

Wabash GPTI Summative Conference
March 23-24, 2014

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

We are grateful for our participation in the Wabash Graduate Program Teaching Initiative. A particular need for us at this point in time has been not only the opportunity to re-evaluate pedagogical formation in our program but also to reflect on three institutional relationships. Our particular PhD program at Duke, the Graduate Program in Religion (GPR), is jointly administered between the Department of Religious Studies, which operates within the university unit known as Trinity College, and the Divinity School, a professional school within the university. At its best the “shared” nature of the GPR provides students with increased intellectual diversity and additional institutional resources. However, it also heightens the challenge of administering our program effectively and planning strategically for the future, since we must constantly negotiate between several stakeholders. The GPR operates with shared leadership: a Director of Graduate Studies and an Associate Director of Graduate Studies. These two roles alternate between the Department and the Divinity School. The other chief stakeholders are the Chair of the Department and the Dean of the Divinity School. An Executive Committee consisting of these four individuals, as well as three additional representatives of the Graduate Faculty, provides further structural oversight. The GPTI has given us an important chance to compare teaching opportunities for PhD students within the Department and the Divinity School.

Two other institutional relationships have also been in need of more careful scrutiny: 1) the relationship between the GPR and the Divinity School’s relatively new ThD program, which is also a research doctorate but managed entirely by the Divinity School, and possessing a distinctive focus on the ministries and practices of Christian communities; and 2) the relationship between the GPR and Duke’s new College Teaching Program, which is a university-wide initiative offering enhanced opportunities for pedagogical training to all PhD students regardless of field.

We held our mini-conference on October 20-21, 2013. We were encouraged to learn about the creative teaching that our graduates are presently doing, and to hear their positive appraisals of the GPR and its role in preparing them for their current work. They spoke appreciatively about the mentoring that they received in our program and expressed a surprisingly high level of satisfaction with their present teaching positions. However, we were also challenged to hear them describe a considerable gap between the expectations they once had regarding the profession of teaching and the reality they said they had since discovered.

Teaching Preparation in Our Doctoral Program

In our program all doctoral students have opportunities to teach. During their first year, in order to provide them with adequate time for transition, students instead serve as research assistants to various faculty members. But beginning in the second year each doctoral student,

whenever possible, is placed as a teaching assistant responsible for one section of students within a course anchored by a faculty instructor. The role of the teaching assistant can vary widely, depending on the nature of the course and the pedagogy of the faculty instructor. Because our PhD program is jointly administered by a religious studies department and a divinity school, students in the program may either assist with the teaching of undergraduates (in courses offered within the Department of Religious Studies) or with the teaching of master's degree students (in the Divinity School). Because the Divinity School enrolls a greater number of students, there are more opportunities for PhD students to teach in traditionally Christian disciplines like biblical studies, church history and theology. Since these courses are geared toward the preparation of students for professional Christian service, they sometimes feature a more explicit confessional dimension. For this reason PhD students are permitted to elect whether they are open to teaching within the divinity setting or not. For PhD students who elect to do so, teaching divinity students can helpfully add breadth to their teaching experience. Similarly, PhD students who teach within the Department of Religious Studies gain an excellent opportunity to develop skills particularly suited for undergraduate students.

An ad hoc committee was formed several years ago within the Divinity School to examine its use of teaching assistants or "preceptors." It was determined that there were two basic modes of preceptor use by faculty, one that was more extensive and one that was less so. In the extensive mode preceptors would characteristically "run" the course and do all the grading themselves, while the faculty instructor would largely limit his or her course involvement to lecturing. In the less extensive mode preceptors would lead small group discussions and contribute to the process of grading, but the faculty instructor provided discussion goals and strategies for the small group meetings and remained at the center of the grading process. The committee decided to allow this diversity of usage to continue, but also to acknowledge the two basic modes it had identified and develop criteria that would apply to both modes. Faculty were encouraged to take seriously their responsibility to mentor graduate students and contribute substantively to their pedagogical formation rather than using graduate students as if they were merely cheap support staff. Many faculty members were already devoting considerable time to teaching PhD students how to design a course, how to grade, how to handle conflict in the classroom, and how to lead discussions. Several faculty members who taught large lecture courses also invited PhD students to present a lecture. Faculty members would provide feedback after such a lecture and sometimes observed graduate students leading the discussion in their precept groups. At this time the Divinity School implemented a day-long seminar devoted to pedagogy, which was required for all PhD students who wished to serve as preceptors. The standard course evaluation form for divinity students was expanded to include questions about the PhD students serving as preceptors. Those course evaluations are available for review by the PhD students themselves after the conclusion of the semester.

The Department of Religious Studies has not conducted a similar self-study, but it appears to possess the same basic range of interaction between faculty instructors and students. One current structural challenge for the GPR arises from the fact that there are fewer department faculty members and fewer religious studies courses on offer in a given semester (compared with Divinity), and so sometimes it is more difficult to place PhD students as teaching assistants in fields like East Asian, Islamic and Jewish studies. Also, course sizes tend to be smaller, which means that teaching assistants in religious studies courses will not always receive an opportunity to lead their own discussion sections or be exposed to some of the pedagogical issues that emerge in a large lecture class. The Department of Religious Studies does not sponsor a seminar

on teaching for PhD students and undergraduate course evaluations do not always invite comments about teaching assistants. Both of these things would be good to implement and recommendations to that effect can be found in our summary of findings. However, the Department of Religious Studies does have a more regularized approach to providing PhD students with an opportunity to teach their own undergraduate courses. Many students have done so over the years, and this experience has given them a chance to hone their pedagogical skills with a heightened level of responsibility. Normally, such opportunities in the Divinity School are limited to those PhD students who teach introductory biblical languages.

PhD students typically teach or precept for one course during each semester of years 2-5 in the program. Sometimes, particularly in Divinity, PhD students have elected to be responsible for two or even three precept groups (usually within the framework of the same large course, but occasionally in two different courses). Doing so was a means of gaining further teaching experience and additional funding. But we have always recommended only a single section or precept group per student, and recently the Graduate School has insisted more strongly on this point.

Thanks to an initial Wabash grant awarded more than ten years ago, our graduate program hosts an in-house lunchtime series of discussions devoted to pedagogical concerns. The series is student-initiated and led, and explores general teaching topics such as “how to lead a seminar” and “how to design a syllabus” and “how to lecture even if you don’t feel prepared,” etc.—as well as topics more specific to the teaching of religion and theology, such as “teaching an introduction to religion” or “teaching religion at a public university.” Two paid student coordinators determine the topics and invite various faculty members from Duke and other area colleges and universities to participate.

In addition, Duke has over the last few years developed a comprehensive college teaching program open to all PhD students across the university. This program features classes on teaching and course design, and it offers doctoral students formal opportunities for observed classroom teaching, faculty mentoring, improved implementation of teaching technology and enhanced professional development (e.g., preparing a CV, assembling a teaching portfolio, negotiating mock job interviews). We have been successful to a degree in integrating the two programs. If students attend eight of our in-house lunch-time sessions and work one-on-one with a faculty member in divinity or religion (e.g., to develop a teaching portfolio, design an introductory syllabus or craft a teaching statement), they receive credit on their transcripts for a seminar in the teaching of religion. This course then also counts toward the number of courses that students are required to take in order to earn the certificate in college teaching available through the university teaching program.

Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work

We believe that good things are happening in our program with regard to pedagogical formation, but that they also tend to be unstructured and informal. To the extent that we could further regularize and formalize our pedagogical training, it would bring additional benefits to our students and strengthen our program.

In light of our findings from the mini-conference we will recommend that the Department of Religious Studies initiate a teaching event for PhD students who will be serving as teaching assistants for undergraduate courses offered by the Department. We will also recommend that the Department work with the university to ensure that undergraduate course evaluations include a

section asking for comments about the effectiveness of teaching assistants, and that such comments be available for review by the PhD students serving in that role. A longer-range structural goal for our program is to increase opportunities for teaching assistants in courses focusing on non-Christian religions.

For the GPR as a whole we will recommend the development of a more frequent and more consistent practice of observed classroom teaching for teaching assistants and preceptors. We would also like to include a description of teaching opportunities and an array of pedagogical resources as part of an upcoming redesign of the GPR website. This kind of explicit attention to teaching roles and opportunities might also assist us in further clarifying for our students the relationship between the Department and the Divinity School, as well as the relationship between the GPR and the ThD program. While we are pleased with the integration we have achieved thus far with our in-house teaching initiative and the university college teaching program, we will seek out further opportunities for organizational cooperation and synergy.

For the next 2-3 years we will also seek funding to invite a recent GPR graduate to return each year and present a talk to our current students about the realities of college-level teaching. This idea was suggested by the most frequent comment made by participants at our fall mini-conference: "if only I had known what it would really be like." Many of our participants reported feeling challenged to transition from Duke's academic culture into the academic culture of their present institutions. For some this change had to do with moving from a research-oriented university to colleges and universities in which research was no longer considered a primary goal. Other participants expressed a sense of being unprepared for various professional aspects of institutional citizenship that they encountered when they began to teach full-time as a member of a faculty. We believe that a recent graduate of our program is most likely better equipped to alert current students to these kinds of issues than we are, and to do so in a pertinent and compelling manner.