INTRODUCTION

A graduate student holds a teach-out on a divisive issue. A student government passes a policy requiring instructors to include in their syllabi warnings about any violent or sexually explicit content on their reading lists. A professor is penalized for posting an unpopular opinion on social media. From campus protests to content warnings, the news is filled with stories that challenge graduate students and professors to think critically about how they respond to controversial topics. How should graduate students frame and discuss contentious topics in their fields? This project featured a series of workshops that offered practical advice to graduate students on how to navigate these issues.

WORKSHOPS

The series included three events. Each event featured a panel discussion. The first workshop, “Teaching Troubling Topics,” focused on methods graduate students can use to present challenging material while still respecting the needs of a diverse student population that may include trauma survivors. Panel participants discussed not only pedagogical strategies but also how to direct students to campus counseling resources. “Teaching Political Controversies,” the second workshop, provided an opportunity for instructors to discuss tactics for teaching politically charged topics. Touching on issues ranging from evolutionary biology to reproductive rights, the panel considered how instructors should present their own views as well as how to respond to resistant students. The final event, “Graduate Students and Public Controversy” featured a panel discussion interrogating how debates about acceptable academic speech fit into the broader context of the changing profession, new media, and the post-recession university. Panelists offered suggestions on how graduate students can make their voices heard through union organizing and committee work while also navigating the perils of the job market.

CONCLUSION

Audience members provided positive feedback for the workshop series. Many reportedly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss issues they have faced in the classroom and in the profession. While the workshops addressed difficult subjects and open questions, participants left with new insights into how to approach them.

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Professors for the Future, 2015 - 2016

PFTF Fellow: Jordan S. Carroll
Program: English
Major Professor: Colin Milburn

Project Title: "Controversial Subjects."

Project Summary:

The headlines are filled with stories that challenge professors and graduate student instructors to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable speech. Responding to these debates, the Controversial Subjects workshop series explored how professors might best address sensitive or contentious topics in the classroom as well as in their careers as public intellectuals.

The series included three events. The first workshop, “Teaching Troubling Topics,” focused on methods graduate students could use to present potentially disturbing material while still respecting the needs of a diverse student population that may include trauma survivors. “Teaching Political Controversies,” the second workshop, provided an opportunity for instructors to discuss strategies for teaching politically charged topics. The final event, “Graduate Students and Public Controversy” featured a panel discussion interrogating how debates about acceptable academic speech fit into the broader context of the changing profession, new media, contemporary politics, and the post-recession university. Overall, this series was aimed to improve teaching effectiveness while offering a forum for graduate students and faculty. Individuals from a wide range of disciplines attended the workshops, including representatives of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

The Controversial Subjects workshop series was carried out with generous help from Simon Abramowitsch, Dr. Arnold J. Bloom, Christy Cahill, Dr. Bai-Yin Chen, Dr. Teresa Dillinger, Valerie Feldman, Dr. Elizabeth Freeman, Dr. Bruce D. Haynes, Sawyer Kemp, and Duane Wright.

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