
Graduate Student Teaching Credentials: Potential Value to New Ph. D.'s in Obtaining Employment

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Abstract

A survey of 14 chairpersons of agricultural and natural resources academic departments at the University of Florida indicates that teaching credentials enhance the competitive position of new Ph. D.'s in obtaining faculty positions. A survey of Ph. D. students in these departments suggests that a relatively small percentage of students have or expect to have teaching credentials at the time of graduation.

Introduction

Over the last few years, there have been a number of national initiatives to encourage training of graduate students for the teaching component of their future careers (Lambert & Tice, 1993; Nyquist et al. 1991). Most universities provide a variety of courses or training workshops to train graduate students to teach. Also, it is not uncommon now for individual academic departments to provide in-house teacher training workshops.

There are many reasons why graduate students should prepare for the teaching component of their careers. First, and foremost, they owe it to their future students. However, there also are more pragmatic reasons. McKeachie (1994) has stated, "Teaching skillfully may be less time-consuming than teaching badly. Teaching well is more fun than teaching poorly." I doubt the first statement, but know from experience that the second statement is true! Another reason to develop teaching skills is that many of these skills are the same skills required in giving scientific presentations at meetings. Also, student and peer evaluations of teaching are being used increasingly as evidence for decisions on tenure and promotion and for annual evaluations for awarding salary increments. Finally, other things being equal, teaching credentials may assist a new Ph. D. in obtaining employment.

Recently, the University of Florida's College of Agriculture held a workshop entitled, "Future Directions in Graduate Education" for which I was asked to speak on the subject, "Preparing Graduate Students to Teach." While thinking about my topic, I began to wonder about the practical consequences of graduate students taking time from their busy schedules

to learn to become more effective teachers. I asked myself the questions, "Do teaching credentials really make a difference in obtaining employment in a university?" and "What kind of teaching credentials do Ph. D. students in the agricultural sciences possess?" This paper reports my attempts to answer these questions.

Department Chairperson Attitudes

In an attempt to answer the first question above, I sent a survey to chairpersons of 14 College of Agriculture and College of Forest Resources & Conservation departments at the University of Florida. Chairpersons were asked to fill out the survey with the assumption that they were considering a new Ph. D. for a faculty position that involved both research and classroom teaching responsibilities. The first item on the questionnaire was, "Do you consider teaching competence when making hiring decisions?" If their response to this question was "yes", they were asked to rate each of nine potential teaching credentials on a scale of one to five in terms of how much importance they would give to that particular credential. They also were asked to list other credentials they would consider favorably. Finally, they were asked whether their department required candidates to give a "representative lecture" for a course they would be expected to teach as part of the interview process.

All 14 chairpersons said that they considered teaching competence when making hiring decisions. Five indicated that their department required a representative lecture as part of the interview process.

Table 1 contains ratings of the perceived importance of the teaching credentials. A similar survey was conducted nationally of entomology department chairpersons. Additional credentials suggested by agriculture and entomology chairpersons as important to them were:

1. Letters addressing the candidates teaching skills.
2. Evidence of communication skills and personality
3. Obvious love of teaching
4. Full responsibility for lecture or laboratory of a course
5. Secondary school teaching experience
6. Evidence of peer or faculty review of teaching
7. Course syllabus and lecture outlines

These chairperson responses may be helpful to students wishing to make themselves more competitive for college or

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Table 1. Department chairperson survey (University of Florida Colleges of Agriculture and Forest Resources & Conservation)

Potential teaching credentials of new Ph. D.'s	Responses ^a (Perceived value)						Mean ^a	S.D.
	1	2	3	4	5			
1. Has taken a course in "College Teaching"	3	3	6	1	1	2.6	1.16	
2. Has attended a teaching assistant training workshop	2	2	7	2	1	2.9	1.10	
3. Has experience as a teaching assistant	5	3	3	2	1	2.4	1.34	
4. Has authored or coauthored a journal paper on teaching or related to education	2	3	5	3	1	2.9	1.17	
5. Has received a grant related to education or teaching	3	3	6	1	1	2.6	1.16	
6. Has some special competency in teaching (e.g., multimedia)	6	3	2	1	2	2.3	1.49	
7. Application packet contains a teaching portfolio	6	4	1	1	2	2.2	1.48	
8. Application packet contains student evaluations of candidate's teaching	3	7	2	1	1	2.3	1.14	
9. Application packet contains a statement of teaching philosophy	3	6	2	2	1	2.4	1.22	

^a 1-Extremely valuable...5-Of no value

^b N=14

university positions. Teaching credentials also should make agriculture Ph. D.'s more competitive for general biology faculty positions at junior colleges and four year colleges.

Graduate Student Teaching Credentials

In an attempt to determine the reality of graduate student teaching credentials, I surveyed the Ph. D. graduate students in the College of Agriculture and the College of Forest Resources and Conservation at the University of Florida by asking departmental secretaries to place the survey form in the mailboxes of all Ph. D. students in their respective departments. Students were asked to return the surveys to the secretaries within three weeks. Completed surveys were received from 84 of the 417 Ph. D. students in the two colleges.

Table 2. University of Florida Colleges of Agriculture and Forest Resources & Conservation Ph. D. student survey

	# of students with credential ^a
1. Taken a course in "College Teaching"	13
2. Attended a teaching assistant training workshop	19
3. Experience as a teaching assistant	69
4. Had sole responsibility for teaching a course	28
5. Authored or coauthored a journal paper on teaching	3
6. Presented an education-related paper at meetings	2
7. Received a grant related to education or teaching	5
8. Some special competency in teaching (e.g., multimedia)	18
9. Experience as primary or secondary school teacher	17
10. Given presentations for school children	46
11. Formulated a "philosophy of teaching"	23

^a Eighty-four of 417 Ph. D. students returned the survey. Eighty-two (19.7%) checked one or more items.

Student survey forms contained a list of ten teaching credentials. Students were asked to check which credentials they already had or would have by the time they graduate. Eighty-two (19.7%) of the 417 students listed at least one credential. Table 2 presents a summary of the student responses. This is probably a fairly accurate estimate of the frequencies of actual credentials. I suspect that students who did not return the survey likely either had no interest in teaching or had no teaching credentials to report. Only two survey forms were returned with no credentials checked.

Interestingly, several students indicated that it had not occurred to them to make an effort to develop teaching credentials during graduate school until they saw the survey. Others noted that they would be interested in learning of opportunities to improve their teaching skills. These comments suggest that possibly we could do a better job of counseling our students in this area.

Conclusions

The results reported in this paper are based solely on agriculture and natural resources department chairpersons and students at the University of Florida, but it is assumed that they are generally applicable to many other large land-grant universities. While, admittedly, the sample size of 14 for the department chairperson survey is small, hopefully it suggests general trends of thinking.

Although there was considerable variation among responses of department chairpersons as evidenced by the relative large standard deviations, all indicated that they would view at least some of the credentials favorably. Because of the variation of responses by individual chairpersons, graduate students might be advised to attempt to develop several of the credentials. Enhanced employment opportunity might be the most powerful argument in encouraging our students

to prepare themselves to teach. It appears that teaching credentials do enhance the competitiveness of new Ph. D.'s in obtaining employment.

Historically, some chairpersons have been reluctant to reward teaching because of the belief that, "Teaching is more difficult to quantify than is research." Research is generally evaluated on the basis of publications in refereed journals and competitive grants. It is paradoxical that, for teaching, these two credentials were among the least valued by chairpersons.

It is difficult to draw too many conclusions on the adequacy of graduate student training in teaching without knowing what percentage of new Ph. D.'s go into academic positions. Graduate students who are primarily interested in careers with industry would likely have less interest in teaching credentials. Surveys of new college and university faculty assessing their perceptions of the value of teaching credentials in obtaining employment also would be useful.

The numbers of credentials checked per student varied widely. A few students checked quite a few of the credentials, but most checked only one or two. By far the most common credential was "Experience as a T.A." It is noteworthy that a number of students complained that their T.A. duties involved only photocopying and other "busy work" and were worthless to them in terms of meaningful teaching experience.

To the degree that the relatively low response to the student survey really indicates the prevalence of teaching credentials among University of Florida Ph. D. students, and if it is characteristic of other universities, we probably would do our students a favor by encouraging them to devote more emphasis to this part of their training.

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