

## Developing an Effective Working Relationship with Your Course Instructor

In your role as a graduate teaching assistant (TA) you will most likely support a course instructor in the instructional delivery of undergraduate courses; thus you are a member of an instructional team. While this may seem straight forward, in many cases your specific instructional duties will vary considerably depending on the faculty you are working with. Establishing and maintaining a productive working relationship with your course instructor is imperative as this relationship constitutes the foundation of supporting student learning and in turn, nurturing your own instructional and professional development. The following tips are designed to guide you in your instructional interactions with the course faculty and lead to a mutually rewarding and enriching experience.

### Clarify Expectations:

- Each instructor has different teaching philosophies and approaches so find out their expectations up front.
  - Will you be writing and manually grading exams?
  - Will you lead discussion sessions? What materials, resources will you receive to prepare for these discussion sessions? How will the discussion sessions interface with the main lecture class?
  - Will you attend lecture, take notes, prepare materials for lecture?
  - Would you like to find online videos on particular content?
- Be proactive: schedule a meeting with the course instructor as soon as you've learned of your assignment.
- Think about what you expect to get out of the TA experience and make these expectations known:
  - Would you like to write some assignments?
  - Would you like a chance to lecture?
  - Would you like to learn how to use Sakai?
  - Would you like to find online videos on certain course content?
  - Would you like the professor to evaluate your performance? (Hint: yes!)
- Be professional- you're no longer a "student" – you function as co-instructor.
- Meet with the course instructor on a regular basis – you may need to take the initiative for arranging these meetings.
- Keep the course instructor informed of your schedule ahead of time, e.g., map out your own exams, deadlines for papers / projects, conferences, presentations and align them with your teaching schedule: where may schedule conflicts arise? How may they be addressed? It's advisable to resolve these as early in the semester as possible.
- Keep in mind that you are ultimately responsible for making the most of your TA experience. If you're not getting what you need don't be afraid to ask.

### Keep Consistency:

- Attend the lecture class as much as possible, your course schedule permitting.
- Keep in constant communication with the instructor.
- Familiarize yourself with methods/tools/equation notation that may be instructor-specific.
- Refer back to main lecture content as much as possible during your discussion sessions.
- Use grading scales or rubrics to maintain consistency with grading.

### Provide Feedback on Student Learning:

- Grades
  - Use excel to record grades and plot results (percentages, charts, averages).
  - Note frequent errors.
- Office hours
  - Keep a log of who came by, what questions / issues were discussed.
  - Note frequent topics/content and methods used to help students.
- Discussion Sessions
  - Take attendance and ask for questions
  - Get student feedback on how the discussion session is working for them so that you may adjust your instruction accordingly: what's helping their learning? What would further help their learning?
- Give feedback not only to the student, but also the course instructor
  - What material are students understanding well / poorly?
  - Which students are challenged / failing?
  - Which students are successful / bored?
  - Suggestions for helpful additional exercises, lecture topics.
- Document
  - Take notes when meeting with the course instructor.
  - Keep **all** email communication that you sent and received from a student or course instructor, manage course email via folder in your email.
  - **Always** respond to email, acknowledge receipt, even if you may have the check with the course instructor first, e.g., "I will get back to you in 48 hours."
  - Record grades, attendance, lateness (person or assignments), excused absences.
- **Be flexible and professional** – teaching is a dynamic and highly personal process; faculty may adjust their course instruction based on their observations, student feedback, urgent personal or professional situations, and they may ask you to adjust, perform instructional tasks upon short notice.

## Create and Maintain an Effective Working Relationship:

### Questions to ask yourself:

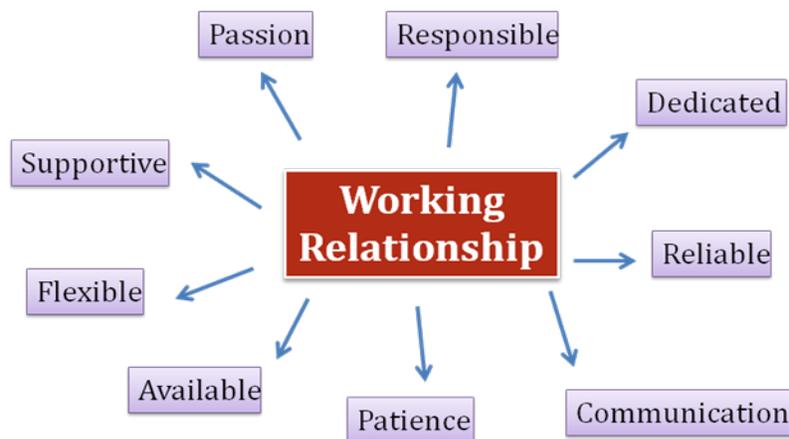
- What do you hope to gain from the TA experience?
- What are your post-graduate career plans? Do you want to be a faculty member? Researcher?
- How will you approach the TA experience given your future career plans?
- Under what type of supervision do you work best?
- What are your other time commitments? E.g., classes, exams, family
- How will you share your experiences with the course instructor? What works well? What doesn't?
- How / when will you ask for feedback on your teaching? What will be helpful to you?

### Questions to ask your course instructor:

- What has been your experience with previous TAs? What has worked well? Not worked well?
- How do TAs contribute to / support you in teaching this course? What are your expectations of TAs?
- How often will you meet with the TAs? How do you prefer to communicate with TAs?
- How would you prefer I inform you about concerns or problems?
- How will I get feedback on my teaching? What options are available?

### When things don't go as expected:

- Communicate with the course instructor first. Relate the issue in a professional manner, provide documentation as appropriate. Refrain from whining or complaining. Work towards a mutually satisfying and beneficial resolution.
- Talk to other TAs, especially those that have worked previously with this faculty.
- Seek guidance from your master's or dissertation advisor.
- Seek advice from a faculty mentor within / outside the discipline.



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