

Southern Methodist University, Graduate Program in Religious Studies

**Document 1: Teaching Preparation in the GPRS**

For many years, SMU's Graduate Program in Religious Studies has included a Practice Teaching Requirement in its PhD curriculum. Every student must complete at least one term of practice teaching under supervision, during the third to the fifth year in the program.

There are two ways to meet this requirement. In the first, the student teaches a course of his/her own design, planned with the advice and under the guidance of the student's adviser or other supervising professor. Ordinarily the teaching venue is the Perkins School of Theology, but with the permission of the Director of the Program it may be elsewhere on the SMU campus or at another institution. For any course to be offered at Perkins School of Theology, an official new course proposal must be approved by the Perkins Faculty.

In the second, the student meets the teaching requirement by serving as a Teaching Assistant in a course taught either at Perkins School of Theology or, with the permission of the Director of the Program, elsewhere on the SMU campus or at another institution. In this case, the PhD student must be significantly engaged with the students taking the course in question, both in instruction and in the evaluation of their work. If it is to count as meeting the teaching requirement, the Teaching Assistantship must provide the student with the opportunity to lecture (or make equivalent presentations) at least twice and regularly to lead discussion sections. In addition, the student must prepare a full syllabus for the course as if he/she were teaching it alone.

When the teaching requirement has been completed, the student's adviser (or the supervising professor) submits to the Director of the Program an evaluation of the student's fulfillment of the requirement, along with a copy of the syllabus that the student has prepared.

Nearly all of our PhD students serve as teaching assistants for at least one term during their course of study, either for basic courses at Perkins School of Theology or in for undergraduate courses in the Department of Religious Studies. Many also teach introductory courses as adjunct instructors in the Department of Religious Studies. Such service is not a requirement for the PhD, nor is it tied to the financial aid students receive from the program. Compensation for it is arranged separately by the school in which they serve. The university provides an orientation workshop for all graduate students serving as teaching assistants.

An important part of our preparation to teach in a broader sense has been the Core Seminar in Religious Studies, a set of four courses in major areas of content and methodology in the study of religion that all students are required to take. From the early 1980s through the 2007-2008 academic year, the four Core courses—on the philosophical study of religion, the historical study

of Western traditions, the historical study of Eastern traditions, and social-scientific study of religion—were all taken in the first year of study (two each semester). In 2008-2009, with the latest curricular revision, the Core courses—now in the philosophical study of religion; history, theory, and method in religious studies; contemporary approaches to the study of religion; and approaches to the study of Asian religions—are spread over the first two years of study (one each semester), and first- and second-year students take the courses together. This exposure to the range of disciplines and approaches that constitute religious studies as a field has been useful to our students in shaping their own inquiries within their particular disciplines, and has also helped to prepare them for the typical expectations of collegueship in a department or faculty. In recent years the Core Seminar has included among its assignments the preparation of a syllabus for a basic course in religious studies and some orientation to a variety of pedagogical tasks.

We have also arranged informal and largely ad hoc events on issues in pedagogy over the years, though these have been sporadic. In recent years the GPRS Graduate Student Organization has sponsored some events of its own, and in the last two years we have implemented a more formal and thorough paracurricular program in pedagogy, with the help of a start-up grant from the Wabash Center. This program, “Conversations in Teaching and Learning,” features a two year cycle of sessions (three faculty-led discussions per term, with a parallel set of student-only occasions) for second- and third-year students, leading to (among other things) the development of a statement of one’s own philosophy of teaching and transcript certification that the student has completed this program as part of their preparation for teaching.

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**Document 2: Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work**

- (1) Breadth of training, especially in non-Christian religious traditions, has been essential to the success of our graduates as teachers, and is a needed complement to their scholarly specialization.
- (2) Significant teaching experience as a component of graduate study is of basic importance in preparing out students to be effective teachers.
- (3) The value of teaching experience as part of graduate study depends to a significant degree on the extent of direct faculty supervision and mentoring.
- (4) The practical and theoretical aspects of pedagogy are best learned when they are deliberately addressed as a part of graduate study (as in our Conversations on Teaching and Learning program), so as to complement the learning about pedagogy that goes on in supervised teaching.
- (5) It is essential for our program to keep abreast of technological developments in teaching (at present, especially online teaching) and to help our students acquire the skills necessary to master these developments.