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PhDs - Teaching Portfolio

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Overview

Across the country, large research universities and small liberal arts colleges are coming under increasing pressure from key constituencies to improve the quality of teaching offered to undergraduates. One public manifestation of this pressure has been a significant increase in the number of schools that are asking for extensive evidence of teaching experience and prowess in the job search process. Candidates are increasingly asked to offer a teaching portfolio that does more than describe the courses they've taught in the past and are willing to teach in the future.

Most schools do not ask for all of the elements described below, but it is useful to have the information organized and in a written form because the substance they contain is likely to be needed in an interview if not beforehand.

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Your statement of philosophy is a concise description (no more than a page) of the central ideas behind what and especially how you teach. We've all sat through really bad classes, and had to explain really poor lectures to sections. Think about how you would attempt to solve some of the difficulties and frustrations you've encountered as a TA. If you've been relatively lucky, talk about the ideas/techniques that you've seen yield positive results and how you will apply them in your teaching. Don't simply state how much you lecture versus how many hours of class participation. Rather, talk about how you have been successful in increasing the extent and quality of student participation by...

Frame your discussion in terms of how your teaching style addresses salient problems or issues such as enhancing students' analytical skills and ability to understand theoretically sophisticated material or how to avoid teaching to the lowest common denominator. If you can, illustrate your points with examples; e.g., The following essay question taken from an exam in early American literature asks the student to apply the theoretical approaches we discussed in class to a text from a different genre and think about the implications of the shift in content.

Small schools will want to know that you can do more than teach large lecture courses (which they assume is all that occurs at a place like Berkeley). Emphasize your experience teaching small sections and your one-to-one interaction with students.

Throughout the nation, a number of pedagogical trends are on the rise. You may want to address one or more of the following issues in your statement depending on your particular interests and the nature of the expectations at your target schools.

- Increased undergraduate involvement in faculty research. How would you integrate your research into your courses and enhance student participation in your work?
- Increased use of technology in the classroom and beyond. How would you use email and the web to have a substantive impact on a course that you teach? Many schools have wired classrooms with PCs and internet access available for humanities and social science courses; how would you take advantage of these facilities?
- Writing Across the Curriculum which requires students to take courses with an emphasis on writing offered by a wide array of disciplines and not just the English department. How could you implement this requirement in a couple of your sociology courses?

List of Courses and Sample Syllabi

If you haven't taught a lot and do not have a raft of battle-tested, polished syllabi, you can still provide a list of three to five courses you anticipate teaching with a brief paragraph of each describing the nature of the course and perhaps some of the readings you would use. Don't worry about being too exact or stress over whether to put down Wilkins as your primary anthology rather than Rivkin & Ryan. No one is going to hold you to these syllabi and descriptions. All you want to do is convey the flavor of your teaching - how you would go about structuring an intro course in American history or a seminar on your specialty. Feel free to borrow someone else's syllabus and just adapt it based on your preferences. No first year assistant professor ever creates five, brand-new, original courses.

Teaching Evaluations

Some of the schools that request teaching evaluations will accept department-generated summary sheets, but many want to see the all of the individual evaluations for the courses you submit. You cannot rely on the department to keep track of your teaching evaluations. As soon as they are available to you, make a copy of all the raw data and the summary sheets. If the forms used by your department allow for written comments, these can also be mined for quotations that you can use to illustrate key points in your statement of philosophy.

Letters of Recommendation

Though technically not a part of your teaching portfolio, at least one of your letters of recommendation should refer explicitly to your teaching. Coming from Berkeley, many schools will assume that you view teaching as a necessary evil at best, and letters that emphasize your teaching ability and commitment to it are the best means of combatting this stereotype. If the people you have TA'd for and/or your advisor have never seen you teach, ask them if it is possible to for them to sit in on one of your section meetings or ask if you can present a lecture. You want them to be in a position to speak on the basis of direct experience and not "I've never seen her teach, but given her enthusiasm and interest I'm confident that she ...").

When you ask them to write your letter, ask them explicitly to mention your presentation and teaching skills. Give them a written summary of your teaching experience (including any opportunities they've had to observe you) and copies of positive evaluations. Remind them of discussions you've had about teaching philosophies or other pedagogical issues.

If you are unlikely to have further opportunities to teach at Berkeley, and were never observed by a faculty member who can write on your behalf, there are other alternatives. Plan to give a talk on your work at a departmental colloquium or series sponsored by an on-campus research unit (e.g., Center for Chinese Studies). Ask one of your writers to attend, or better yet, arrange to talk at a forum they usually attend anyway. This may be hard for you to request, but part of a faculty member's job is to help get you launched in your own career, and most want to help you get ahead. Besides, you can't add to their prestige and burnish their professional patina from the sidelines.

Videos

This is the new millenium and although still relatively rare, a few schools are asking finalists to submit a half-hour video of a class they have taught. I have seen this in English literature and dance listings. Scan the job ads from last year in your discipline to help you decide if it is worth the effort to arrange becoming a STAR.

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