

Duke Divinity School Doctor of Theology

Wabash Center Graduate Teaching Initiative Findings

Seven participant alumni, who have been teaching in a diversity of settings, returned to Duke for our Wabash gathering on March 8-9. We had four major findings from the experiences and comments offered by the alumni, as well as a wealth of additional insights and suggestions.

Major insights:

First, our alumni are teaching in much more diverse institutions than we realized, ranging from seminaries to undergraduate institutions, both small liberal arts colleges and fairly large universities. While the common denominator of these institutions is some kind of tie with the church, that tie ranges from quite tenuous to quite strong.

Second, with very few exceptions our graduates are teaching in institutions very different from Duke, and thus facing very different teaching challenges. They need intentional, reflective preparation for teaching undergraduates, for example, who are not necessarily as motivated as the M.Div. students at Duke.

Third, the majority of our graduates are teaching undergraduates, not masters students preparing for ministry. This is a shift in our understanding of the program. Positively, the strongly interdisciplinary focus of the program prepares them particularly well to teach the breadth of courses required in their faculty positions, as well as to see connections among a variety of fields. We had not anticipated such an outcome for the Th.D., and it presents both challenges and opportunities for teaching preparation.

Finally, the alumni were excited about teaching, happy in their institutions, flourishing, and extremely affirming of their experience in the Th.D. program. Of course there is room for improvement, particularly in some specific proposals for opportunities for critically reflective teaching, but overall both the interdisciplinary nature of the program and its emphasis on matters of practice have paid off in terms of nuanced, reflective teaching practices among our graduates.

Ideas and suggestions:

We found that the ethos and sensibilities of the program are amenable to changes within its existing structure that can increase the opportunities for teaching preparation among our current students.

First, the precepting responsibilities that are part of the funding package could be utilized far more intentionally, by both faculty and students, as opportunities for mentoring in pedagogy. This is a matter of encouraging faculty to be transparent

with their preceptors about the logic and structure of the syllabus, assignments, reading materials, exams and assessment. Some faculty already do this, but many do not. One concrete way move in this direction is to include mentoring doctoral student teaching in the orientation for new faculty as a way to encourage faculty to make intentional use of the mentoring opportunities provided by the preceptorial system. Meetings prior to the course, weekly meetings with preceptors throughout the class, and a final dinner and conversation assessing the course are simple and effective ways to model reflective teaching practices and involve graduate students in that process. Similarly, non-invasive observational visits to preceptorials, followed up with feedback to the preceptor, could be very helpful, as well as the opportunity for graduate students to lecture in class and receive feedback. All of this happens, but on an ad hoc basis.

Second, cultivating relationships with institutions outside of Duke, as a way of offering our students as possible adjuncts, may be fruitful. In particular, we need to find more ways for Th.D. students to teach undergrads, developing their own syllabi, teaching, grading, and so forth. Because of the structure of Duke University, and the fact that the Divinity School Doctor of Theology is not part of the School of Arts and Sciences, our students do not have the opportunities to teach undergrads within the University.

Third, we can make more intentional use of our routine colloquia, to have workshops and panels on various aspects of teaching, from assessment to developing syllabi for a variety of contexts, to statements about teaching practices for use in job applications. Again, this is something already happening, but it could be increased with intention and attention to teaching in particular.

Fourth, inviting alumni back to talk with current students would garner the attention of current students in a way that faculty panels may not, and provide invaluable insights.

Fifth, further development of genuinely co-taught courses promises to offer more mentored professional development for students.

Doctor of Theology Program Overview
Duke Divinity School

Introduction to the Program

The Doctor of Theology program at Duke Divinity School is a regular academic doctorate including two years of coursework, testing and proficiency in two modern research languages (and primary languages as needed), successful completion and oral defense of preliminary exams in the major and minor areas of study and the dissertation area, and successful completion and oral defense of the dissertation. It usually takes about five years. The Th.D. is distinctive in three ways: it is intentionally interdisciplinary, with attention to matters of practice; it encourages research at the interface of the academy and the church; it provides the opportunity to get a doctorate in areas of church ministry, such as homiletics or pastoral care. The Th.D. also, however, gives doctorates in church history, theology, New Testament, Old Testament, and so forth.

Preparation for teaching

Precepting: As a part of their funding package, all Th.D. students work as preceptors for courses in the Divinity School, for at least one course per semester, with the option of precepting for up to two courses for additional pay. Precepting for large core courses (10-12 preceptors for courses of @150 students) involves leading weekly discussion groups of about 14-15 students, in which the preceptor teaches relevant content and methodology, going over assignments, and grading all assignments. It may also involve lecturing, at the discretion of the professor. Precepting for smaller courses may involve leading class discussions, lecturing, and grading, again at the discretion of the professor. The precepting work may provide an opportunity for discussion with the professor of everything from grading to handling problems in the class, to classroom dynamics to choice of readings and assignments – but again, this is at the discretion of the professor. Some have weekly meetings with their preceptors, some have dinners and evaluation of the course at the end of the semester, some invite their preceptors to lecture and/or to have input into the final exam, and so forth, and some do not.

Colloquia: There are two to three colloquia per semester, to which Th.D. students are invited for presentations and discussion on a variety of aspects of professional development, including teaching. Thus we have had student-led discussions of various aspects of teaching, including experiences in precepting, ranging from assessment to power dynamics in the classroom. We also have on occasion had faculty presentations on the art of a good lecture. The colloquia also focus on other aspects of professional development (getting published, giving academic papers, preparing for job interviews, applying for grants, and so forth), so teaching is not the sole focus.

Co-teaching: We have inaugurated a program for co-teaching, open only to ABD students and limited to two co-taught courses in the curriculum per semester. In the past this has occasionally happened on an ad-hoc basis, but we are working on implementing a clear, public policy with appropriate remuneration for the student.

Teaching in other venues within the Divinity School and the University: Some of our students design and teach courses in the Duke Divinity School summer and weekend Course of Study programs, which is designed to provide master's level education for United Methodist church leaders; others have tutored in the Duke University tutoring program for student athletes, as well as in both the Divinity School and university writing programs. We have begun two non-residential, hybrid (intensive residential weeks plus online instruction) degree programs, and Th.D. students both precept and co-teach those, which provides an opportunity for learning pedagogical methodologies related to online education. Students with competence in Greek often have the opportunity to design and teach the introductory Greek courses in the Divinity School, both as summer intensives and throughout the academic year.

Adjunct teaching in other institutions: Some Th.D. students have found positions as part-time adjunct instructors in other colleges and universities within the Triangle, such as Meredith College, Elon College, and so forth. These positions, however, are not readily available, and often do not include the opportunity for intentional mentoring about teaching.