Whom Will Your Alumni/ae be Teaching?
From the Wabash Graduate Program Teaching Initiative

- Graduates of very strong institutions are teaching in a wide variety of contexts from junior colleges or their equivalents through undergraduate institutions to graduate schools and seminaries.

- Virtually all beginning teachers report that they were surprised by multiple aspects of their new teaching contexts, especially when they differed from their own undergraduate and graduate experience.
Some Maxims, I

• **All teaching is local**
  – The teaching context is shaped by expectations and realities specific to the course, curriculum, student body (or segment thereof), department, institution, region, etc.

• **They are not us**
  – Especially at the introductory and intermediate very comparatively few undergraduate students intend to pursue graduate work in the study of religion, let alone in our specific fields; they have different interests, expectations, and commitments than we may have had as undergraduates
Some Maxims, II

• **Teaching is a social *and* intellectual process**
  – It involves the constant interaction of teacher, students, and material in every permutation of relationship: students with each other, students with the material, teacher with students, etc.

• **Teaching as the transmission of knowledge has come under attack**
  – The ease and speed of information retrieval via the web poses a simple challenge to teachers: what happens in the classroom that can’t happen anywhere else?
Some Maxims, III

• Neither one’s undergraduate nor graduate experience is a wholly reliable guide for new contexts
  – A glance at the Carnegie classifications, shows the diversity of institutional settings (see http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/summary/)
  – There is a rise in professional education and for-profit schools
  – There is a rise in on-line and hybrid courses even within institutions that have a largely “traditional” profile
The Challenge to (New) Teachers

• Course design and execution in a new environment. (for a full taxonomy of “situational” factors shaping course design see L. Dee Fink, Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 69)
Factors to Consider, I: Individual

- What can you find out about the student body in general? Among the salient factors might be religious disposition (see the Walvoord study), age, socio-economic background, race, gender, etc.
- Are there identifiable patterns in the enrollments of courses in your department (e.g. from certain majors)?
- What can you find out about the current “generation” of college students?
- They are very unlikely, as a whole, to be “in your image;” so how can you get a sense of audience?
Tentative Suggestions, I

• Cultivate an anthropological curiosity about your students
  – Give them short in-class surveys
  – Require one office visit for each student
  – Have lunch with them on some schedule
  – Read the student newspaper and other publications
  – Get to class early and chat them up
  – Learn from local institutional research
Factors to Consider, II: Departmental

- Does the department/program have a clear sense of its own mission, either explicitly or implicitly?
- Does the department primarily conceive of itself as designing its curriculum for majors and minors or for the general student population?
- How many student enrollments does the department have every academic year?
- How many majors and minors does the department have in each graduating class, on average?
- How are teaching responsibilities (e.g. at various levels from introductory to advances, for seminars, etc) allotted in the department?
- Who, then, are you going to be teaching?
Tentative Suggestions, II

• Candidates should read the departmental website and follow its links
• Ask questions about enrollment patterns (including numbers in introductory courses, majors per class, etc.) in interviews
• Find out whether there are requirements or expectations for “non-traditional” teaching (what, where, and when)
Factors to Consider, III: Institutional

- What is the health of the institution (endowment per student; number of applications, admit rate, etc.)
- What is the current strategic plan?
- What is the institutional mission statement?
- What is the departmental mission statement?
- Is there a general education program, either in the form of a core curriculum, distribution requirements, or something else?
Tentative Suggestions, III

• The big question: **How does what you want to accomplish as a teacher, with your specific portfolio of courses, align, or not, with those various expressions of institutional mission and the array of constraints and possibilities that the “institutional profile” suggests?**

• How does what you know and are prepared to do map onto what they are likely to ask you to do?
Factors to Consider, IV: National/Global

• Are there trends in higher education that are indirectly or directly shaping your teaching environment, such as
  – more contingent and fewer tenure-track faculty,
  – teaching online and in hybrid forms
  – emphasis on training for jobs;
  – general student preparedness for college,
  – rising number of diagnosed learning disabilities
  – concerns about cost and accessibility,
  – global, national, or local events that call for the analytical expertise of the study of religion, etc.)
Tentative Suggestions, IV

• How can you efficiently keep aware of such trends (while preparing for class, keeping up a research agenda, and having a life)?
Challenges for Graduate Programs

• While maintaining their focus on training excellent scholars
  – How to promote awareness of importance of context for shaping teaching and a professional career?
  – How to prepare graduating students to succeed as scholar-teachers in multiple contexts?
Responses from Graduate Programs

• Are local, and particular to the program, its faculty, and students
• Are necessarily subsidiary to training research scholars
• Can be essential to graduates’ ability to “hit the ground running”
• Can capitalize on the experiences of recent graduates who are now teaching