

## **Teaching Preparation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

### Teaching Opportunities:

Students in our program get a lot of teaching experience, as their funding is largely dependent on their willingness to serve as teaching assistants and, after they have completed their doctoral qualifying exams, as teaching fellows. (TAs lead discussion sections and/or serve as graders for faculty-taught lecture courses; TFs develop and teach their own courses under faculty supervision.) Most students in the program serve as TAs from their first semester in the program and can expect to teach in one or the other capacity for a full 10 semesters. In addition to this, advanced students can apply to teach summer school courses and/or to teach online courses through the continuing education center. Students who do not complete their dissertations within the 5 years of funding that the department guarantees typically support themselves in this way, and by adjunct teaching at other area institutions. By the time they receive their PhDs, most of our students have had multiple opportunities to teach independently, both online and in traditional classroom formats.

### Preparation and Supervision:

Entering first year students are required to attend a day-long teacher training organized by the Graduate School before they are allowed to enter a classroom. This training focuses more on University rules and resources (FERPA regulations, etc.) than on the actual teaching skills needed to run a class. For this reason, the department devotes the full afternoon of our Departmental Orientation to a training session that focuses on preparing students to serve as TAs and issues related to teaching Religious Studies at a public university in the Southeast.

Faculty with TAs meet with their TAs weekly to discuss the course, recitation sections and other issues related to section instruction, management, or assessment. Faculty are also expected to observe each of their TAs leading a recitation at least once during the semester and to give the TA written and/or oral feedback.

At the point that students pass their doctoral qualifying exams (usually in their third or fourth year), they become eligible to teach independently (as departmental TFs, summer school instructors, or through Carolina Courses Online). TFs are supervised by their advisors and/or the faculty member who most often teaches the course they have been assigned.

### Teaching Instruction and Feedback

Students in the department have access to a number of different types of instruction and support while developing their teaching skills.

- **Gateway Courses:** Different fields of specialization within the Department regularly offer graduate seminars designed especially to introduce important themes and methodologies relevant to the field. These courses also have an explicit pedagogical focus, to prepare students to teach in that field. Such courses are designated as “Gateway Courses.” The Department requires that all students take 2 Gateways, one in their own subfield and one in a different subfield, before they can sit for their doctoral exams.
- **Graduate Student Teaching Committee:** For the last several years, our graduate students have run a self-organized teaching committee that sponsors monthly seminars on topics related to teaching and also offers peer supervision and feedback. The teaching committee offers an annual student teaching prize which carries a small stipend.
- **Peck Prize for Teaching Excellence:** The Department offers an annual prize for teaching excellence that is awarded by the Graduate Studies Committee. (This is independent from the one awarded by the student committee, although both are funded by the Department).
- **The Center for Teaching Excellence** has been an excellent resource for our students over the years. The Center regularly offers graduate student workshops on developing syllabi, assessment, and specific instructional skills and techniques that students take advantage of according to interest. Students who are deemed to need to work on their teaching skills based on faculty observation and/or student evaluations are encouraged to work with the staff there.

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Department of Religious Studies  
Wabash Teaching Initiative Follow-Up Document**

**Wabash Conference Report: Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work**

The Teaching Initiative identified several departmental strengths that we will continue to cultivate and build on.

- There is a strong culture of teaching throughout the department. The ethos that teaching matters is present among the faculty and is reflected in graduate students who model their advisors' values and benefit from faculty mentoring regarding teaching, as well as faculty concern for students' research progress.
- As part of this culture, students mentor each other formally and informally. They bring teaching challenges to the graduate lounge, where they share suggestions and techniques with one another.
- The development of teaching skills is widely seen as part of the academic professionalization process, and students are encouraged to take pride in their teaching, and to understand and value it as a central part of academic life.
- The Department attends to teaching potential as early as the admissions process, noting applicants who indicate the desire and capacity to become educators as well to develop as specialists.
- Students in the program have many opportunities to teach in various settings, within and beyond their fields of specialization.

The Teaching Initiative identified areas that we will target for consideration and/or improvement.

- The graduates encouraged a more systematic form of engagement around their teaching. Some graduates felt they received great feedback from their mentors, while others wished for more consistent feedback.
- The graduates made it clear that the department should tighten our relationship with the Center for Teaching and Learning and be more proactive in encouraging students to take advantage of their workshops. Not all of the graduates were aware that the Center offers workshops on things like assessment, syllabi development, and leading difficult discussions, and these students indicated that they would have benefitted from more instruction in these areas while in the program.
- Many graduates indicated that they found it challenging to move into new institutional contexts when they took jobs elsewhere, where the norms and expectations were different than at UNC. They asked for help learning to read (and adjust to) different culture and teaching environments.

- The graduates also asked for more assistance in the transition from graduate school to fulltime teaching, particularly as they sought tenure-track positions that better matched their interests and vocational goals.
- The evaluation asked us to consider how the institution values the kind of mentoring that takes times and energy on the part of some faculty member, and how to continue to provide opportunities for self-reflective faculty members to grow in their abilities to be mentors.

Going forward, the Department will continue to try to cultivate the teaching culture that we have established by supporting faculty mentoring and teaching-related student initiatives.

- We are particularly concerned to encourage informal conversations around teaching between students and between students and faculty; however, we will continue to support the formal programs that we have in place inasmuch as they seem to be working.
- We are planning an end-of-year conversation with current graduate students to solicit their feedback on the training for teaching they are receiving and the processes for this that are in place.
- In the next few weeks, the Department Chair and the Director of Graduate Studies will be meeting with the Dean of the Graduate School and we will also initiate conversations among the full faculty to generate ideas about how to further encourage faculty mentoring (including how to encourage all faculty to be equally active mentors, and how to reward those faculty who go the extra mile).
- Having learned that our graduates are willing and eager to help mentor current students, we will intentionally develop programs to help bring them into this process. One thing that we particularly hope to involve them in is offering advice and assistance in the transition from graduate school to tenure-track positions, as older graduates are teaching in a variety of different academic settings and have experience with the particular process of figuring out a new institution and how to be successful there as a teacher and faculty member.
- In the weeks since the Teaching Initiative, the graduates who attended have already set up a Facebook page (“UNC’s Post-Graduate Lounge”) to actively connect graduates from our program. We also intend to use social media or a university-sponsored website to create a virtual space where current students can connect with department graduates independently of faculty.
- We will continue to think about what we learned from the Teaching Initiative dialogs and make plans to put new insights into practice.