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Professional Development for Graduate Students in the Department of English

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The remarks below were delivered by Professor McLaughlin at the Departmental Teaching Network (Faculty Liaison/Graduate Student Liaison) meeting held at the Sheridan Center on Wednesday, September 27, 2006.

The Department of English has been trying to integrate the professional context into all aspects of the Ph.D. program and, at the same time, making them relevant to the scholarly and intellectual development of our graduate students. In English this has meant introducing the professional context to Ph.D. students from the moment they arrive at Brown (anyone who has been involved in recruiting graduate students knows that this is already an important part of the discussion before students arrive in graduate school).

In this context, we have found recently that the searches for new faculty that we have been conducting in the department provide a very valuable opportunity for making our own students aware of the content and the challenges of the job search process. We alert our beginning Ph.D. students to the fact, for example, that we will be inviting job candidates to campus starting in mid January and that, even though there will be no classes during this period, they should plan to be on campus to attend the talks given by the finalists for the position and to participate in the regular meeting of the graduate students with the finalists. Thus, the current environment of hiring at Brown, we believe, presents our students with special advantages to gain insight into the job market and prepare themselves for it.

Over the last several years, we have also been approaching our Ph.D. Qualifying Examinations with the professional horizon in view. Our belief, and I think that this is widely shared among

department faculty, is that it is possible to consider the Qualifying Examination within the professional horizon without instrumentalizing this crucial step in the student's scholarly development in ways that empty the exercise of intellectual content. We have noticed, for example, that the Qualifying Examination, which in the English Department requires the student to focus on a recognized field of scholarship (Early Modern Literature in English, British Romanticism, etc.), represents the point at which the department faculty examine and certify the Ph.D. candidate's competence as a specialist in a particular field of scholarship. This means that, among other things, the examination in this sense anticipates the moment when a job candidate is interviewed by a hiring committee and when he or she must convince the committee of scholarly competence. He or she must be able to offer a perspective on the current state of scholarship in the field in question, and provide a set of undergraduate and graduate courses that would introduce this field to students, etc. The attempt to bring out more deliberately this dimension of the Qualifying Examination means separating it from the dissertation, of examining the student's knowledge of the major texts and arguments in a particular field of research, rather than testing ideas for a dissertation which, in any case, the student is not yet prepared to write.

Along similar lines, we have been able to take advantage of the fact that English Ph.D. students are invited to offer introductory-level courses with topics of their own design in the English Department at Brown (these are EL 20 courses). We have encouraged, indeed obliged, the graduate students to develop courses that are designed to introduce students to important developments in their chosen field of specialization, rather than letting a Ph.D. candidate offer a course on the dissertation topic that has not yet been clearly defined. This is better for the undergraduates and it has the consequence of providing the Ph.D. student with the sort of introductory course in their area of specialization that can be offered at any college or university.

As Ph.D. students approach the end of their studies - like most programs, I suspect - we have a number of formal practices that are designed to help our students succeed on the job market. In June, the department's Job Placement Officer writes a letter to all students we expect to be looking for positions in the upcoming academic year. We expect our students to be on the job market at the beginning of their sixth year at the latest. This letter outlines a number of key things for students to do over the summer in order to prepare themselves for the job search in the fall. Some of these points are very basic and even obvious, but we have found that it is worth making them clear. This would include opening a file at the Brown placement office, making sure that their professional membership is current (they will need to be members to attend the professional convention where job interviews will be conducted), consulting with the dissertation advisor and committee about the upcoming job search and requesting letters of recommendations, and preparing a c.v. and letter of application (we give them a description of how such a letter should break down on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis). Beyond that, the letter also recommends that the prospective job seekers work on a writing sample (usually a chapter or a portion of a chapter from the dissertation). The

Graduate Program Coordinator (or DGS) keeps a file of sample letters and c.v.s that we encourage students to consult.

Then, in the fall the Job Placement Officer convenes a seminar that meets regularly at a designated time and place in which job seekers can participate in a workshop in order to prepare their c.v.s, letters of application, and writing samples. In early December, as students begin to receive invitations for job interviews, the Job Placement Officer sets up mock interviews with groups of Brown faculty (we have found that faculty who are not members of the student's dissertation committee are desirable for these since the interview committees will usually be composed of scholars from outside of the field of specialization). The Job Placement Officer attends the professional meeting in December where job interviews are conducted. Here again, the fact that we have been sending search committees to this convention has proven valuable.

The Job Placement Officer, along with the search committees, hosts a lunch for our own job seekers. Our students on the market have found this lunch provides them with an opportunity to exchange information about interviews that have taken place, get advice about interviews yet to take place, and to hear from our own search committee about how their interviewing of candidates from other programs are going. At the final stage, the students who are on short lists for jobs will be invited for campus visits. The Job Placement Officer or the dissertation directors will, at that point, often rehearse the oral presentation with the student and make sure he or she is aware of the various meetings that are to be expected during campus visits.

Finally, it is important for candidates to stay in touch with their advisors and the Job Placement Officer in the period following the campus visits so that they can be prepared to receive job offers (knowing what kinds of questions to ask about the offer, how to balance multiple possible or pending offers, how to negotiate the terms of the appointment, etc.).