the job search. Outline post-doctoral fellowship opportunities and also alternatives to the academic career.
- **Annual Wabash Workshop**  
Organize a workshop on teaching and learning resources. Invite Wabash to give it.