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A Plea to Graduate Departments

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ABSTRACT *The competitive job market—now facing prospective college teachers of foreign languages—calls for both better preparation in teaching and for improved documentation of pedagogical qualifications in the placement file.*

These comments were prompted, in part, by my recent experience on a faculty search committee, and in part by two recent articles by Elaine Showalter and Phyllis Franklin. Their studies confirmed my own subjective impressions arising from the scrutinization of twenty-seven applications for a nontenure track lecturer position in German—the replacement for a retiring tenured faculty member. Five informal phone calls to other departments with recent hires also corroborated my concern over the high number of applicants: They had received between sixty and eighty applications per tenure-track vacancy. In other words: Too many job seekers for too few openings.

The aforementioned article by Franklin (1998) discusses two reports that address the same situation. One is a statement by a coalition of ten organizations in the humanities, available on request from the MLA. The other is the *Final Report by the MLA Committee on Professional Employment*, forthcoming from the MLA. "Both reports," Franklin emphasizes, "also argue that significant numbers of the graduate students currently enrolled in Ph.D. programs will be unable to find satisfactory academic employment in the years ahead" (5). The reduced employment prospects are closely related to the increased hiring of part-time and adjunct teachers in higher education. As Franklin points out, with this shift in hiring practices, many university administrators avoid long-term commitment to new fac-

ulty and gain flexibility in dismissing personnel (4). In addition to similar observations, Showalter offers several suggestions to counter these problems, one of them being formal training in teaching in every graduate program (3). We will return to that point shortly.

One is hard-pressed to find precise statistics on the numbers of academic vacancies and job seekers. Both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *MLA Job Information List (JIL)* contain primarily advertisements from universities and four-year colleges, but very few from community colleges and extremely few for part-time positions. Many of the announcements are only tentative and may not materialize—and the majority of the positions call for nontenure track or short-term personnel. Both the statistical data published by Laurence and Welles (1998, 33) and the *JIL* confirm this. For example, in the October 1997 issue, the *JIL* advertised a total of 603 positions in all foreign languages, and of these only 261 were tenure-track. In October 1996 the respective numbers were 593 and 239 or 43 percent. In 1996, American universities conferred about six hundred Ph.D.'s in foreign languages while the advertised positions in the *JIL* for 1995-96 amounted to 1,122 and for 1996-97 1,118 (Laurence and Welles 1998, 32). That may look encouraging at first glance until one realizes that not all of these openings are tenure-track or continuing and that the new Ph.D.'s apply in competition with ABDs and older Ph.D.'s for these positions. The ratio between job seekers and positions in higher education may, of course, vary among language areas ("Special Supplement"). In Ger-

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man, for instance, U.S. universities conferred 108 Ph.D.'s in 1995 and 98 in 1996 (Benseler 1997, 76), numbers fairly close to advertised positions in the *JIL*. The latest available information in the *JIL* (October 1997-April 1998) reveal 61 definite tenure-track and 31 short-term and nontenure track positions, a total of 92 in German. Again, these statistics do not include the unadvertised openings, especially the part-time adjunct positions and vacancies at community colleges, nor the host of experienced Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s and new ABDs joining the search. But the available soft data allow the conclusion that the academic job market is still tight, that more vacancies will be converted to nontenure track or part-time appointments, and that many qualified applicants will fail to find the desired career position, at least directly upon graduation.

At odds with this trend is the annual crop of Ph.D. candidates seeking employment in academe. Of course they aim at tenure-track positions in M.A. and Ph.D. granting departments. After all, that is the kind of work for which they have been trained. They find out soon enough that this employment market is highly competitive. Most applicants therefore throw their net widely, also approaching community colleges and small B.A. granting programs, such as the one at the University of North Texas. All the applicants for our lecturer position were very well qualified academically. But to judge from their dossiers, many were mismatched to the available position, especially the ABDs and recent graduates.

Without exception, these applicants listed some practical experience as teaching assistant or fellow. Although they pointed to their success as a teacher, perhaps by including student evaluations or outlining their pedagogical style, we searched in vain for information about the training and guidance they had received in their graduate departments. Of course one hopes that teaching fellows everywhere receive thorough training, but our search committee could not find documentation for it in any of the dossiers. The letters of reference for the applicants concentrated on scholastic achievements and research poten-

tial. They only asserted vaguely, and in passing, that the candidate was also a fine teacher. Most writers of recommendations are either not familiar with or interested in the challenges of teaching first- and second-year language courses. We suspected that many of the applicants were not too interested either when they failed to adjust their cover letter to fit the position.

Obviously, many of the dossiers were aimed at a research-oriented position in a program with a graduate degree. Our search committee was looking for a full-time teacher ready to devote all energies to the basic language program. We became increasingly interested in evidence of pedagogical skills beyond the academic credentials. Thus, publications and research potential seemed less important unless they supplemented or strengthened the applicant's qualifications for our opening. Considering that most new Ph.D.'s aim at college teaching—84 percent of them in one study (Gonglewski and Penningroth 1998, 72)—and that many vacancies occur in nonglamorous modest programs involving mostly basic courses, graduate departments could enhance the competitive strength of their graduates by meeting the needs of the bread-and-butter positions. That would include a rigorous and up-to-date training program for all teaching fellows. Such training is also one of Showalter's proposals to equip new graduates with more applicable skills in the academic job market. While some form of pedagogical assistance exists for most teaching fellows, it is often course-related and varies considerably in scope from department to department. She states that "[w]e need broadly conceived pedagogical training in public speaking, small-group dynamics, new media, modes of learning and instruction, evaluation and assessment" (3). One could easily lengthen her list of topics with many other teaching-related issues, such as prevailing theories on language acquisition versus learning, active use of authentic materials, promoting interaction in the classroom, developing curriculum and materials, and so forth. The topics clearly exceed the parameter

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of the coaching that many junior fellows receive. One may reasonably presume that quite a few excellent training programs for teaching assistants already exist. However, ten unsystematic inquiries confirmed Showalter's observation that pedagogical training for our teaching assistants varies greatly from casual and almost non-existent to comprehensive. I would like to appeal to ACTFL— or another umbrella organization in our disciplines— to solicit descriptions of the pedagogical support for all junior teachers in graduate departments, publish this information, and initiate a debate that might lead to some recommended and broadly adopted standards.

At the present, search committees have, at best, only a vague idea about the pedagogical training of their applicants. An outline of this training would be a valuable component of each application packet. Such an outline might be a form describing the most characteristic features of the teaching fellow training, including, for example:

- Admission criteria for teaching fellows and assistants;
- Conditions for continuation in the program;
- Required, organized instruction for all such junior teachers;
- Syllabi of guidance courses for teaching fellows;
- Pedagogical philosophy guiding the program;
- Required literature for the participants;
- Methods and teaching materials used in the supervised courses;
- Scope of duties and tasks of the junior teachers;
- Objectives and functions of the language laboratory;
- Training in use of pertinent technology.

In other words, the form should supply the search committee with an accurate description of the applicant's training and experience acquired in the home department. That should reduce the tendency of applicants to toss around popular catch words, such as "communicative competency" or "second-

language acquisition theory," without providing documentation that their department offered such instruction.

The outline might conclude with some information about the candidate by the teaching fellow coordinator. For example, the time frame for the applicant's participation in the program and the department, the levels of courses taught, and the numerical ranking in end-of-semester teaching evaluations, both on the scale used by the students and in relation to the average of all teaching fellows for the same period. This kind of form would provide tangible help for a search committee in matching the local needs with the best suited applicant.

It is my subjective impression that traditional graduate courses of study enjoy greater prestige than a degree in teaching a foreign language, probably because the candidate earns the degree in the targeted "academic" subject. In brief, little if any room is usually granted to pedagogy-style courses that might be viewed (rightly or wrongly) as diluting the academic rigors of the degree. For candidates from most programs, the training of teaching fellows might constitute their only pedagogical preparation for a teaching position. It would seem logical, then, that a description of this training deserves a place in every prospective teacher's dossier.

If a traditional graduate degree program calls for a minor, it might adopt as an option to the usual minor a sequence of courses normally required of teaching fellows. One of these courses might focus on second-language theory, such as language learning and acquisition; another might offer applied and practical information. By elevating such courses to the status of a minor, the entire graduate faculty would, one hopes, become involved in screening them for academic integrity.

Another strategy for improved success in landing a teaching position could be the expansion of requirements for the M.A. to include a secondary school certification program as an option to the thesis and/or minor. Many applicants overlook the public school market. In a study on German graduate stu-

dents only one percent of 188 respondents indicated teaching in high school as a career goal, compared to 84 percent aiming at higher education (Gonglewski and Penningroth 1998, 72). But those who do investigate this area find that if they come equipped with only a degree in a foreign language, they can at best hope for short-term employment on an emergency certificate until they earn the professional certification. Our graduate departments need to be reminded that secondary school positions offer additional career prospects and pay better than in years past. For instance, our local independent school district offers an entry-level teacher with a B.A. degree \$26,450 per year, rising to a maximum of \$41,020 after forty years. A beginner with an M.A. earns \$27,450 (maximum \$44,820) and with a doctorate \$28,460 (maximum \$45,870). This scale can stand comparison with that at our university where a full-time, experienced lecturer with a graduate degree is paid \$30,000 and an assistant professor with a Ph.D. \$35,000. It would appear, then, that preparation for teaching in public schools deserves more attention in graduate departments. One could even explore cooperation with the college of education aiming to get the in-house courses for teaching fellows accepted as part of the certification program. Besides, many school districts are rumored to be discontinuing the smaller language programs for lack of qualified teachers. A decrease in high school language offerings eventually spells a decrease in enrollment at the university level. As we all know, college students tend to choose for their foreign language requirement the language they already had some contact with in high school. Thus promoting secondary school teaching credentials would serve at least two selfish purposes: Improving the employment prospects for the graduate candidates, and enlarging the pool of likely undergraduates in the college department.

With these observations in mind I therefore implore our graduate departments to expand the guidance and support of their students. The initial success in securing employment in academe depends on being able to meet the

needs of departments with vacancies. Many of these openings are not housed in prestigious graduate programs. With so many applicants competing for fewer positions, the pedagogical preparation gains in importance. Similarly, the continued survival in the profession will depend on more than just publications, especially in nontenure-track positions. Colleagues working on such terms must still remain involved professionally and strive to improve their expertise. For them the probationary period never ends. Our graduate departments need to do a better job in preparing their candidates for this rough climate.

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