

A Proposal for Teaching Postdoctoral Fellowships

Introduction

In recent years we have made the decision to stop basing the size of our Ph.D. programs on the need for graduate students teaching fellows to provide undergraduate instruction. A Ph.D. program's size is to be based instead on factors such as its ability to attract very strong students, its quality and competitiveness, the quality of the supervision and mentoring of the students, its ability to place its students in good jobs, and finally, the graduate school's ability to provide competitive funding for the students. In order to achieve competitive funding, our humanities and social science Ph.D. programs have decreased in size. In order to be competitive we have also decreased the teaching load of the individual student. As a consequence in many departments the size of the graduate student body will drop below what is needed to provide teaching in the undergraduate schools. In a few departments this has already happened, and it is only because we still have large classes of more advanced students that we are able to cover teaching. In Contemporary Civilization, Literature Humanities and Logic & Rhetoric the problem is already apparent. Dissertation fellowships, promised to all our students who entered after Columbia in 2001 or later, but only implemented in some departments, will further aggravate the problem.

At present in many departments we are using as teaching assistants and preceptors graduate students up to their seventh year. We should *not* allow graduate students beyond their seventh year to teach. This would undermine another essential goal of the graduate school, which is to encourage students to finish as quickly as possible. It would certainly be best if we could institute a hard-and-fast policy by which no graduate student past the seventh year is allowed to be on appointment. We were not able to hold to the policy this year in the Core or L&R, and, unless we change our way of doing business, the situation will only worsen.

Thus we need to find an alternate way to provide teaching. Solutions for replacing the missing graduate students by other types of instructors range from adjunct faculty (the cheapest solution, for the time being at least) to regular tenure track assistant professors (the most expensive solution). The default solution, which will occur unless we plan now, is the use of adjuncts. It is not reasonable to entrust, year in, year out, a significant number of the flagship courses of the undergraduate curriculum to poorly paid adjunct faculty hired haphazardly at the last moment. This proposal represents a way for us to extricate ourselves from this problem.

The solution proposed here is intermediate in terms of cost (a lengthier discussion of cost is given below). It has several advantages. First, it will help decrease the time-to-degree for our Ph.D. students. Indeed, it removes the perverse financial incentive that students currently have to stay enrolled as students, given that the adjunct salary is now significantly lower than the graduate student stipend (the current salary for adjuncts is \$5,000 a course, while the semester stipend for a graduate student on stipend is \$8,025). Second, it gives priority to our own students and especially to those who have finished their degrees in a timely manner. Finally, it rewards students who have worked hard on their teaching.

The proposal below was presented at the meeting of the A&S chairs on May 29, 2002, and modified on the basis of suggestions made there and at a subsequent meeting with the Dean of the College. Note that similar positions already exist at the University of Chicago¹, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford and a number of other schools. Furthermore the Woodrow Wilson Foundation also funds similar positions².

The Proposal for Teaching Postdoctoral Fellowships

1) This would be a two-year position³, with no possibility of renewal. First priority would be given to Columbia Ph.D. students who graduate in the June prior to the start of the appointment. Priority would also be given to students getting their degree in 7 years or less. The goal is for our own students to have a platform from which to apply for jobs.

2) The salary in 2003-04 would be \$40,000⁴, and benefits would include health and social security, but no retirement benefits. Students currently in Columbia Housing would be allowed to stay in their current housing. In exceptional cases we would grant access to the postdoc housing pool for the others, but in general we would expect them to stay in their current housing.

3) The teaching load would be 2 courses a semester⁵, with one course each semester being in the Core (CC, Lit Hum, Art Hum, Music Hum, perhaps other), plus one other "service course" (Core, L&R, language course, other to be decided) plus one course in the instructor's area to provide professional development. There would be no service obligations to the University other than teaching. While some faculty feel that the proposed teaching load of 2 and 2 is too heavy to deserve the name of postdoctoral fellowship (we disagree), it is certainly light enough for the holders to pursue their scholarly work and is light indeed compared to the teaching loads many of our students encounter in their first job after Columbia.

4) The selection process. The Arts and Sciences, the Graduate School and the College would first establish the instructional need for the coming year. On this basis an interdepartmental committee (including the chairs of the relevant Core areas in need, as well as representatives from the departments) picks the candidates. Excellent teaching (and interest in teaching) would be the top criterion. The second criterion would be quality of research. There would be no national search. Applications would be due February 1⁶, relatively late because we need to gauge both our teaching need for the next year and the likelihood of the students being ready to graduate. Since we plan to

¹ The Chicago positions, called Harper (in the Humanities) and Schmidt (in the Social Sciences) Fellowships, are the closest to what we are trying to do here <http://www.college.uchicago.edu/harperschmidt/Information.html>

I will make comparisons with the Harper positions below.

² http://www.woodrow.org/academic_postdocs/

³ Harper Fellowships are for four years, but it would not be healthy for us to consider such long positions, because we would like a reasonably large number of graduate students to rotate through them.

⁴ The Harper Fellowship is \$38,500 in 2002-03, so quite comparable.

⁵ The Harper Fellows teach 2, 2 and 2, but usually each quarter they teach two courses with identical preparation. This makes it hard to make a direct comparison, but our load appears lighter. It should be noted that informal consultation with the Harper Fellows at Chicago suggests that the teaching obligation there is considered high.

⁶ The Harper Fellowship application is due December 15, because they are tapping a national pool.

award the fellowships to our own students, this should not present a problem. The selection would be made by March 15, late enough to attract students who are not quite ready to go on the market in November but who can still finish by May.

5) Office space: In the department of origin, or (option to be explored) in the Heyman Center.

6) Timing. We could plan for 6 positions in 2003-04 as a pilot, going up to 12 a year in steady state, so that we would have 24 Teaching Postdocs in residence at any given time. The important thing is to start in 2003-04 so we can work out the problems on a relatively small scale.

Conclusion

We must arrive at a method of meeting the extra undergraduate teaching needs emerging from the lightening of the teaching loads of graduate students and the downsizing of the Humanities and Social Sciences departments. If we do not, the teaching needs of the College will grow greater, be met more haphazardly and this will in turn diminish the quality of our undergraduate programs. Furthermore our advanced Ph.D. students will remain in holding patterns as Teaching Fellows instead of embarking on their careers.

This proposal shows one way out of our dilemma.