

Graduate

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UNIVERSITY^{AT}ALBANY

State University of New York

Teaching^{at} Albany

SKILL Conference

Saturday, March 21, 2009
9am-3pm
University Hall

ITLAL invites proposals for the 2009 SKILL Conference for graduate students in teaching roles. This conference provides aspiring university faculty the opportunity to share their teaching expertise with other graduate students, and to gain professional experience presenting at a conference.

Topics may range over all teaching strategies and techniques, including engagement of students, effective TA'ing in large classes, teaching laboratory classes, creative grading practices, teaching portfolios and other topics related to the theme, "Teaching for Professional Success."

The keynote speaker for the conference will be Maryellen Weimer, author of *Learner-Centered Teaching and Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning*. Dr. Weimer's workshop will be titled "Assumptions that Grow Teachers."

Deadline for Proposals
Friday, February 27

More information and a proposal submission form are available at our website:

<http://skill.itlal.org>

Proposals must be submitted electronically.

If you have any questions about the conference, please contact Billie Bennett at 442-4850 or bbennett@uamail.albany.edu.

Busting Myths about College Teaching

As teachers, many of us believe that if we can help our students examine their own myths and preconceptions about a topic, they will advance to deeper levels of understanding. For example, research in physics education has found that intuitive but incorrect preconceptions about motion hold students back from acquiring Newtonian concepts of motion (McCloskey, 1983).

In the same spirit, we can ask ourselves if there are any myths about teaching that hinder our efforts to become effective university professor-teachers. What follows is a summary of some of the most common myths about teaching, along with our responses, culled from various authors and faculty development professionals.

Myth #1: "It's my research alone that's going to get me the job—teaching will come later"

Many graduate students seeking academic jobs share the belief that original research alone will win the coveted faculty position. While this may be true at a few of the most prestigious research institutions, it is not the case elsewhere. A recent survey of academic search committees across different academic disciplines by Meizlish and Kaplan (2008) found that doctoral granting universities rank teaching ability equal with research potential when evaluating applicants.

Furthermore, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching reports that doctoral-granting universities make up only 6.4% of colleges and universities in the U.S. This means that a new grad's chances of gaining employment at a university as research-intensive as the one s/he graduated from is low. Meizlish and Kaplan also found that baccalaureate and masters-granting universities rated teaching ability significantly above research potential in the hiring process.

While graduate advisors should foster high aspirations in their students, students should also be preparing themselves for "Plan B." This means making efforts to get teaching experience and to improve one's teaching skills during the graduate years in order to be competitive at a variety of institutions.

Myth #2: "The only way to learn to teach is simply by jumping in"

Some departments might see college teaching as a "sink or swim" reality, and therefore provide limited preparation or supervision of graduate teaching assistants. In reality, university teachers need to develop a full range of specific skills, such as making interactive presentations, developing effective assignments, leading productive discussions, and evaluating student work. All of these skills can be developed in part before a new instructor steps into the classroom for the first time. As in any field of expertise, efficacy comes not only from trial and error, but also from concerted study, feedback and reflection.

Most importantly, the best college teachers are inquisitive about teaching strategies, and describe teaching as a creative and uplifting experience that complements their research. Under-prepared instructors often view teaching as a distraction or a burden, and are more likely to experience frustration and early burn-out. Inadequate preparation to teach also leads to considerable waste of time when new instructors try to re-invent the wheel.

Myth #3: "Good lecturing IS good teaching"

As graduate students we are likely to imitate the teaching practices that are most familiar to us through

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example. The traditional lecture, born of a technological deficit that persisted for hundreds of years (i.e., limited access to books), and that has continued well past the point where solutions are widely available, has mistakenly become equated with teaching. The primary function of lecturing is to disseminate information, and research suggests that it is sufficient for this purpose. For other goals, such as analyzing and assessing information or thinking critically, lecturing has little impact on most students.

Different learning goals demand different methods and techniques. What all effective instructional practices have in common, however, is that they put students at the center of the activity. Students do the work rather than simply watch a professor's performance. Instructors need to learn a variety of skills to accomplish this consistently (McKeachie, 1990).

Myth #4: "I don't have time to work on my teaching!"

As graduate students we move from one pressing deadline to the next, and it's easy to believe that we just can't spare the time to improve our teaching. This is a question of aligning our goals and values with our priorities. If demonstrated teaching effectiveness is necessary when we enter the job market, will we be ready?

If your department does not offer a structured program to prepare graduate students for teaching assignments, an alternate resource might be your graduate student colleagues who have reputations for effective teaching. There will be members of the departmental faculty, too, who value teaching and do it well. Ask to see their materials and syllabi, even invite them to watch you teach your first time out. In addition, ITLAL offers regular events and several services for graduate student instructors. Some of the events are intended not only to foster reflection on effective teaching, but serve also to put you in contact with like-minded colleagues and potential resources across campus.

For a more systematic approach, consider enrolling in the "Preparing Future Faculty" program now being piloted at UAlbany. Participants sign up for a series of credited or non-credited seminars (depending on your department's policy), which provide an opportunity to learn about a variety of teaching strategies, to get feedback on teaching, and to learn to document teaching for the purpose of job applications. The PFF program for the University at Albany is currently being developed for ITLAL and the Dean of Graduate Studies by Kimberly Van Orman, who can be reached at kv9081@albany.edu.

Life after the Myths are Dispelled

College teaching, like every profession, requires a specific body of knowledge and a specific set of practices, none of which are a mystery. To become an effective teacher requires a few elements that are all well within reach of all graduate students:

- Mastery of your subject matter (at first, just enough to stay ahead of your students)
- Course design (how content, method and policies flow from course goals)
- Curriculum development (how content and method fit together into a coherent program)
- Delivery of instruction (how students interact with the material, with you, with each other)
- Assessment of instruction (how you will know if you are being effective)
- Your availability to students (how you will answer questions and form mentoring relationships)
- Administrative requirements (keeping track of all the tasks associated with teaching) (Cashin, 1989).

Now that the myths have been debunked, we invite you to join us in the journey toward excellence in university teaching. Visit our web resources at www.albany.edu/teachingandlearning, or give us a call at 442-5521 if you would like to pursue discussions on topics that hold particular interest for you.

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- McKeachie, W. J. (1990). Research on college teaching: The historical background. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(2), 189-200.
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