Creating a Teaching Portfolio

Search committees are increasingly considering teaching experience and pedagogical expertise as significant factors when evaluating faculty members’ profiles. There is evidence that in a competitive job market, and when other things are equal, the candidate with a strong—and documented—teaching record will get the job offer.

Because teaching is often undervalued at Harvard, despite recent efforts by the Deans to change the University culture, GSAS students sometimes overlook the importance of their skills and experience in the classroom when envisioning their overall “package” as a job candidate. This is understandable: at most large research universities, teaching does not play a significant role in hiring or promotion decisions. If graduate students chat with junior faculty members in their department, they will likely hear that the assistant professors they admire do not have a teaching portfolio or statement of teaching philosophy and have never been asked to show one. But this does not mean that GSAS students should follow their example.

The reality of today’s job market is that most GSAS graduates will apply for college and university jobs in which teaching plays a central factor in making hiring decisions. Small liberal arts colleges ranging from Amherst to Sweet Briar, as well as state universities large and small, look carefully at a job candidate’s ability to teach and advise effectively. And the culture at top-flight research institutions like Harvard is also changing, albeit slowly. As a result, almost all schools will require that job candidates submit a statement of their teaching philosophy. At a growing number of colleges and universities, teaching portfolios, “a collection of materials that document teaching performance,” are often requested in addition.1 In some cases, these have even become the preferred means of evaluating a job candidate’s potential. Peter Seldin has estimated that 2,000 colleges and universities in North America use Teaching Portfolios for evaluative purposes in hiring, promotion decisions, or both.

Because Harvard graduate students operate in a university environment that elevates research far above teaching, it may at first seem silly to devote time and effort to creating a Teaching Portfolio. There are three things to keep in mind: 1) Harvard is the exception, not the norm. Teaching, and documentation of teaching, is important in the larger academic world. Moreover, Harvard itself is changing. Despite a longstanding culture of devaluing teaching, the Deans are working hard to ensure that teaching is a factor in promotion decisions; 2) although there are a lot of uninspiring Teaching Portfolios floating around the Web, teaching documents can be organized into a Portfolio that demonstrates both serious thought and rigorous standards of disciplinary scholarship; 3) Peter Seldin, the accepted authority on Teaching Portfolios, suggests that they take between 12-15 hours to create. That is a small time commitment given that the process can generate considerable results, both in terms of one’s own growth as a teacher and in terms of more pragmatic benefits, like attracting attention on the job market.

The Bok Center and the Office of Career Services advise Teaching Fellows to develop and then update a Teaching Portfolio early in their teaching careers at Harvard. TFs can begin the process during a regular teaching consultation appointment at the Bok Center. The staff will brainstorm with you different ways to design a Teaching Portfolio that captures your educational philosophy and documents your ongoing teaching efforts. They can also provide a template developed for the typical Harvard experience.

Before making an appointment, take some initial steps:

- Save all syllabi, handouts, and assignments from courses in which you teach. Make sure to make a note of

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questions, exercises, and materials you developed yourself.

• Think about and begin working on a statement of teaching philosophy, which are often a required part of a job application. The strongest statements are those that have received as much attention as a statement of research aims developed for a fellowship application. They should be rooted in real experiences in the classroom.

• Request letters from professors who have employed you to teach, particularly those who have observed your teaching and/or read over your comments on student work. Ask for these letters while the professors’ memories are fresh.

• When course grades are submitted and there is no appearance of impropriety or favoritism, consider asking a student or two for a letter of recommendation.

• Have a section (or if you give a guest lecture, the lecture) videotaped as part of a consultation at the Bok Center. Ask to keep a copy of the tape. Videotaped segments of teaching are occasionally requested in lieu of or in addition to an onsite job talk. Watching yourself teach on tape, especially in consultation with a Bok Center staff member, can be a springboard to reflecting on and articulating your teaching philosophy. Use the Bok Center handouts “Watching Yourself on Videotape” and “Observation Guide” as aids during this process.

• Keep all student evaluations of your teaching. Mid-semester evaluations (using forms you develop or forms available from the Bok Center), combined with final CUE evaluations, make a good package. Your CUE scores are sent to Course Heads at the end of the semester, and the portion pertaining to your teaching may be detached from these. A shortage of storage space and concerns about confidentiality limit access to your CUE scores, but you do have a right (and responsibility!) to examine them. If the Course Head does not pass them along to the TFS, ask for copies.

The above may seem like a lot of work that will distract you from completing the PhD. Try not to see it as such. Instead, envision the process of creating a Teaching Portfolio not as a necessary evil—something akin to assembling a CV—but rather as a means of productively preparing for the job market and a successful academic career. The process of creating a Portfolio should provoke the kind of thought and attention to teaching that academics more commonly reserve for research.

Obtaining Letters of Recommendation from your Students

If the short-answer questions on CUE evaluations do not provide substantive commentary on your teaching from students, you may wish to solicit “teaching recommendations” from 2-3 undergraduates whom you have instructed. These letters can be included in your Teaching Portfolio. Of course, you should only request a letter of recommendation from a student when you are no longer involved in evaluating their work.

Because undergraduates usually do not have experience writing letters of recommendation, you will want to give them some guidance. Direct them to the Bok Center website for assistance in composing a letter. You might also want to provide them with the following tips, which have been adapted from Cynthia Verba’s The GSAS Guide for Teaching Fellows on Writing Letters of Recommendation.

a. You should promptly identify yourself and the basis of your knowledge of the instructor: Were you their student in a tutorial or small seminar for department concentrators? How often did it meet? How many students were in the class? How many papers were assigned? Do you also know the instructor through exposure in the tutorial system, or through some other capacity? Has your acquaintance been sustained over a number of years?

b. In evaluating an instructor’s intellectual and pedagogical capabilities, try to describe the instructor in terms that reflect their distinctive or individual strengths. Whatever strengths strike you as particularly salient, be prepared to back up your judgement with concrete
examples - class activities, organization, discussion leading or lecturing skills, paper comments or other writing assistance, general mentorship.

Above all, avoid the misconception that the more superlatives that you use, the stronger the letter. Heavy use of stock phrases or clichés in general is unhelpful. Your letter can only be effective if it contains substantive information about the instructor’s qualifications.

c. In discussing an instructor’s character, proceed in a similar fashion to the intellectual evaluation, highlighting individual traits and providing concrete illustrations.

d. After discussing each of the above points, your letter should have some brief summation, giving the main thrust of your recommendation for the candidate.

Remember that letters of recommendation can be filed through Harvard’s web-based Dossier Service. Contact Pat Pearson at OCS (dossier@fas.harvard.edu) for more information.