

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, socioeconomic 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