Graduate Students and Teaching: Are We Preparing Future Adult Education Professors to Teach?

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ROUNDTABLES

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Are We Preparing Future Adult Education Professors to Teach?

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Abstract: What do we know about how graduate students are being prepared to teach? The purpose of this roundtable is to present findings from a research study and a model for graduate student professional development related to teaching. We also seek participant contributions and feedback.

Introduction

Academic positions in the adult education field are becoming increasingly competitive and teaching experience is an important hiring decision component. Additionally, the availability and effectiveness, including teaching effectiveness, of graduate programs is becoming gradually more important in graduate program rankings. Simultaneously, there is a concern about undergraduate education quality, including teaching quality. At many universities, a significant number of courses, labs, and recitation sessions are taught by graduate teaching assistants (TAs), yet TAs often do not participate in teaching effectiveness training beyond a simple orientation program (Prieto & Meyer, 2001). The purpose of this roundtable is to present findings from a research study and a model for graduate student professional development related to teaching. We also seek participant contributions and feedback.

Method and Data Sources

In order to explore graduate student professional development related to teaching, internal and external resources were researched. Internal research included a review of university strategic documents; statistical data about students, TAs, and faculty; faculty and TA teaching evaluations; and a graduate student survey was administered. External research included an analysis of peer institutions' websites, review of the literature, and drafting of a NSF (National Science Foundation) proposal, and partnering with the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL). CIRTL's mission is to advance the teaching of STEM disciplines in higher education and includes an emphasis on teaching-as-research (CIRTL, 2011).

A Model of Graduate Student Professional Development in Teaching

Based on the research and findings, a model of graduate student professional development in teaching was developed, the core of which was inspired by Prieto & Meyers' (2001) process model of comprehensive TA training. The new three-layered model highlights the importance of creating teaching opportunities, the critical partnership between a university and departments, key roles and stakeholders, and specific strategies and methods.

Central to the model's core is the progression from initial teaching experience to enhanced teaching experience (Prieto & Meyers, 2001), which requires graduate students to have

multiple and varied teaching opportunities. Teaching experience and opportunities are supported by training and development, which can be achieved through department-based academic and pedagogical content along with university-wide teaching and learning programs and resources. Since TA positions are limited, additional teaching opportunities must be created in order to support teaching development.

The model's second layer consists of key roles. Existing key roles include graduate students, TAs, and international TAs. The TA consultant, or peer mentor, is a new role created for graduate students who possess excellent teaching skills. These TA consultants will complete additional certification training in order to provide teaching feedback to their graduate student peers. Feedback will include observing graduate students teaching in the classroom, videotaping their teaching and providing analysis, reviewing their instructional design and teaching materials, and consulting the students on their pedagogical approaches. Faculty mentors will provide teaching opportunities, in addition to offering critical feedback, advice, and assessment. A program coordinator has been hired to lead the model's effective execution.

The model's outer layer illustrates best practices. The first best practice is to enhance TA training through the use of blended learning and offering an online TA orientation in order to improve learning and control the TA orientation's delivery cost. In addition, expanding TA training beyond orientation to experienced TAs will increase teaching effectiveness.

The next set of best practices involves leveraging the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning's (CIRTL) partnership and resources. While STEM focused, CIRTL's three pillars—teaching-as-research, learning communities, and learning-through-diversity (CIRTL, 2011)—apply to all graduate student professional development related to teaching.

The final set of best practices has four components. It begins by adapting faculty development workshops that are then offered as blended learning opportunities to graduate students. It also includes vetting and developing online teaching and learning resources for students. Furthermore, college teaching certificate programs can be expanded by identifying and offering course substitutions for the existing college teaching certificate and by implementing learning communities that will hopefully evolve into college-based graduate teaching certificate programs. Assessment is critical, but often missing, and can include graduate student teaching consultations, evaluations, and observations. Finally, celebrate and recognize teaching excellence through awards for graduate students, similar to faculty teaching excellence awards.

Implications for Practice

The intent of the research is to contribute to the scholarship and discussion of graduate student professional development in teaching. It is hoped that the research and model provide a focused but flexible plan for graduate student professional development related to teaching, which can lead to advancing graduate programs and enhancing undergraduate education.

References

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