

Supervising and Mentoring Graduate Teaching Assistants: A Faculty Guide

Graduate TAs contribute significantly to and advance the teaching mission of most research institutions. They support faculty in their instructional roles in multiple ways: they may conduct discussion sections, recitation sections, laboratory sections or studios linked to a main course, they may hold office hours, lead review sessions, provide feedback on and grade student work, author exam questions, develop course materials, and assist faculty in the main course. While many TA appointments are designed to assist faculty in the management and delivery of high quality undergraduate instruction, TAs, as they advance in their graduate careers, may design and teach their own courses.

Faculty supervisors play a central role in preparing TAs for teaching in the discipline. TAs' knowledge of discipline-specific pedagogies that are tailored to address students' learning needs provides the foundation for effective teaching, especially for graduate students who aspire to faculty careers. Faculty hiring committees expect candidates to demonstrate their teaching effectiveness in the discipline, discuss their professional growth, and provide evidence of the impact of their teaching. Thus, hiring committees both value and expect that graduate students will have received preparation, support, and feedback on instruction as part of their graduate training.

Faculty and TAs: Working as a Teaching Team (Pre-Fall)

Graduate TAs, especially those hired for the first time, often are anxious about their new instructional role. Many have only recently graduated from their undergraduate institutions, in which they safely sat in their classes as students. Now, in the course of only a few months, they are expected to teach students and to participate as members of an instructional team. Their anxiety tends to stem from not knowing what exactly their responsibilities may entail. Faculty may reduce this anxiety by ***providing a clear description of the position goals and duties as well as means of feedback and performance evaluation.***

Faculty supervisors should meet with TAs before the semester begins to clearly define and discuss position goals, expectations, workload, responsibilities, and performance evaluation. In addition, faculty should share course syllabi, relevant materials, and information pertaining to the students and expectations for learning and performance. The pre-fall meeting offers an opportunity to share faculty's teaching philosophy and highlight ways of engaging the students with the course content. Such an initial meeting starts a conversation about the teaching and learning process, sets the stage for ongoing questions and dialogue, and helps reduce the likelihood of problems later in the semester. Faculty supervisors are encouraged to create a TA "contract" to convey the professional nature of the position as the TA functions as representative of the department, institution. The contractual document should be comprehensive and address areas such as, lecture attendance, course logistics, assessment of student learning and grading of student work, office hours, and teaching responsibilities.

Please refer to the sample contract available at:

<http://cte.udel.edu/sites/cte.udel.edu/files/PDFs/sample%20faculty-ta%20contract.pdf>

The “contract” should be agreed upon between the TA and faculty supervisor prior to the first day of class and can also serve to clarify performance standards. For instance, it may include stipulations stating that the TA provide advance notice if he/she is unable to attend class or that the TA will return graded assignments within a specific time frame.

During the pre-semester meeting, review the academic calendar and highlight those weeks in which the TA should anticipate extra demands (such as grading of exams or assignments). Discuss the grading standards and policies pertaining to any work that the TA is responsible for grading and clarify expectations for student performance and TA’s grading scale. Additionally, review the syllabus and explain how assignments and class activities relate to the learning goals outlined for the course. This discussion is critical for TAs who will lead discussion sections or instruct labs. The TA will be much more successful if he/she understands how his/her responsibilities contribute to the course learning goals. Faculty supervisors may also want to encourage their TAs to talk with other TAs that have worked with the faculty in the past. Gaining advice and insight from other TAs may help them avoid making mistakes and will bring them up to speed quicker. A pre-semester meeting also offers an opportunity to ensure that your TA has participated in appropriate university-wide (Annual Conference for Graduate Teaching Assistants offered by CTAL) and/or department-based training. For instance, TAs need to be informed about university and department policies regarding safety, academic honesty, and student privacy.

Ongoing Support, Guidance & Training

Faculty may envision their supervisory relationship with TAs as an apprenticeship focused on ***socialization into the teaching profession***. In addition to serving as supervisor, faculty serve as mentors to graduate students aspiring towards academic careers in their field of study. The nature of the professional relationship that you develop with your TA affects not only the quality of their TA work but also their perceptions about academic careers and faculty roles. TAs who perceive themselves as partners on a teaching team and whose contributions are invited and valued are more likely to approach their TA responsibilities seriously, seek feedback, pursue opportunities for professional growth, and strive towards excellence.

The path to such an apprenticeship begins on the first day of class. Introduce the TA to your students and describe his/her instructional role publicly (e.g., outline the TA’s role in the syllabus). Additionally, assign the TA particular roles during each class. For instance, ask him/her to assist students while working in groups or to be available to talk with students prior to lecture. Invite TA input and feedback on various aspects of the course with the intent to enhance the students’ learning experience. Be supportive of the TAs’ attempts to take initiative and provide feedback on their ideas. Support their decisions in the areas of the course that you have delegated authority to them. For instance, consult with your TA before altering any student grades that they may have assigned to demonstrate instructional cohesion between the faculty and TA to your students. All of these actions reinforce that the TA is a *bona fide* member of the instructional team. Finally, be mindful of TAs’ academic schedules and workload and considerate of the stipulations of their TA contract.

To establish and maintain a mutually rewarding **mentoring relationship** ongoing contact between the TA and the faculty is required. You may decide to meet on a regular basis, or designate a day of the week to check in via email, Skype. These regular meetings offer an opportunity to reflect on the past week (what worked well, what modifications might be needed), discuss and demonstrate teaching and assessment methods, provide guidance on questioning, problem-solving skills, alert TAs to difficulties that students might encounter with the upcoming content, and address TAs' questions and issues. These meetings also provide a forum to socialize graduate students into your field of study, learn about their hopes, fears, career aspirations and provide guidance.

Serving as a faculty mentor includes providing opportunities for TAs to observe, discuss, and practice various aspects of teaching. For example, you may invite TAs to observe your implementation of a particular instructional approach, such as informal group work. Following the observation, discuss the method ensuring that the TAs understand the steps taken to implement this pedagogy. Soon after, observe the TA implementing the same method, followed by feedback aimed at enhancement of skills and development of the TA's teaching style. In addition to formative feedback, you may want to conduct a more **formal evaluation** of the TA's performance at the end of the semester. If the TA is working directly with students you may want to help them create an evaluation instrument to obtain student feedback. Discuss both the student evaluation results and your performance feedback with the TA for purposes of teaching development and growth. Encourage the TA to save these evaluations as he/she may be asked to draw on them to document teaching effectiveness for faculty position applications.

The Center for Teaching & Assessment of Student Learning (CTAL) offers various programs, services and resources to support both TAs and faculty in their instructional and mentorship roles. Please refer to: <http://cte.udel.edu/> and select "Programs" and/or "Teaching Services" (under "Programs")

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Gross Davis, B. (2009). "Guiding, training, supervising, and mentoring graduate student instructors," in *Tools for teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

"TAs and professors as a teaching team: A faculty guide to TA training and supervision." Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1992.