

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative Summative Meeting  
**The University of Chicago Divinity School:**  
**Summary of Findings from GPTI**

The Wabash Center's Graduate Program Teaching Initiative (GPTI) grant came at a pivotal moment for us. Since 2008, students at the Divinity School have been part of the university-wide Graduate Aid Initiative (GAI), which requires them to get substantial teaching experience. As a part of that, in fall 2010, Dean Mitchell convened a Task Force on Teaching in the Divinity School to re-evaluate the way we prepare our students to teach, and reconfigure, coordinate and systematize the programming we offer to help them become accomplished and thoughtful educators by the time they graduate. A large part of that effort is our development of the Craft of Teaching program, described in the accompanying document. It should be noted that the alumni/ae who took part in our consultation did not participate in the Craft of Teaching, which was inaugurated in 2012. However, the findings from the consultation have informed the creation of that program and will continue to help us improve it.

The GPTI helped us to gather data that allowed us to see where our time and resources are most valuable, and what we needed to change or add in order to effectively train our students. What we learned during our meeting with the alumni/ae and the facilitators from the Wabash Center (Eugene Gallagher and Nadine Pence) will have an immediate and formative effect on the kinds of programming we develop.

Review of Findings

We expected to discover from our alumni/ae that the context where they taught was the crucial factor that determined what their experience of teaching would be like, and what challenges they would face, and this indeed was the case. We chose our alumni with this in mind, deliberately selecting professors from large state schools, liberal arts colleges, and seminaries.

Class emerged as a more important factor that we expected. By "class" we refer both to the financial health and prominence of the institution (an expensive private college versus a struggling seminary; a well-funded, prominent state school versus an underfunded third-tier public institution), and to the student body itself. Student expectations of their professors, and professorial opportunity and support are directly affected by where alumni/ae teach and whom they teach. The wealth and prestige of the institution where they taught did not necessarily correlate directly with their happiness in their academic positions and satisfaction with their teaching. Faculty who taught at institutions with more non-traditional students faced additional challenges, but seemed to report a greater feeling of self-worth and a sense of purpose in their work.

Area of disciplinary focus proved to be somewhat less of a factor than we expected. We learned that area of study mattered most in the way it connected to either the ethnicity of the faculty or the diversity of the student body --- a Latina faculty member teaching about Latin American religion to a predominantly white student body, for instance, or a professor whose students were largely first-generation immigrants. The challenge to get students reading, thinking, and talking about religion seems comparable across disciplines. With that in mind, it was striking (though not surprising) how many

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alumni/ae spoke of the challenges of getting a silent room of students to talk, and they brainstormed usefully about different techniques they have used.

The academic rigor of their graduate programs was the most significant contribution of the Divinity School to their teaching success. The rigor of their studies gave them the confidence to occupy their current positions and teach with authority, even in subjects and areas far from their own discipline. The methodologies they learned (JZ Smith and close reading were mentioned) helped them develop skills they could use in teaching. Many used particular faculty members, either through stories they told about them, work of theirs read in class, or as visitors, as a way to model academic practice and the possibility of an academic career to their students. These factors seemed more important than the specific content they learned while at the Divinity School, e.g., no one spoke of their coursework or qualifying exams specifically preparing (or failing to prepare) them for teaching the content they were now responsible for.

They had to “unlearn” from their University of Chicago training not to focus the whole of their teaching around conversation about a text. Students were less invested in doing the readings and were harder to coax into discussion than they expected. Some alumni/ae talked of teaching as a physical process, and of learning how to move in the classroom. Others spoke of using other media to teach with, and then returning to the text. Related to this was the importance of learning about how different kinds of technologies could assist with creative teaching strategies.

Alumnae spoke of the challenges of being a woman in front of the classroom, and in the office.

Substantial discussion surrounded the challenges of teaching students with disabilities, both mental and physical. Resources for helping faculty manage students with special needs vary widely across institutions. What faculty needed most was information about these students that would help them respond appropriately to their needs.

We learned that teaching context is the key factor in the teaching experience of our alumni/ae, and this will have to remain a central part of the Craft of Teaching program as we go forward.

Our alumni/ae face challenges beyond getting their next article out and constructing a good syllabus. We need to educate our students about the full range of professional duties they will need to handle once they graduate which, in addition to research/publication and teaching, include but are not limited to: promoting the study of religion among students and colleagues, advising students with a wide array of challenges, handling parents in an appropriate manner, balancing the time demands of the different aspects of their careers, and dealing with departmental and university/college politics.

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative Summative Meeting  
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The Craft of Teaching in the Academic Study of Religion**

**I. Program Description:** The Craft of Teaching in the Academic Study of Religion (CoT) is the Divinity School's program of pedagogical development for its graduate students. Begun in 2012, the CoT coordinates an integrated series of workshops, panel discussions, and practica as the locus of pedagogical reflection and practice. We offer some two dozen programming events each year, led by Divinity School faculty, alums, experienced graduate student teachers, and special invited guests. In our inaugural year (2012-13), over 120 graduate students participated in 22 workshops facilitated by 15 faculty and 19 alums. The CoT is overseen by a Program Coordinator who reports to the Divinity School Task Force on Teaching, which is composed of the Dean, the Dean of Students, and two faculty members, including the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

**II. Structure:** Our varied program offerings are anchored by two recurring elements. The Dean's Quarterly Craft of Teaching Seminar is the flagship series of the program. Each quarter the Dean invites an alum or another accomplished educator to lead a seminar in which they discuss their approach to course design in relation both to a specific course they have taught and to the institutional context in which they teach. A primary goal for the Dean's seminar is to expose graduate students to the diverse institutional contexts in which religion is taught in higher education. The second recurring element is the Annual Syllabus Workshop led by the Director of Undergraduate Studies. In this annual three-hour program participants draft course titles and descriptions that are peer-reviewed during the workshop.

In addition to these two recurring elements, the majority of CoT programming consists of topical workshops developed either by the Program Coordinator in consultation with the Task Force on Teaching or by the Divinity School's student-faculty Workshops and Area Clubs, which in consultation with the Program Coordinator devote one session per year to pedagogy. Topics for these programs vary in response to the needs and interests of conveners and participants, resulting in a wide variety of programs. By way of illustration, recent topics have included: "Approaches to the Introductory Course in Religious Studies"; "Beyond Content: What does it Mean to Think Like a Medievalist?"; "Rethinking 'Dead' Language Instruction: Ancient Languages and Modern Language Pedagogies"; "The Art of Lecturing"; and "Contemplative Pedagogy". We also recently launched a microteaching workshop in which graduate students teach a short lesson plan (which is video-recorded for immediate reviewing) and receive detailed feedback from two staff facilitators and their peers.

For our institution, this year-round, workshop-based model of teacher training offers many advantages:

- Sustains a focus on pedagogy throughout the academic year
- Builds on our unique institutional culture, which values workshop-style interaction between faculty and students
- Provides diverse programming that is especially responsive to student and faculty interests

Graduate Program Teaching Initiative Summative Meeting

**The University of Chicago Divinity School:**

**The Craft of Teaching in the Academic Study of Religion**

- Brings students into contact with many different educators, both faculty and alums, representing many different institutional contexts and diverse perspectives on teaching
- Gives students the flexibility to take advantage of the available programming at their own pace, recognizing that student interest in pedagogy varies with the stimuli of teaching commitments, the demands of coursework or exams, and proximity to the job market.

**III. The Certificate in the Craft of Teaching:** Doctoral students who participate in the program are eligible to receive the Divinity School's Certificate in the Craft of Teaching in the Academic Study of Religion, serving as evidence of their interest in and preparedness for teaching in the area of religion. The requirements for CoT certification include (to be completed within a five year period):

- Participation in three Dean's Quarterly Craft of Teaching Seminars
- Participation in one Divinity School Syllabus Workshop
- Participation in at least seven additional CoT programs of students' choosing.
- Participation in the two-day, university-wide Workshop on Teaching in the College

**IV. Relationship with the University's Center for Teaching Excellence:** The Divinity School's CoT maintains a close relationship with the University's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) and encourages Divinity students to participate in the CTE's services and certification program. Successful completion of the CoT fulfills the departmental pedagogy requirement for the CTE's teaching certificate. Moreover, as part of the CoT we require attendance at the CTE's annual Workshop on Teaching in the College, which serves as an access point for Divinity students to the programs offered by the CTE.

**V. Website and Communication:** The CoT maintains a website that contains full program information, updated schedules, teaching resources, and a multimedia archive of streaming video and downloadable podcasts of past CoT events. The CoT also hosts a public Facebook page and a closed Facebook discussion group; the latter is intended to facilitate pedagogy discussion among current graduate students and alums.

**VI. Divinity School Prize for Excellence in Teaching:** Each year the Divinity School offers one or two teaching prizes (with cash awards) determined on the basis of submitted teaching portfolios. The prizes not only recognize and encourage outstanding commitments to teaching among the students in the Divinity School but also incentivize the creation of teaching dossiers.

**VII. Program Assessment:** In addition to occasional feedback on individual offerings, the CoT is assessed annually by means of a student survey. The Program Coordinator also meets with workshop and area club coordinators to gather feedback about the program. Exit surveys and surveys of alums of the program at 3 or 5 year intervals are also planned.