

Pedagogical Training for Doctoral Students

Department of Theology

University of Notre Dame

Preface

The goal of doctoral education is to produce scholars who have begun the life-long task of becoming balanced scholar-teachers. For this reason, preparation to teach is just as essential as developing skills in academic research and writing. To this end, the Department of Theology has developed a program to prepare doctoral students to teach which has four principal elements. The process is under the immediate supervision of the Assistant Chair for Graduate Studies and the Chair of the Department's Teaching Committee, who are responsible for overseeing development and supervision of doctoral students as teachers. The program proceeds in stages to introduce and involve graduate students more and more intensively in the craft of teaching, beginning with work as a graduate teaching assistant in year two or three of the program, and culminating in teaching two classes as teacher-of-record during year five.

Elements of Notre Dame's Teaching Preparation Program

1. Graduate Teaching Assistantships

During the second and third years of the doctoral program students work as Graduate Assistants for individual faculty. While their duties vary, a critical component is the opportunity to work with a faculty member in teaching an undergraduate course. Faculty are encouraged to introduce students to all aspects of undergraduate instruction, e.g., course planning, syllabus construction, grading, lecturing, leading discussions, advising, as well as course-evaluation and revision. We have found that students who have this experience at this stage of their program are much better equipped to teach a course of their own during their fifth year. In assigning Graduate Assistants, the Director of Graduate Studies, Assistant Chair for Graduate Studies, and Chair of the Department will work together to insure that students will aid a member of the faculty in all aspects of teaching his or her course for at least one semester of their two years' service as a GA.

Teaching Workshops

Throughout their first four years students receive formal training that prepares them for independent teaching at the college level. This training falls into two parts. First, students are encouraged (and could be required, if deemed necessary by faculty review) to participate in workshops offered at the University's Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning. Second, in their fourth year (the dissertation year) they participate in a series of workshops conducted by theology faculty and organized by the Chair of the Department's Teaching Committee. In these workshops, students are introduced to the two required undergraduate courses in theology and the specific concerns that the Department has for solid performance in the teaching of these courses. The student also produces a syllabus for a course proposed to be taught in the following (fifth) year,

which is evaluated by the Teaching Committee and amended as required by that Committee. No graduate student may teach for the department unless he or she has participated in these workshops and has an approved syllabus.

If during the biannual review of doctoral students significant potential weaknesses in teaching are identified, he or she may be asked to observe several sessions of a class taught by one of our strongest teachers during the fourth year, and may also be required to attend additional Kaneb Center workshops.

3. The Teaching Mentor

The student chooses a teaching mentor during his or her fourth year. The mentor may be any member of the regular faculty from the Department of Theology. Often this is the dissertation director; but it need not be. It is important for the student to select someone with strong pedagogical skills who will be able to assist the student in the classroom and speak with him or her openly and frankly about strengths and weaknesses in teaching. The mentor's responsibilities include the following: assisting the student with the development of a syllabus, advising him or her on all aspects of independent teaching, visiting the classroom on at least two occasions and providing feedback to the new instructor on his or her performance during the initial semester of instruction, and assisting the graduate student instructor to interpret the statistics provided by the university's formal instrument to collect student perceptions of teaching: "Course Instructor Feedback Reports." Finally, the mentor will submit a written evaluation of the instructor's teaching at the end of the student's course to the Assistant Chair for Graduate Studies, who will use them for ongoing assessment of graduate student teaching and the department's teaching preparation.

4. Colloquia for doctoral-student teachers

The Assistant Chair for Graduate Studies conducts colloquia for graduate students teaching their own courses – approximately one every two weeks. These colloquia expose doctoral student teachers to a variety of teaching strategies, explore in depth teaching particular topics common to the university-required theology courses that the graduate students teach, and provide a venue for them to discuss common concerns that have arisen in the course of their teaching.

Summary of Findings and Proposed Actions Notre Dame GPTI 2011-2012

Findings:

We found that our teaching preparation program is well-conceived and works effectively *if* all parties are aware of the rationale and outcomes at each stage and do their part. Students sometimes aren't aware of the rationale behind different stages, or the outcomes we hope for them, then they do not participate as fully or productively. Thus, we need to insure greater transparency to both students and faculty and work in particular to encourage and reward effective mentoring on the part of faculty teaching mentors. In addition, we need to work with the university teaching center (the Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning) to make its programming more well-known and to help students understand the benefits they will gain from making room for that programming in schedules that are, admittedly, already very crowded. Modest additions to our departmental programming, particularly in year five, and providing more informal venues for conversation about teaching, will take advantage of the strong interest in teaching in the department which often just needs some modest venue to catalyze and channel it. These more informal venues could profitably be located as students are finishing coursework and beginning to prepare for their candidacy exams.

Our first steps have been to gather more data about the effectiveness of certain elements of the teaching preparation. After a survey of students in years four and five about their experience as graduate assistants, we concluded that the Graduate Teaching Assistantships in years two and three were not exposing students consistently enough to a broad range of teaching experiences. In response we are tweaking the GA assignment process to improve that – giving greater priority to faculty who will involve student involvement in the classroom over requests for research assistance, particularly for students who have not yet had classroom experience. We have initiated some broader faculty conversations with a report given to faculty departmental meeting in January, and will continue these discussions next year as a part of our departmental self-study prior to external review. We have a pilot program in place this year to encourage more conversation about teaching between graduate students and faculty, and between faculty, by inviting teachers to visit each other's classes and discuss their different strategies, both in dyads and then in larger group conversations over dinner. This complements a substantive expansion of the workshops for graduate student teachers and postdoctoral teaching fellows. Finally, we are exploring ways to maintain contact with graduates so that we can continue to draw on their assessment of our programming.