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Even professors need practice

Grad students at Tufts get together to learn how to teach better – a skill often overlooked in graduate programs.

By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo | Staff writer

Hugh Long is used to talking in front of a crowd. He's an actor. But today he's doing a practice run as a university professor. Pacing in front of his laptop, his hands jammed in his pockets, he waits for the class to settle down before launching into a presentation on Shakespeare's use of theatrical swordplay.

His "students" – for now – are fellow PhD candidates at Tufts University, a classic campus perched on a hill with a view of the Boston skyline. For the past month, these 16 scholars from departments as diverse as mechanical engineering and history have been learning about the art of teaching. Now's their chance to try out the strategies and hear honest feedback before they step in front of undergraduates in the fall to co-teach with faculty mentors.

Earlier, Mr. Long had summed up a common lament among graduate students – and even junior faculty – who generally have very little preparation other than basic teaching-assistant jobs: "They just expect you to know – almost as if you walk in [to a PhD program] and being a teacher just automatically comes to you." By contrast, through the new Tufts Graduate Institute for Teaching (GIFT), he said, "I've learned ... some structure, some organizational skills ... and different ways of evaluating students. The other thing I got out of it was a large sense of confidence that I'm on the right track."

Tufts' approach is emblematic of a growing recognition among doctoral programs that they need to impart skills for teaching, not just research. As college classrooms diversify and the pace of technology quickens, there's a demand for scholars who have a flair for more than just a traditional lecture. More than 100 universities now have formal programs to prepare future faculty, many of them spawned by grants administered by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in Washington between 1993 and 2003.

"Some institutions are seeing this kind of broad preparation of their students as giving them a competitive edge in their ability to recruit the best [graduate] students," says Daniel Denecke, director of best practices at CGS. "Other institutions, unfortunately, are still in the mind-set of preparing their students for a handful of [research-oriented] jobs at a handful of universities.... But I think that that culture is on the wane."

"I see more and more institutions [and math faculty] taking this seriously ... and seeing it as one of their responsibilities," says Solomon Friedberg, a math professor at Boston College who developed math-teaching case studies to train graduate students. "I care very much about research, but on the other hand, for someone to only be able to contribute that way and leave 30 years of students feeling very poorly about a subject, that's a very disappointing situation," he says.

How GIFT got its start

Tufts has always had a commitment to good teaching, says Lynne Pepall, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. But several years ago, leaders there realized, "we should be able to find a mechanism

by which that [commitment] informs our graduate students ... in a formalized way, not just by happenstance." They launched a summer institute, which this year evolved into GIFT.

Tufts' program has a component that's rare among such efforts: a stipend of \$2,000, which makes it easier for students to choose it over other paid opportunities in the summer. For the 16 slots, 32 students applied. More professors than needed volunteered to teach workshops and mentor, which bodes well for GIFT's sustainability, Dean Pepall says....

Different learning styles applied

Graduate students are usually isolated in their departments. So GIFT participants are excited about the opportunity to meet peers from all over campus.

"One of the greatest strengths of this program is its diversity," says Ashley Shelden, a graduate student in English. "Because we represent other disciplines, we also represent other learning styles.... It's kind of scary when I hear that students don't learn well simply by reading things, my being an English major.... But it's precisely out of that fear that [I realize] if I'm going to give them a difficult text to read, I need to integrate other strategies for comprehending that material." ...

Greater interaction with faculty

By now, the GIFT students are well practiced at discussing the pros and cons of classroom activities. In one workshop, GIFT director Sinaia Nathanson, a psychology professor, led them in a simulation of the power dynamics in a hierarchy, not unlike the relationship among professors, teaching assistants, and undergraduates.

Young college students don't have as much life experience on which to draw, so "by doing a simulation in the class, you create some kind of common denominator that they can all analyze," Professor Nathanson says. After experiencing the exercise as students, the GIFT class stepped back to analyze how well it worked.

Recently the grad students were thrilled to have an "ask anything" lunch session with seven faculty members, some still working toward tenure, others in leadership positions. Their questions covered everything from strategies for applying for jobs to handling ethical issues and balancing work and family.

"This set of [workshops] are all the things that you're supposed to get in graduate school implicitly, but they're done explicitly, and they're done by area experts – so we're hearing about curriculum design [and other topics] from someone who really does it well," says Claudine Kavanagh, who's preparing to be an English professor.

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