

The article below looks at the increasing popularity of teaching certificate programs for Ph.D., graduate students interested in academic careers. It is from the October 15, 2010 issue of INSIDE HIGHER ED, an excellent - and free - online source for news, opinion and jobs for all of higher education. Copyright © 2009 Inside Higher Ed (<http://insidehighered.com/>)

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Preparing Professors to Teach

Graduate education's supporters and critics alike have long called for doctoral students who are better trained to teach, as tenure-track positions become increasingly scarce and the competition for those jobs intensifies. Efforts by universities to focus on the teaching skills of the would-be professors they turn out have developed in fits and starts over the last 15 years.

But in recent years a flurry of new programs at leading universities -- in some cases overflowing with grad students -- suggests that institutions and doctoral candidates are recognizing a need for future faculty who can not only conduct research at top-tier universities, but also be effective in the classroom at a liberal arts or community college.

Teaching certificate programs are filling that need at dozens of public and private institutions across the country, and the programs continue to expand. Administrators say the certificates not only give students an edge in the job market, but also teach the skills Ph.D. candidates need to be effective teachers -- and faculty need to be lifelong learners.

The trend is visible across the country: Year-to-year, more graduate students are opting to seek the voluntary teaching certificates, says Linda von Hoene, director of the Graduate Student Instructor Teaching and Resource Center at the University of California at Berkeley. As Berkeley plans its own program, von Hoene is in the midst of conducting a survey of the 70 or so institutions that already offer one. She also plans to present her research in November at the annual conference of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.

Von Hoene says a preliminary analysis of the 30 programs that had responded to her survey as of last week indicated that, at those colleges alone, the number of students poised to obtain teaching certificates will increase by about 10 percent this year, from 946 to 1,044.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the most recent institutions to move in this direction, the Teaching and Learning Laboratory offers graduate students teaching certificates. The lab's director, Lori Breslow, says she was "totally floored" to see 90 doctoral students register for the program when it began in 2008, and enrollment jumped to 140 this year.

"We were getting vibes that the graduate students did want some sort of training, at least an introduction to higher education," Breslow says. "We did it just to give it a try and see what would happen. We had no idea whether we would have two people or 200 people. We thought it would be a

good way to provide information to potential teachers.”

Some certificate programs began in the late 1980s and 1990s, von Hoene says, but the majority were created over the past decade. “These programs are not static in the sense that they continually are assessed and also revised and then informed by a lot of the research on teaching and learning,” she says.

“While I think, in general, the emergence of these certificate programs shows an increased commitment to preparing graduate students for teaching, that commitment actually predates in most cases the formal adoption of a certificate program,” von Hoene says. Training processes may have been in place in the 1980s, but in the 1990s, the focus shifted from preparing graduate students exclusively to their work as TAs to the responsibilities they would bear as future faculty members. “We need to keep in mind that some of the schools that have very rigorous programs and long traditions in this area may not necessarily have a formal certificate program, e.g., Ohio State, Indiana, Berkeley. The bottom line is that a tremendous amount of progress has been made in graduate student professional development over the past three decades, something which is not always as visible to the public as it should be.”

But certificates are particularly beneficial because they are often formally recognized or denoted on a student’s transcript, providing a better documentation of the steps a student has gone through to become a better instructor.

MIT students who have obtained the certificate say it was enormously helpful. Mark Zachary Taylor, an assistant professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology international affairs school who earned a political science Ph.D. from MIT in 2006, was less concerned with securing a job than he was with being able to teach effectively once he got one.

“We don’t learn how to teach.... Our stereotype is that a teacher gets up there and hands you a lot of knowledge. You’re the empty glass, they’re the pitcher of water and they pour their knowledge into you. But that’s not how it works,” Taylor says. He strives to engage students in classes, pose interesting questions and draw them in, maybe by connecting the issue at hand to politics or their personal lives. “All those techniques I learned through the teaching certificate,” he says. “I really believe in this form of education, these programs.”

MIT is a relative late-comer to the teaching certificate movement, and as such its program continues to evolve. Depending on the institution, training requirements for the certificate vary. At MIT, students participate in eight workshops that include readings and assignments. They formulate teaching philosophy statements (a staple among such programs), learn how to design courses, plan lectures and create syllabuses, among other things. Students have two years to complete the program.

Meanwhile, institutions such as Brown University, which began its program in 1989, have far more elaborate tracks. At Brown, students can earn four certificates. Each program takes a year to complete, and comprises four to seven workshops. The programs are modeled around different themes that build

the components of a “reflective teaching practice”: an understanding that effective teaching requires careful planning; knowledge of one’s audience and the ability to engage different learning styles; a recognition of the importance of establishing learning goals (and means to determine if such goals have been achieved); and a willingness to be innovative.

Brown requires some of the same tasks as MIT, such as the philosophy statement and syllabus construction, but it also stresses heavily the importance of student-faculty collaboration, and creating a community that emphasizes reflection on and scholarship of teaching. This year, the program expects to award 196 certificates, about 50 more than last year. “We’ve actually seen a significant increase in participation, particularly this year,” says Kathy M. Takayama, director of Brown’s Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning.

Takayama points to the job market and the program's recent revisions and improvement as reasons for the consistently higher enrollment from year to year. She also noted that about 13 of the participants this year are faculty and postdocs looking to continue their professional development; they, along with the graduate students, seem to recognize that the program has long-term impact, she says.

Takayama says the program unites participants into a community of peers, regardless of discipline or stature. It trains them to think about learning contextually, beyond the course materials. What exactly is learning? How do you assess students? How do you make teaching accessible and effective? Certificate programs “really are important not just for students, but also for faculty members and postdocs,” Takayama says. “The faculty are looking for thinking about their teaching in a scholarly way. They became faculty because they got degrees in their discipline, but they never thought about their process of teaching in a formal way.” And, of course, the programs teach graduate students these skills before they have the chance to realize they never learned them.

Although she doesn’t necessarily see a faculty appointment in her future, Nicole DiLello got her teaching certificate from MIT and is in her sixth year of working on her Ph.D. in electrical engineering. She says the program helped her develop presentation skills and target her work, be it a lecture or a lesson, toward a specific audience. “I’m still not sure if I actually want to go into teaching, but I thought it would be good background if I did,” she said. “I just think that people often don’t think about the sorts of things the program teaches.”

For the most part, students who obtained certificates from the University of Michigan – whose program is also on the younger end of the spectrum – reported satisfaction with their training. They generally said they feel more prepared to teach and, to a lesser extent, demonstrate that when looking for a job.

“It is a difficult job market for Ph.D.s right now, and candidates with evidence of good preparation for teaching and interest in teaching are more attractive to search committees,” Constance E. Cook, executive director for Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, wrote in an e-mail. She said Michigan started its teacher certificate program because “we thought it would not only improve grad student teaching, but also help them on the job market.”

Since Michigan's program began in October 2007, 386 students have enrolled and 98 have received certificates. In a survey of recipients (with a 98 percent response rate), 93 percent of students said they gained the skills and knowledge to enhance their teaching practice, 94 percent said they felt more confident to teach at the college level, and 85 percent reported an increased confidence in their ability to discuss teaching and learning during job interviews.

And even though students contacted by Inside Higher Ed said the job market was either a small factor or did not play at all into their decision to pursue a certificate, Robert Sowell, vice president for programs and operations at the Council of Graduate Schools, says the programs are indeed helpful. "I think it is definitely making them more competitive," Sowell said. "They can go in with a teaching portfolio, with a formal certification or a notation on their transcript that they have participated in this sort of training." It's a "win-win-win situation" for the student, the institution where the student is a TA, and the institution where the student will go on to work, he said.

Von Hoene says certificate programs are bringing the discussion of teaching and learning to "a whole new level."

"Most important," she says, "it's to show there's a false dichotomy between teaching and research."

"A lot of research universities care most about the quality and quantity of your research, but I do think there's a growing trend in some places that teaching matters," Taylor, the 2006 MIT graduate, says. "I'm really happy at Georgia Tech because teaching matters. A lot of universities say that, but when it comes to promotion and tenure, it's not always the case."

— Allie Grasgreen