

# Guide for Undergraduate Teaching Assistantships



## Undergraduate Programs and Policies Committee Members 2011-2012

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## **Introduction:**

To promote best practices on SUNY campuses, the Undergraduate Policies & Programs Committee of the University Faculty Senate suggests these recommendations when considering campus policies related to undergraduate teaching assistantships.

## **Definition:**

An undergraduate Teaching Assistant (TA) is a student enrolled in a credit-bearing course with specific student learning outcomes to assist faculty in providing instructional support. Credit is awarded according to SUNY policy for credit-contact hours, which is found at [http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc\\_id=168](http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc_id=168).

## **Recommendations:**

A Teaching Assistantship can have many benefits to the student, the faculty mentor, and other students enrolled in the class.

For the TA, it can lead to:

- better understanding of the teaching and learning process
- deeper appreciation of the subject matter
- pre-professional training
- improvement of writing and presentation skills
- development of leadership and self-confidence
- better time management skills

For the faculty mentor, the TA can provide formative feedback on course assignments, course content and delivery, and how well the students in the course are learning. Students enrolled in the course can benefit from access to a peer mentor which can lead to increased engagement through greater time spent in out-of-class learning activities facilitated by the TA.

Seven aspects of good practice for undergraduate teaching assistantships have been identified by Roderick (2009) based on a review of the literature and her own research. She reported that good practice...

1. Facilitates a transparent selection process,
2. Negotiates responsibilities of assistantships,
3. Trains and mentors undergraduate teaching assistants,
4. Provides teaching assistants with visibility and opportunities to display competence,
5. Engages teaching assistants in the course and in student learning,
6. Enhances educational quality for all, and
7. Encourages fair compensation.

There are a number of ethical and pedagogical issues that must be carefully considered however when campuses and faculty decide to utilize undergraduate students as TAs. Realizing that different disciplines have different needs and expectations for a TA-ship, we propose the following general recommendations for the development of campus policies.

### **1. The Selection Process:**

Campus policies should encourage the Campus and /or individual departments to establish a transparent selection process for TAs with clearly stated criteria. These criteria may include:

- junior or senior class standing
- outstanding overall academic performance as demonstrated by GPA
- recent performance in the course (this should not be the sole criterion)
- familiarity and competence with the subject matter
- written and verbal proficiency
- relevant teaching/mentoring experience
- interpersonal and rapport-building skills
- self-directedness
- ability to set reasonable goals and priorities
- ability to cope with stress
- ability to articulate a strong motivation to assume a TA position

### **2. TA Responsibilities:**

Campus policies should encourage the negotiation of the TA's responsibilities with well established roles in order to maximize the best outcomes for all concerned. For example, the number of hours spent by the TA per week in accordance with the SUNY credit-contact hour policy as listed above, and the resources available to TAs, should be clearly articulated. Campus policies should also clearly indicate the TA's role, if any, in assigning or determining grades in a course.

### **3. Training and Continued Mentorship:**

Campus policies should address the ways that TAs are provided with opportunities to understand their responsibilities, and how to work in collaboration with others to discharge these responsibilities. For example, how will TAs receive training in ethical issues they may encounter, and how should they seek assistance in addressing any ethical or code issues that might arise? Such issues may include confidentiality, plagiarism, cheating, and navigating the dual roles of peer and TA. Will training involve a formal workshop and/or regular meetings with the faculty supervisor and/or signing of a written contract of expectations and roles? How will faculty provide regular feedback to TAs about their performance?

#### **4. Engagement and Visibility:**

When TAs are engaged in the course in meaningful ways, student learning is enhanced and the TA experience becomes an enriching opportunity. Engaging TAs develops their skills, furthers their own learning, provides them with a sense of community, and enhances their self-esteem. Positive outcomes for the entire course occur when TA tasks are well-organized and integrated with the academic content of student learning. Ways for meaningful engagement can include, but are not limited to:

- leading class discussion or break-out groups
- making presentations
- setting up classroom demonstrations
- leading tutorials, recitations, or labs
- providing feedback on student work, which may include papers, homework, quizzes, exams, and other similar assignments
- hosting focus groups to obtain student feedback on class assignments or activities
- assisting faculty with proctoring exams
- assisting faculty with class attendance

#### **5. Supervision:**

Campus policies should emphasize that it is critical for all TA classroom duties to be conducted under direct supervision of the faculty mentor, and the specific limitations of what TAs can and cannot do. For example, can a TA be left alone in the classroom to perform duties normally performed by the faculty supervisor? Can a TA be involved in evaluating or correcting papers, homework, exams, and other similar work? (Note that the final numerical or letter grade for student work should be assigned by the faculty.)

#### **6. Assessment:**

The criteria for assessing a TA's performance should be clearly linked with the specific student learning outcomes for the course. The actual student learning outcomes will likely vary depending on the specific duties and responsibilities that the student will be assigned. A sample of some possible student learning outcomes appear below.

Undergraduate teaching assistants will demonstrate:

- 1) thorough understanding of course content and the ability to explain that content effectively to others.
- 2) an understanding of ethical conduct
- 3) an understanding of the diversity of student learning styles and associated needs
- 4) enhanced knowledge and understanding of many aspects involved in college teaching
- 5) the development of their own teaching philosophy
- 6) the ability to critically self-reflect in order to enhance their skills and/or performance
- 7) the ability to facilitate tutorials by leading group discussions

- 8) the ability to engage students in the learning process
- 9) the ability to develop effective classroom materials (i.e. PowerPoint presentations, lab experiences, review sheets...)
- 10) the ability to follow directions and to perform tasks as outlined by the instructor
- 11) the ability to encourage and support students so that they work to solve the problems themselves
- 12) the ability to make good judgments
- 13) critical thinking and problem solving skills
- 14) effective communication skills
- 15) effective leadership skills
- 16) enhanced organization skills
- 17) effective time-management skills
- 18) respect for all students and their inclusive communities
- 19) initiative

Assigning the TA to complete some form of a culminating experience could enhance the academic experience. Obviously, the type of final project will vary depending on the discipline and the exact responsibilities that the TA will be given. Final projects however may include the development of new laboratory experience, course review materials, or a series of lesson plans for future TAs to use. It could also be a self-reflection of his/her teaching in the review sessions, or the creation of PowerPoint presentations or production of a video to assist future students.

Even though the TA will be receiving a grade for the credit-bearing course, it would be extremely beneficial for the student to be given specific written feedback from the faculty member on his/her areas of strength and areas for improvement. TA-ships are often used as pre-professional development and thus, receiving constructive feedback is critical for enhancing one's teaching skills. If possible, multiple assessments should be scheduled throughout the semester. Utilizing some form of student/peer assessment would be beneficial for the TA as well.

*It is the hope of the committee that these recommendations will assist campuses and faculty in the development and delivery of teaching assistantship courses which will allow students a beneficial and worthwhile experience and at the same time assist the faculty member and enhance the classroom experience for everyone.*

**References:**

Roderick, C. (Spring, 2009). Undergraduate teaching assistantships: Good practices. *MountainRise, the International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.  
<http://www.wcu.edu/facctr/mountainrise/archive/vol5no2/html/finuta.pdf>

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[http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan\\_Center/teaching/documents/BestpracticeguidelinesforUGTAprograms.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/teaching/documents/BestpracticeguidelinesforUGTAprograms.pdf)