

SUMMATION CONFERENCE: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

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**Document 1: Teaching Preparation in your Doctoral Program.**

Preparation for teaching in our department has important aspects, some of which have recently changed.

1. TA assignments provide practical models for teaching, grading, structuring exams
2. Each graduate student teaches their own course under REL 320 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year (for entering class in their 4<sup>th</sup> year.
3. In addition some students teach 100 level course in their fourth year (this has changed for the entering class—all must teach two lower division (100–200 level) courses in their 5<sup>th</sup> year)
4. We have a robust Future Professors Program designed and implemented each year by Prof. Gail Hamner.

For our current incoming PhD program F 2012, we have made 4 offers of full tuition and **Teaching Assistantship** awards for *five* years with the requirement that the 5<sup>th</sup> year be devoted to writing the dissertation and developing/teaching two lower division courses. The University Fellowships with no teaching assignments are now offered only at the MA. None of our MA students serve as TAs for courses.

We made this change partly in response to the results of the Wabash forum in September 2011, when our alums told us that the most valuable aspect of our program for their own teaching was service as TA's especially in course that were not part of their research program. Here the TA experience became part of learning and equipped them for those ubiquitous Introduction to Religion or Introduction to World Religion courses. We wanted that training to begin immediately in the PhD program.

Evaluating and discussing how the TA experience has in fact served our graduate student became a major portion of a faculty retreat held on January 18, 2012 in direct response to the Wabash report--I will return to that in Document 2.

The process of assigning TA depends on careful adjudication of requests for specific assignments by the graduate students and requests for specific graduate students from faculty. After the issue of time constraints are considered, the DGS—here I speak from my experience—tries to make assignments that enhance the students total career profile. This means assignments to courses that will become the heart of their particular specialty—Introductions to Judaism, to Hinduism, to philosophy and religion, to religion and film etc. Then I also take care to assigns courses that graduate students request to supplement to their teaching profile—some expertise in Islam or in Buddhism or in gender studies. Finally when possible, assignments often serve to fill in gaps in their own course work.

What do well but *not* always—see below—is the *conscious* use of these assignment as opportunities to teach pedagogy. Most of our alums told us that watching and modeling the professor in the classroom were the key learning experience. Most of our faculty meets weekly with their TA to discuss aspects of grading, exam construction, and content of discussion sections. Again see below.

Each student solos in his or her own upper division course number Rel 320—usually developing from research associated with the dissertation or a closely related theme. This will not move from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> year. These 320s usually enroll very well. For example this spring our 320 courses included;

- Finding Religions at the Margins
- The End is Near...Again (on *eschatology*)
- Cornel West & Prophetic Pragmatism
- Buddhist Compassion & Christian Love

Each student has a teaching mentor for the class.

**However key changing are now in effect for the incoming class. We offer FIVE year of funding with the teaching distributed as:**

- Year 1, 3, and 3: TA
- Year 4: 320 one semester and TA the other
- Year 5: Two 100/200 level courses distributed according to desire of the student and the needs of the department.

**We are currently in discussion about the mentoring for these 100/200 level courses.**

**The Future Professors Program** has greatly improved since 2007 when Gail Hamner took charge of the program. Her carefully devised plan over the year includes a series of reading/discussion (miniseries) on a range of important topics that she changes from semester to semester so that our students have an ongoing and wide-ranging series of discussion.

Topics have included:

- A three sessions on consecutive Mondays on the complex issue of plagiarism
- Session on handling disabilities in the classroom
- Session—really brilliant—on the classroom as an embodied experience –using *affect theory* to understand bodily dynamic lead by two advanced students.
- A multi-session series on aspects of publishing including “ Publishing Pedagogies for the Doctorate and Beyond”
- Session on Teaching Large Classes
- Session on the Issue of mental health

She selects topics based on student input—the topics are always deeply embedded in the larger world of academics. For example, in a recent email—some of the current and future topic suggested with her explications:

- Constructing classroom space: What is the relationship between the goals of a syllabus, the physical space of the classroom, and the embodied subjects within it?
- Marketing the Humanities: What are successful marketing strategies for our classes? What are the benefits and criticisms of “marketing” the humanities?
- Service Learning/Community Service and the Humanities: What is service learning? Why is it so popular now? How can it be incorporated successfully into our courses? What are the benefits and criticisms of these practices?
- The Digital Humanities: What are they? Why are they spoken of so much? How can we respond to or use them effectively?

In addition to these miniseries, our FPP program always includes sessions on:

- Syllabus review for those teaching their 320 courses attended by all graduate student about to teach and those with recent experience
- Review of CV for those entering the job market attended by faculty
- Practice sessions for those about to present at regional or national conference again attended by faculty and fellow grad students
- Finally the very successful “cake and wine” events for general sharing of issues.

**Document 2: Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work** *(adapted from the final report prepared by James Watts, department chair)*

Patricia O’Connell Killen and Tom Pearson filed an insightful Consultant’s Report to our two-day forum, September 16–17, 201, with ten alumni, who had earned their degrees between 2006 and 2010 and were teaching full-time at the college. Our grant proposal had formulated three key questions to pose to the alumni participants in the consultation:

1. In what ways did we prepare you (the alumni) well, poorly, or not at all for the teaching situations you have encountered?
2. To what degree did our graduate curriculum prepare you well or poorly for the teaching assignments that you have received?
3. Have developments in the field of religion and/or the institutional context of religious studies changed how we should prepare current and future students for teaching?

In addition to the Killen–Pearson report, we also employed one of our graduate students to take careful notes of the conference.

**Core discoveries**

Our alumni were generally quite positive about the preparation for teaching that they received in the SU Religion Department. They confirmed what we have long suspected, that our interdisciplinary graduate curriculum that requires students to work across and outside their primary sub-fields produces adept and versatile undergraduate teachers. They credited that flexibility to their success in finding full-time positions and in fitting into the faculties of liberal arts colleges.

The most surprising outcome was the unanimous emphasis that the alumni placed on Teaching Assistantships as the most important training for teaching. The department’s and graduate school’s efforts to provide extra-curricular professionalization training (the Future Professoriate Program) also received praise, but our graduates all agreed that the TA experience was most valuable. This outcome will influence the department’s TA assignments and the value in places on the TA experience in the professionalization and socialization of its PhD students.

**Implications for Syracuse Religion graduate program:**

The graduate alumni pedagogy conference emphasized most the need to involve PhD students more in the department’s undergraduate programs (majors and minors in Religion and in Religion & Society): as teaching assistants and teachers, but as promoters and developers of our undergraduate majors as well. Our alumni called for more mentoring and feedback about their performance in TA and teaching assignments, and more socialization into the tasks of teaching and doing service in undergraduate colleges. Therefore, one major implication for the graduate program is the need to develop tighter involvement with the undergraduate program, treating them as complementary rather than distinct aspects of the department’s efforts.

We found validation from our alumni for the department’s integrated and interdisciplinary graduate curriculum and do not see a need to change its basic form. Their emphasis fell rather on needing to involve graduate students more in the undergraduate programs.

At the request of the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, George Langford, the graduate committee of the Religion Department developed a list of action items from the results of the Wabash Graduate Alumni Pedagogy Conference. We responded to the suggestions in writing to the dean, who had read the report with care—commenting on those items which we had already improved and leaving many as the agenda items for serious discussion among the faculty.

1. Make the structure of the Future Professoriate Program (FPP) clearer to both students and faculty.  
*FPP program has become better organized and publicized by Gail Hamner since 2007. Many of our alums' experience dated prior to this reorganization. However we do intend to more clearly chart the program for our current student*
2. Invite students into deeper, more sustained reflection on the composition of their career  
*We have changed important elements of the comprehensive examinations. As part of the design of their exams, we now ask that the each student include a paragraph describing how the exams relate to each other as a whole and relate to their future self-understanding and self-description as a scholar and teacher.*
3. Get graduate students involved in strengthening undergraduate program  
*In 2009 we created a position "Undergraduate Liaison"—graduate student serving on undergraduate committee and organizing student events and publicity about courses and majors.*
4. Faculty conversation about undergraduate teaching and graduate student formation.
5. Pedagogy training through TA assignments:
6. Improve pedagogy training for REL 320
7. More faculty observation of student teaching
8. Training in writing for publication
9. Emphasizing academic writing throughout the graduate program.

In response to the report and to begin a serious conversation among faculty, James Watts prepared and circulated two questionnaires on the practices of our faculty in their use of TA support and the respective experiences of those serving as TA's in our courses. He tabulated those responses. Using the main points for improvement suggested by our Wabash consultants and this new data, we held a daylong faculty retreat on January 18, 2012 just prior to the start of classes. I append the long agenda. The stated purpose of the meeting was "not for us to make decisions but rather to *become conscious of our practices* with regard to (1) mentoring and use of TAs (2) mentoring of those who teach 320 (3) and those who teach 100 level courses. And then becoming conscious of the need for mentoring our students at key points in their careers—the comps and how we use our seminars to enhance writing skills." We had a productive session with each of us understanding the diverse practices that we adopt and learning in turn ways to improve especially in structuring assignments in our graduate seminars as well as our mentoring TAS during our undergraduate teaching.

Rethinking our assignments in our graduate seminar was one of the most significant outcomes of this retreat. We began to question the use and value of the more typical "response" papers to weekly reading and began to experiment with training in the book review genre; others have asked their students to craft final paper as journal articles—we await the end of the term for results. On the pressing issue of our use/misuse/overuse of TAs in the classroom, the survey showed that most of the faculty grades at least half of all assignments themselves. Now we all are aware of the complaints our current graduate students echo from their predecessors: many of us need to clarify and explain our expectations with grading. What constitutes any letter grade still baffles TAs; concerns about consistency in grading—perhaps never soluble—remain but all of these issues are now on the table for discussion. And most important, only some of us involve our graduate students in the design of the course. Unfortunately, the DGS cannot make TA assignments until we have enrollment figures, which means that the TA-to-course match is often made *only three weeks before the start of the class*. And, the graduate students themselves do not know their own course schedules until then for a variety of legitimate reasons. On the involvement in the undergraduate program, our new coordinator of undergraduate studies has included the graduate student liaison more deeply into the discussions of the undergraduate committee but more work and discussion remains.

The most important impact of the Wabash consultation was raising awareness of issues and allowing us to engage in conversations with our alums and with ourselves about our practices. The issues and constant need for improvement are ongoing, but we are now engaged in an ongoing conversation.