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The University of Calgary Instructor of Record mentorship program: helping graduate students make the transition to becoming effective instructors

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For most graduate students, the only exposure to undergraduate teaching comes from interacting with students in a junior teaching laboratory or tutorial, or perhaps giving an individual lecture to cover the absence of a faculty member. When graduate students eventually become instructors, they are given the challenging task of teaching a lecture section without much experience and with virtually no formal instruction in this very different learning environment. In this situation, junior instructors are faced with preparing coherent lectures and leading a large group of students in the discovery and understanding of basic Physical concepts. In order to help select graduate students gain experience, the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Calgary is pioneering its own mentorship and instructional experience program, which enables PhD students who are in the final stages of their degree to assume the full responsibility for a lecture section of a first-year introductory Physics course (to date an introductory course on mechanics). Under the guidance of experienced faculty members, the graduate student is responsible for the preparation and delivery of a full set of lecture sessions for one term. In collaboration with experienced physics instructors and broader experts in teaching development, the graduate students receive ongoing mentorship throughout the term and feedback on their lectures twice during the semester. This provides them with the opportunity to try different teaching strategies in the classroom and receive constructive criticism on the effectiveness of their work. After two years, and four graduate student instructors of record, the feedback from participants has been highly positive. Classroom observations reveal that the young instructors are receptive to suggestions to improve their instruction and quickly develop important teaching skills that help them become successful teachers. This presentation will provide an overview of the evolving structures and processes used in this program, as well as a discussion of the strengths, successes, and challenges that we found over its now two years of operation.

Primary author: WIESER, Michael (University of Calgary)

Co-authors: Dr YAU, Andrew (University of Calgary); Dr FEDER, David (University of Calgary); Dr DONEV, Jason (University of Calgary); Dr REID, Leslie (University of Calgary); Dr ROBERT, Thompson (University of Calgary)

Presenter: WIESER, Michael (University of Calgary)

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