Shaping the Professoriate One Class at a Time

by Rita Sommers-Flanagan and Donald P. Christian

One of the ironic shortcomings of the academy is its perennial failure to adequately prepare the next generation of academics to be academics. In a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article, F. Champion Ward identified the widely recognized gap in the doctoral education of many future faculty: a heavy emphasis on preparing for roles as researchers; the modest attention to development as classroom teachers; and the near absence of formal preparation to become members of a faculty. In another recent article, Milton Greenberg issued a call for including “the subject of higher education per se” in doctoral programs. How many professors among us were fully prepared for their first academic position? We’re willing to bet that not many Thought & Action readers raised their hands.

In recent years, the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) initiative has guided and encouraged formal programs that prepare doctoral students more broadly for faculty roles and responsibilities. PFF and its derivative programs have charted substantial progress, yet many graduate programs “remain firmly unengaged with the educational challenges that confront a changing academy, and … a new generation of campus faculty.” Fully developed PFF programs and similar initiatives may involve multiple mentors, partnerships among doctoral and other institutions,

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extensive formal coursework, and other efforts that entail a sizeable institutional investment. In times of drastically shrinking resources and vastly expanding teaching, research, and administrative demands, many institutions may not find such wholesale investment feasible.

Ward’s proposal to address this need was more modest: that doctoral education incorporate a seminar that would “enable future college professors, although variously specialized, to form the habit of together seriously discussing questions that higher education faces in their time.” We have recently taught just such an interdisciplinary doctoral course. Despite the modest scale of our seminar (one semester, one-and-a-half hours weekly), our students found the experience to be a major awakening and an important part of their professional development. We share our experiences with this “low investment-high return” effort in hopes of encouraging other doctoral faculty and programs to develop similar offerings when limited resources or other barriers prevent the full development of expanded PFF or similar initiatives.

The idea for our seminar, which predated Ward’s article, began with a chance discussion over coffee at one of those mandatory chairperson retreats we all look forward to every fall. Each of us was considering how to more directly prepare our own doctoral students, hoping to move beyond what we thought of as the “osmosis” method—used by those who apparently hold the belief that graduate students will simply absorb what they need to know about being an academic by interacting closely with said species.

One of us had students preparing for careers in science—many planning full-time positions in academia. The other had students preparing for careers in counselor education and related areas. Neither of us believed our students had had any time to grapple with what it meant to be an academic. Further, as administrators, we had both recently struggled to help newly hired faculty orient and settle into academia, and we were both aware of the benign neglect readily apparent in this central aspect of these bright young people’s overall training.

We shared a concern that doctoral students are consumed by the demands within their own disciplinary worlds and were learning little about the history of the academy, its current challenges as an enterprise, or the roles and responsibilities of faculty, both individually and collectively—even though many among our current students anticipated academic careers. There was little indication that
major advisors or graduate committees were guiding this part of the education of doctoral students or that students were gaining insight into these issues through other dimensions of their doctoral programs. When does the average doctoral student have time or encouragement to consider the history of the academy, the centrality of academic freedom, the effects of race and gender in the college classroom, the role functions of a faculty senate, or the purpose and meaning of a unionized faculty to name just a few of the core issues common across campuses, from art to zoology?

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We had each planned to address some of these areas in our separate disciplines, one via an experimental How to be a Professor course, the other by incorporating bits and pieces of Preparing Future Faculty into the existing doctoral program. The idea of combining our students and our energy was appealing. Each of us already had a full academic schedule, and we received no workload adjustment or monetary compensation for this endeavor, yet the idea was compelling enough that we found ourselves finalizing the syllabus and planning the course in snatches of time during the holiday break before our spring semester course. Our overall course goal was to assist students in better understanding the responsibilities and challenges that faculty face and to encourage consideration of diverse career options. Our weekly topics for the 15-week semester were:

- Building an identity as a faculty member;
- Models of excellent teaching;
- Challenges in student-faculty interaction;
- Pedagogy, ethics and gender;
- Philosophy of science and learning;
- The academic job hunt (searches, strategies, survival, critique of CVs);
- Diversity and structure of academia/unionized faculty/faculty governance;
- Faculty cultures and communities;
- Institutional structure, individual and group conflict, and academic gamesmanship;
- Tenure, promotion, and career paths;
- National trends and issues;
- Internationalization (both directions).

Because we had guest speakers and covered sometimes controversial or emotionally-loaded areas, we built in two class meetings with no designated topics,
knowing that there would be a need for debriefing and catching up.

Our reading list was eclectic and easy to compile. For current issues in academic and other topics, we drew heavily on articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Chronicle Review*, and the journals *Thought and Action* and *Change*. For pedagogical discussions, we included chapters from Paulo Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Jyl Lynn Felman’s *Never a Dull Moment* and Emily Toth’s *Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*. Many of the books published by Anker Publishing contained provocative, insightful chapters that were of significant value. Students added additional readings when it was their turn to present. A course such as the one described will never lack for interesting and provocative readings and topics. The challenge is one of focus and constraint—not lack of relevant material.

Weekly assignments included readings, student-led in-class presentations, and discussion. We created an e-mail group, and students were asked to post weekly reaction papers reflecting on the readings and class discussions. This assignment extended class discussions and built a sense of community much more quickly than either of us had anticipated. In fact, sometimes students posted three or four times each week in response to each other’s reactions and queries. As co-instructors, we both read everything posted and weighed in as part of the cyber discussion.

In addition, students attended either a faculty senate or a union meeting and wrote a critique; attended a lecture class outside of their discipline and formally assessed the teaching they experienced; reviewed and evaluated course syllabi from other universities within their specialty area; created or updated their own curriculum vitae; and wrote evaluations of the course.
The outcomes, as measured by weekly commentary, midterm evaluations, final evaluations, and post-class interviews, were immensely gratifying. The course was well-received and had a positive impact on students and the ways that they thought about their futures. Students gained appreciation for the history and challenges of higher education in our culture. At the same time, they came to recognize and value an expanded academic worldview by analyzing common concerns with doctoral students from vastly different disciplines.

We assessed student perspectives on course outcomes via an informal content analysis of the weekly reaction papers and the course evaluations. Several recurring themes emerged. Most students continually expressed a sense of surprised appreciation for what they were learning. Students provided numerous comments about the experience of being together in such a seminar course. It was the first time since their undergraduate careers that most had interacted in an academic setting with students not in their own fields of study. Students universally identified the interdisciplinary nature of the course as strongly positive—both the inclusion of classmates from other doctoral programs and having a course co-taught by faculty from different disciplines. Most students indicated that hearing perspectives from across campus contributed to the learning experience. One wrote, “I didn’t truly appreciate the interdisciplinary experience until after I had done it. Before I thought that interacting with other students would not benefit me very much, however I was wrong.”

Our discussions of faculty roles included expectations of campus-level participation and interaction with colleagues outside of one’s own discipline and department—a surprise for some of the students. Students clearly made a connection between what was happening in our course and future faculty expectations. One stated, “We learned much from one another and I believe will make better cross-campus colleagues with a deeper level of understanding of each other and other programs.” Another wrote, “... encourages collaborative thinking and a positive experience which would hopefully encourage faculty to work in that model more often rather than segregating themselves.” For others, the course provided a clear affirmation of the value of colleagues outside of their disciplinary area; for example, one noted “I would love to have a cooperative group helping each other out with research or funding or even life itself.”

The experience of this course prodded students to a more thoughtful consid-
eration of academic life and of future careers. It was apparent in our discussion that many of our students had felt the subtle (in some instances not-so-subtle) expectations of major advisors that any career path other than a faculty position at a major research university was in some sense a failure, for the advisor and the student. Few if any of our students had been encouraged by graduate advisors to consider a teaching-focused academic career. At the same time, many of the students valued their teaching experience and saw college-level teaching as an attractive career direction. For students in the sciences, the attraction to teaching was coupled with daunting questions about an academic life in which the struggle to sus-

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tain a major externally funded research program was such a dominant force. Our course provided an institutional forum that allowed these graduate students to explore and express their interest in a career in which teaching, rather than national/international research prominence, was a primary goal.

This course influenced students to think about their individual professional goals. The readings and discussions were affirming and/or reassuring for some students; for others they caused concerns, doubts, or questions to surface, and yet for others, they stimulated consideration of alternative career paths. But nearly all, regardless of the nature of the impact, regarded these as positive outcomes.

The workloads, multiple and sometimes competing demands, and investment of time, energy and focus demanded of doctoral students are legendary. Several of our students were working as teaching or research assistants while in our course. Some managed their own externally funded research projects. Most were actively involved in dissertation research or writing. Several had families. None expressed the slightest regret or hesitation about taking time from their otherwise overly busy schedules to participate in this course. Our experience suggests that doctoral programs should not shy away from developing a course such as ours out of concern that students will not prioritize it sufficiently to participate. We echo Greenberg’s observations of the considerable interest among doctoral students in the kinds of career topics we discussed in our seminar.

Some students suggested that such a course be mandatory for doctoral students. In fact, thanks to the graduate grapevine, subsequent cohorts of our respective students have made it known that they would value such an opportunity (the course offering was suspended because one of us left for a position at another university and one was on sabbatical. Plans are underway to teach the course again).
Most of our students said the ideal timing for such a course is midway through the doctoral program when, in the words of one student, “[students] will come with experience to share, questions to ask, and the class will be fresh in their minds when they encounter challenges and have to make choices.” Several students thought that a single-semester overview at this career stage is a good introduction to the issues we discussed, and indicated that they would be less enthusiastic about a longer, ongoing series of seminars. Others thought that a mid-program, single-semester seminar like this might be followed by a more specific seminar late in the doctoral program for those students who had chosen an academic career path.

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We were surprised at the students’ limited knowledge of higher education, how different college and university systems work, and the general demands and expectations placed on faculty at different types of institutions. As accomplished doctoral students, some nearing completion of their studies, these people had not had time or opportunity to consider, nor had they had instruction to assist them in understanding the infrastructure and the disparities among disciplines, departments, and institutions that influence faculty lives. Student feedback underlined our observations that doctoral students have little opportunity or encouragement to examine the complexities of academic life. Our 12 students undertook this examination with a very high level of enthusiasm and interest. We do not believe that they were unique among doctoral students throughout the nation in having considerable angst about their future academic career paths. Our students applied course readings and discussions directly to their own lives, futures, and current experiences of academia, in some instances resolving or reducing that angst.

It is ironic that the academy, committed to formal inquiry and instruction within the disciplines, would leave the acquisition of professorial skills and insight to casual mentoring and informally conceived apprenticeships; in the worst case scenario, doctoral programs may completely ignore these topics as critical issues in the development of prospective faculty. The sheer magnitude of knowledge in our fields seems to keep us from researching and teaching effective, ethical, and humane methods of transmission of this knowledge.

There are no easy answers to the acute financial and political problems facing academia. Because of this, perhaps faculty are hesitant to discuss what might be perceived as shortcomings in the profession, or dwell on them with future col-
leagues. Maybe if we just keep teaching, writing, and serving like we’ve always done—only at an increasingly frenetic pace—these problems will simply go away.

In a recent *Thought & Action* article titled, “Keep Your Keys: Teaching, Democracy and Performance Art,” Stephen Olbrys wrote, “What people think and what people want their world to be are legitimate, pressing political questions.” We extend this legitimacy to the professional world of work, and especially, to the professional world of academia.

For the sake of our students, and to have a valid voice in shaping the future of academia, it is time for us to move beyond the osmosis method of transferring the knowledge and skills requisite to excellence in professorial life and positive membership in the academy. Provide doctoral students with a forum and the impetus to grapple with their real and imminent futures—and they will engage. Our experience is that small investments of time and energy in seminars such as the one described may pay enormous dividends for the lives of individual doctoral students/future faculty and for the future of the professoriate.

ENDNOTES

3. www.preparing-faculty.org/.

WORKS CITED