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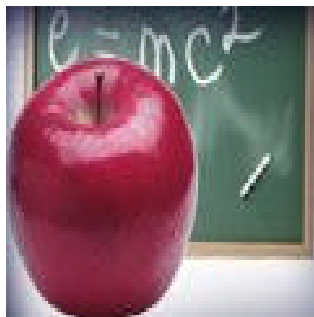
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Training Tomorrow's Professors



LESLEY MCKARNEY

CANADA
13 JULY 2001

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"The program is free for all full-time master's and Ph.D. students."

University of Alberta graduate students have a rare opportunity to acquire teaching skills and get credit for it at the same time. The University Teaching Services (UTS), in collaboration with numerous departments and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, introduced the new University Teaching Program (UTProgram) in 1998. While several Canadian universities have some form of graduate student teaching program in place, the unique blend of theory and practical experience sets the Alberta program apart. "The idea of this program is to help individual departments to add some 'teacher training' to their graduate programs (master's and Ph.D.) and then to have it recognized on the student's graduation transcript," explains Mick Price, the incoming chairperson of the program.

The program is free for all fulltime master's and Ph.D. students and consists of three components. The pedagogical component includes 40 to 50 hours of classroom time, during which the participants explore the core areas of curriculum, instruction, evaluation, student management, and self-improvement. The practical component of the program includes experience in instructing or assisting in a classroom or lab setting, either as teaching assistants in their own department or in outreach programs, and under the guidance of a teaching mentor. Students are also evaluated and provided feedback on their teaching technique through videotaping of two separate teaching events. And finally, all of these events are documented in a teaching dossier and a teaching record book. A statement on the student's transcript notes that the student has successfully completed the program.

Although the UTProgram is "very well supported by students and faculty," according to the former associate dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, Jim Muldowney, winning the university's formal approval for the program was not straightforward. Muldowney and Bente Roed, the director of UTS, spent 18 months preparing the final proposal. Much time was spent discussing the difficulties individual departments would face in implementing such a program, such as limited resources and the shortage or lack of positions for teaching assistants in some departments. After investigating several teaching readiness programs across Canada and in the U.S., Roed and Muldowney were eventually

able to mold a program to suit the pedagogical needs of the students, while not presenting a financial burden to participating students or departments. The magic formula? "Students are responsible for all aspects of their programs: finding mentors, keeping records, arranging for videotaping, and so on," says Muldowney.

That doesn't mean the faculty gets off easy. Much of the support provided from the university is through UTS, and Roed found that an enormous expansion of her network of personnel dedicated to the teaching mission was necessary to provide the program. But it is a worthwhile expenditure. "One great bonus from the program is that it raises the profile of teaching not only among graduate students but also among faculty. I believe that we are more reflective about our own teaching once we become mentors and also discuss it more among ourselves," Muldowney tells Next Wave. And there are other benefits of the program. Recruiting good graduate students can be an extraordinarily competitive business, according to Muldowney, and offering such a program seems to be an enticement. "The fact that we offer the UTProgram is a huge inducement and often the deciding factor in bringing them here," he says.

Many students who start out in the program do not complete it--of the approximately 1000 graduate students enrolled in the program in the first term, 21 have so far graduated--but that isn't necessarily a problem. Muldowney believes that some students find the notation on the transcript less important to potential employers than the record book detailing the attention they have devoted to teaching preparation. These students, he says, typically "pick and choose those aspects (of the program) that they deem most useful."

Kay McFadyen, a "graduate" of the UTProgram, has yet to have an opportunity to test whether the extra credential helps in the job market, but she "would definitely encourage others to participate." McFadyen tells Next Wave that the most difficult issue is to balance time with reward during the program. "Often it is difficult to justify time for self (learning, training, networking) when there are so many other demands that have more immediate implications," she says, but adds that it was worth the effort. "Exposure to diverse ideas and opinions can never hurt, and my opinion is that it is very helpful as we learn to teach," says McFadyen.

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