

Wabash Summative Meeting  
March 23-25, 2014  
Dr. Nili Fox Director, School of Graduate Studies  
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

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

Prior to the Teaching Initiative Workshop our doctoral program teaching preparation was not structured as a formal part of the curriculum. Rather, opportunities for doctoral students to participate in teacher training and related activities varied from year to year. For example, over the past decade a variety of 1-2 hour seminars were offered by our faculty and alumni on the following topics:

- Teaching essentials for undergraduate courses
- Creating syllabi for introductory Bible courses
- Techniques for interviewing for academic positions
- Presenting academic papers at conferences and readying manuscripts for publication

In addition, each academic year four teaching positions consisting of a one-semester course were offered to advanced qualified doctoral students. These courses focus on language skills, primarily Biblical Hebrew and Rabbinic Hebrew. Occasionally an exceptional graduate student teaches a core text course in the Rabbinical or Graduate school.

These are excellent opportunities for our best doctoral students but they tend to ignore those students who probably require the most training, although academic acumen is certainly not a direct indicator of a successful classroom instructor. Other teaching opportunities arise from time to time at neighboring institutions such as the University of Cincinnati, Xavier University, and Wright State University. The latter are all undergraduate courses and present valuable teaching experience for our students. Unfortunately these opportunities are not available on a regular basis and are not coordinated with our program. In addition, it seems that only a select number of students actually pursue these openings.

One weakness in the program is that the Graduate School did not institute a supervisory component for doctoral students in teaching positions. While HUC courses taught by students are occasionally observed by faculty, the process has not been regularized. Observations were rarely recorded and it is unknown what type of feedback, if any, the students/instructors received. Essentially, instructors were rehired based on positive student evaluations of their

courses. Apparently, non-HUC courses rarely if ever included observations by faculty or administrators from those institutions. It seems that supervision and guidance were left to the discretion of individual HUC faculty or resulted from requests by individual students. Often students have relied on more experienced peers to guide them.

In sum, the Graduate School has not previously instituted a formal program or a specific requirement for doctoral students in the area of teacher training. While some students have clearly profited from existing opportunities others have not.

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## **Document 2: Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Workshop**

The Teaching Initiative Workshop (August 2013) brought together 10 HUC alumni who are currently teaching at a variety of institutions across the US. These include Christian colleges and seminaries as well as secular universities. Reconnecting with our alumni was an instructive experience for HUC faculty, administrators, and students. The alumni were open in discussing both positive and negative experiences as they relate to strengths and weaknesses of the academic and teacher training programs for HUC doctoral students.

The need for teacher preparation embedded in the work of scholarly formation was clearly articulated. In other words, emphasis on academic learning should go hand in hand with teacher formation. Building these skills should begin in courses students take as part of their program by means of modeling by instructors. It was somewhat surprising to me and my colleagues that students experienced courses where basics such as syllabi, articulation of course goals and expectations, and assessment feedback were unavailable. Alumni did stress that these realities applied only to certain faculty and that these individuals have since retired. Still, their observations raise awareness and reinforce faculty responsibilities vis à vis students. Modeling teacher effectiveness is a critical first step in teacher training of students.

Furthermore, alumni noted that there were too few opportunities to teach on the HUC campus, and no opportunity to teach undergraduates (HUC does not offer any undergraduate program). These alums mostly gained teaching experiences at neighboring institutions in the greater Cincinnati area. They stressed the need for the Graduate School to provide a more structured program even if actual course instruction was limited. This can be accomplished through class presentations, teaching assistantships, grading experience, and guest lecturing. Again it was noted that some faculty do incorporate some of these teaching opportunities in the classroom. Alumni also suggested that a mentorship program with HUC Ph.D. alums, similar to one that exists for rabbinical students, would be extremely valuable for graduate students.

It was clear from the workshop that the Graduate School needed to formalize its teacher training as an integral component of the doctoral program. At the same time, it would be necessary to impress upon its faculty to actively participate in such an initiative in every way possible. Such an endeavor can only succeed in a cooperative environment. Further, shifting the

program from one which spared no experience on establishing students' scholarly ability to one which creates educators with full academic competency requires a culture shift.

Following the Wabash workshop and receipt of the consultant's report, the Graduate Executive Committee (composed of 7-8 HUC faculty and 2 student representatives from the Graduate Student Association) discussed these findings. Plans are in progress to initiate various changes for the coming year; some are already underway.

**Pedagogy courses for Ph.D. students:**

HUC is in a consortium relationship with the University of Cincinnati (UC). As such, HUC students can enroll in UC courses free of charge. Thus, the UC certificate program in teacher training, "Preparing Future Faculty," which is specifically designed for Ph.D. students, is open to HUC students. The program consists of two education courses and various workshops. This semester one of our Ph.D. students is enrolled in the course, "Teaching Effectiveness." At present we are experimenting with this option. In the future, the UC courses may become requirements. An alternative may involve HUC education professors who currently offer pedagogy courses for rabbinical students tailoring a program to our doctoral students' specific needs.

**Supervision of student instructors:**

We are now in the process of instituting observations and guidance as a requirement. Faculty will be asked to observe classes taught by graduate students at least twice a semester. The observations will be written up and followed by meetings with said students for the purpose of offering feedback relating to pedagogy techniques or any supportive measure. Outside institutions which employ our students will be contacted to negotiate a similar structure. The latter may prove to be a challenge.

**Other teacher training opportunities:**

One of our challenges is how to best serve students who are not qualified for one reason or another to teach the HUC courses offered to grad student instructors. These include foreign students who are not proficient in English, especially those lacking good oral skills. An option we discussed is providing TA opportunities for them. Thereby, they can assist a professor in various ways in courses in their subject area. This teaching assistantship would include the opportunity to teach one or more class sessions with the advantage of supervision by the course instructor. HUC faculty will also be encouraged to assign class presentations to grad students in their courses (several professors already do so on a regular basis).

**Biannual workshops:**

We are continuing to offer workshops for training graduate students in pedagogy skills as well as other skills required in an academic setting (i.e. writing papers for presentations). These will be regularized so that at least two workshops are offered each year. Our local alumni have been especially helpful in this regard.

**Alumni mentors:**

The Graduate School publishes a biannual newsletter which is sent to students, faculty, alumni, HUC board members, and other friends of HUC. The Spring 2014 edition contains an article by the vice-president of the Graduate Alumni Association in which he outlines a vision for a mentorship program. He calls for alumni to volunteer as mentors, each to be matched with one graduate student. These Ph.D. alums must be actively engaged in teaching at an academic institution. Their responsibilities can include the following:

- Support to students on navigating the graduate program
- Counsel on navigating the academy, professional societies, and adjunct teaching
- Offer insight on the job application process
- Serve as a sounding-board for research
- Advise on pedagogy, including syllabus design and classroom instruction
- Assist in the cultivation of professional contacts

At present this is formulated as a pilot program with the hope of expansion in the near future.

**Pre-conference mini-seminars:**

In collaboration with our graduate students, we have instituted a monthly mini seminar where students have the opportunity to present papers they are preparing for an academic conference. It seems that many students are insecure in their ability to present at conferences. This relates to a lack of effective presentation skills as much as fear that their thesis or research will be challenged. The mini seminars will be attended by faculty as well as students who will offer constructive critique in what is promised to be a safe lunch setting.

We are most grateful to the Wabash Center for offering the Graduate Teaching Initiative Workshop. The event on our campus this past August was enlightening and served as an impetus for the Graduate School to improve our program offerings to better serve our students. The Wabash staff has been immensely helpful in guiding the project. Paul Myhre and consultant Willie Jennings skillfully conducted sessions with our alumni and in a matter of days were able to accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of our graduate programs. We have taken their evaluations and suggestions seriously and are planning accordingly.

