

Graduate Students: Present Instructors and Future Faculty

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September 17, 2018



There has been an increase in the number of universities relying on graduate students to teach undergraduate coursework in recent years. In some universities, such as Purdue and University of South Florida, up to 26 percent of undergraduate courses are taught by graduate instructors (U.S. News and World Report, 2017). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), there were over 135,000 graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in 2017.

With graduate instructors teaching such a large number of undergraduate courses, there are concerns about their training as teachers as well as their impact on the undergraduate population. According to one survey, undergraduates find GTAs to be friendly and approachable. However, GTAs are also viewed as less knowledgeable and confident than faculty (Kendall & Schussler, 2017).

In most universities, the primary focus of graduate students is on research and their own coursework. Teaching may be viewed as an unfortunate responsibility that graduate students have to deal with to fund their education. We recently conducted focus groups of GTAs, and many reported feeling lost and unprepared to be instructors. This sentiment is not surprising given the limited training most GTAs receive before they are assigned a class to teach. There are few fortunate GTAs who receive a semester-long training. Many GTAs receive more limited instruction on pedagogy and classroom management.

GTAs often default to lecture because that is what they have experienced as students. The road toward becoming an effective teacher for these graduate instructors is often long and tedious, and based on trial and error. We would like to urge departments and universities to do the following:

- **Offer more comprehensive and formal training to these future instructors.** This training should focus on effective teaching pedagogies. In particular, strategies for student engagement and classroom management should be at the forefront.
- **Provide sample rubrics and guidance for ethical grading.** In our focus groups, GTAs reported that grading fairly was one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. They reported their limited use of rubrics often contributed to challenging situations in the classroom surrounding grades and huge time burdens for themselves. Although GTAs will likely have to alter model rubrics for their assignments, having a base from which to work could likely assist with more efficient and equitable grading.
- **Review initial GTA syllabi and exams.** Creating syllabi and exams can be daunting for new instructors. Having a member of the department or experienced peer review drafts can be especially helpful in preventing mistakes and complications in the classroom.
- **Conduct classroom observations.** Receiving feedback from peers or faculty can help improve teaching, especially if done early in the semester. Feedback should be provided in a constructive manner with concrete suggestions for improvement.
- **Involve veteran faculty as mentors.** GTAs can learn a great deal from observing experienced instructors and receiving guidance from a dedicated teaching mentor. Given the pressing demands on senior faculty, we hope that departments and universities will value the time spent being an effective teaching mentor.
- **Connect GTAs with one another.** Universities should offer GTAs a safe place to share ideas and experiences. Departments should encourage collaboration among GTAs of similar courses. Some departments might consider pairing senior and beginning GTAs, as graduate students may be more comfortable sharing their teaching fears and weaknesses with their colleagues rather than their faculty who are in an evaluative role.
- **Communicate frequently.** GTAs reported limited support in their initial semester teaching. Providing important updates and suggestions (e.g., first class day ideas, mid-semester evaluation tools, and pertinent articles) can help create a GTA community and feelings of connection.

Being a GTA is an incredibly difficult position, often with little support. There is the need to balance research, coursework for the one's own degree, and courses one is teaching. The growing number of undergraduate courses taught by GTAs makes it imperative that we attend to the need for pedagogical training of GTAs, many of whom will soon be faculty.

References:

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Both Dr. Ahmed and Dr. Rosen supervise the graduate instructors in their departments and teach courses on college teaching, which provides them the opportunity to encourage graduate instructors to integrate experiential education into their own courses.