

Preparing Graduate Students for Successful Faculty Careers: A Course Focusing on the Tricks of the Trade

Hubert B. Van Hoof

School of Hospitality Management, Penn State University
219 Mateer Building, University Park, PA 16802
Tel: 814-863-0009 Email: hbv1@psu.edu

“A curious feature of modern academic life is the presumption that new faculty members arrive on campus having previously acquired virtually all the habits, knowledge, and skills required for on-the-job success. By some mysterious alchemy, it is assumed that yesterday’s graduate students have mastered the skills and tricks of the trade needed as full-fledged faculty in today’s challenging academic environments...In fact, there is abundant evidence to suggest otherwise.” (Lucas and Murry, p. xii, 2011)

Abstract

This article focuses on how we can enhance the preparation of our graduate students for future faculty careers. It describes a course in a professional program that highlights the subjective characteristics of the faculty position that go beyond the traditional elements of research, teaching and service. The course looks at the origins of the US education system and its underlying philosophies, and compares the US system to higher education systems abroad. It discusses the internal politics of academia, in particular when it comes to the job application process and promotion and tenure decisions and

Keywords: Graduate course, graduate students, history and politics of higher education, academic hiring process, P&T

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/14-1-08

Publication date: January 31st 2023

Introduction

As many of my colleagues in academia, I have worked closely with scores of PhD candidates over the years and have always been amazed and proud of the fact that, in particular in the area of research and scholarship, they leave our program much better prepared than I ever was when I left graduate school. In the other major component of a faculty position, teaching, their prowess will come with practice and exposure to different kinds of students over time, yet there too I am pleased with how my program educates its graduate students. Yet, there is one component of graduate education that needs more attention as we prepare graduate students for successful faculty careers and that goes beyond the traditional pillars of research, teaching and service.

When we search for, and hire, potentially successful future professors, we look for promise in the areas of research and teaching, and many graduate students enter the job market with solid publication records and some teaching experience. But let’s be honest, candidates for faculty positions are not only selected because they have an impressive CV at a young age and great academic pedigree, or because they already taught a course or two. They are also selected because search committees intuitively feel that there will be a good colleague down the hall and that they will not cause their department heads any headaches about their classroom performance in their first few years.

Several of my own graduate students with outstanding CV’s failed in their first job applications because they could not present and market themselves well, were not aware of what a professor position entails beyond the traditional pillars of faculty responsibility, and therefore could not generate a comfortable feeling about their future potential among the members of the search committees. Being aware of the impression one creates in a selection process is important, because interviewing and hiring people is not completely objective, and the better we prepare our graduate students not only for the subjective and often untold components of the selection process, but also for the P&T process and the job itself, the better off they are once they enter the job market.

What Makes a Good Professor?

If we were to survey graduate faculty in this country from different disciplines and ask them to describe what makes a good professor, we would likely get almost as many different responses as there are respondents. Opinions about what makes a good professor differ based on the nature of the program one works in, one’s own prior education, personal interests and talents, age and experience, or even geographic location. Program chairs and deans will have different opinions from assistant professors, and senior faculty will have different perspectives from junior faculty. However, some universal qualities about what makes a good professor are commonly accepted. In some form or other, a good professor is an active researcher, a good teacher, and provides service to the academy, the field, and the university.

Many in the academy will agree that out of the three basic faculty responsibilities our graduate students tend

to be best prepared to do research, and second, that they have had some exposure to the undergraduate classroom. During their years in our graduate programs, we work with them on our research projects and publications, we have them take stats and methods courses, and they write their dissertations with us. They work as our research assistants and teach some of our classes, preferably in their own areas of expertise. We clearly focus on the objective and quantifiable parts of their CV's.

However, a good professor is more, he/she is an all-rounder. A focus on research preparation is very important and having them teach as graduate students helps them in their career pursuits, but we need to do more and ask ourselves Do our students know how to conduct a good interview? Do they know about the politics of the P&T process? Do they know the underlying principles of US higher education? Can they communicate effectively with industry executives and with our undergraduate students? Can they use practical examples to explain complex theories? Most of our undergraduates are inductive thinkers and need practical examples to reinforce theory and distill a larger concept. Yet, can we trust our graduate students, who are our successors in the years to come, to do that?

It is easy to say: "I had to learn things the hard way too" and hope they will figure it out once another program hires them. If we do that, we forget our own struggles when we started as junior professors. If we do not highlight the "subjective" parts of the faculty role as well, we do not make the utmost effort to prepare our graduate students as well as we can, and therefore short-change our own undergraduate students and our colleagues and students at other programs. When I started as an instructor, I had some teaching and management experience and somewhat of an idea about the difference between an instructor and an assistant professor. However, I had no idea how the P&T process worked and how "getting along" with colleagues and finding a mentor in the early stages of my career was vitally important because mentoring junior colleagues is what good colleagues do. Some of them would eventually end up as members of my P&T committee.

Why Graduate Students are not Good Professors Yet

In working with my own graduate students over the years, and in having interviewed many others for tenure-track positions, I have come to some interesting conclusions. I feel that most of them have the technical skills to become good researchers, and all of them know more about statistics than I do. They can identify a hole in the literature on a topic and can extend previous research with a new twist, however inconsequential that twist sometimes is. They struggle with broader, conceptual issues and at times lack originality in their thinking, and it remains difficult for them to apply theory to practice. They are ruffled when asked "What would a manager in the field think of this?" or "Would this issue even be considered relevant in the industry?" However, the basic research skills needed to survive and even flourish are there and they are not my main concern.

I am also not too concerned about their teaching skills. There are some pedagogical and communication shortcomings, but most programs will have their graduate students take remedial English and communication courses if needed and will dedicate some time, or even a whole course, on how to design and orchestrate a course and how to interact with undergraduate students. Moreover, after a few sessions as teaching assistants, most graduate students will have the opportunity to teach a course or two before they complete their PhD programs.

Obviously, what concerns me is the "unwritten" part of what makes a good professor. A majority of our Ph.D. students are international, a common enrollment pattern in graduate programs (Van Hoof, Wu, Zhang and Mattila, 2013), especially in a field like mine, hospitality management. If we assume that they will seek, and hopefully find, employment in the United States, it means that a growing number of the faculty of the future in hospitality management will be international as well. An international perspective brings a lot to the classroom and we all know that our undergraduates greatly benefit from, and even need, a more global perspective. This also means that we must focus on some other skills that usually do not make it into a PhD curriculum. The area where I see great benefit for our graduate students as they apply for and start their new positions is the philosophy, structure and politics of US higher education, or what Lucas and Murry call "the skills and tricks of the trade" (2011, p. xii). So the graduate colloquium I designed and discuss below in broad strokes does exactly that.

The Course: The History, Philosophy and Politics of US Higher Education

The graduate colloquium I am highlighting here is a required component of our doctoral degree program in hospitality management and was designed to raise awareness among our graduate students about who we are and where we come from as educators, and to better prepare them for the job market they are entering. The course is divided into two parts: the first part discusses the history, philosophy and structure of US higher education. It does not talk about research or about pedagogy because these topics are covered in other seminars. It touches upon the core philosophical beliefs expressed in the US Constitution that are reflected in how higher education in the United States is structured and organized, beliefs such as limited government, the rationale of a free market and competition, social mobility, and equal opportunity. It looks at the differences between US higher education

and higher education in other countries and addresses the present-day issues higher education is grappling with, such as budget restraints, increased scrutiny of universities, student access to higher education, and dwindling enrollments. This part of the course is designed to address the lack of exposure our graduate students, both domestic and international, have had about the American higher education system. Many have never heard of the Land Grant Act that established the university they are studying at or the institutions they will be working for.

The second part of the course looks at the “subjective” part of a faculty position. From hearsay, graduate students know about, and fear, the P&T process as being long and highly competitive, but they do not realize that it is different from systems abroad for instance, where the process is shorter and where length of service sometimes takes precedence over merit, especially during the later stages of a professor’s career. In order to address this lack of knowledge about, and experience with, the subjective elements of the P&T process and of faculty careers, we focus on how to write, organize and present one’s CV and one’s research, both in writing and in an interview process. We visit issues such as the difference between “teaching” vs. “research” universities and how that impacts one’s future career choices. We discuss what it means to work in a large program with many separate content experts versus working in a small program in which professors are asked to teach multiple subjects both inside and outside their comfort zones. We look at the official and “unofficial” elements of the P&T process and discuss how to interact with colleagues, supervisors, and students once they are hired. We invite junior and senior faculty members to talk about their experiences, have an instructor discuss the differences between fixed-term and tenured faculty responsibilities from his/her perspective, invite recently promoted Associate Professors to talk about their tenure-track experiences, and have school and college administrators talk frankly about their decision making in hiring or declining candidates for tenure-track positions.

Whereas the first part of the course is new and useful knowledge, especially for international students, the second part is the real eye-opener. Students know that instructors teach more than tenured professors and are not expected to do any research, but they do not necessarily realize that tenured professors are a protected and privileged group among the faculty. They know how important it is to have a solid CV that lists many high-quality publications and presentations, but they do not realize that hiring decisions and salaries offered are not only driven by publications, but also by personal impressions, budgets, the nature of the university they apply to, faculty expertise, and concerns about classroom effectiveness. They do not realize that finance and accounting faculty tend to command higher salaries than marketing or HR professors and that, on average, research universities pay higher salaries than teaching universities. Through it all, we look at hospitality management education; we discuss how it was founded, how it developed and grew, and what makes it different from other majors on campus. And we talk about how the rest of the campus in R-1 universities regards hospitality management or other professional programs, which is not always a pretty picture.

Conclusion

I greatly care about the well-being of our graduate students, who are our successors, and because of that I chose to present them with a different perspective than what they are used to. In approving my course proposal, my colleagues fully agreed with me that besides being good researchers, our graduate students will also benefit from attention to their communication and presentation skills. Ideally, they need some practical experience and should have taught a course before they leave our graduate programs. Many programs focus on those in some form or other, either by referring students to other departments or by offering them in-house. Yet, we do not focus enough on the tricks of the trade.

If we assume that our jobs as professors do not end when our students graduate, but rather when they become tenured full professors themselves, we need to educate them about everything that can help them reach their goals. These students are the people who will take over from us as we retire. Their success is our success, and would we not want them to be much better than we ever were?

Postscript: In the spirit of collegiality, the author is happy to share the syllabus of the course.

References

- Lucas, Christopher and Murry, John. (2011). *New Faculty: A Practical Guide for Academic Beginners*. Palgrave MacMillan, New York, NY.
- Van Hoof, Hubert B., Wu, Luorong, Zhang, Lu and Mattila, Anna (2013), U.S. Graduate Hospitality Programs: An Overview. *FIU Hospitality Review* 31(2), 42-54.