

Chapter 6 - Especially for TA's

This chapter discusses the unique roles and responsibilities of both Graduate Teaching Assistants (TA's) and graduate students and offers advice on improving professionalism and managing workloads. This chapter also covers the various components of the Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE), which supports teaching enhancement for TA's.

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Managing Dual Roles of Student and Teacher

Classroom Issues

How do I manage students who may be close to my own age?

Not only are many TA's close in age to undergraduates, but some have also graduated from the same program in which they are now teaching. As a result, often a TA's most pressing concern is how to gain respect and credibility in an instructor role. Maintaining a professional distance is one way to establish your presence as instructor - ways to accomplish this distance are discussed later in this chapter. If you feel you cannot fairly evaluate someone whom you have known socially, it might be best to ask the student to enroll in a different section, if at all possible. If that is not possible, establish clear rules ahead of time with the student.

How can I be perceived as credible and in control of the classroom – and still be liked?

Instructors at any level want to be seen as likable, approachable, and in touch with undergraduate concerns; however, being too sociable and extroverted can undermine credibility, especially for TA's. We suggest that TA's establish explicit, reasonable guidelines early in the term and adhere to them consistently. The guidelines and the rationale for each one

should be included in the syllabus or distributed as a separate handout. By establishing boundaries at the course onset, the TA is then free to focus on those strategies that will make learning fun and enjoyable.

What are some personal qualities and attitudes useful in working with students and colleagues?

Students mention such qualities as warmth, friendliness, caring, enthusiasm, accessibility, and a sense of humor. Wilbert McKeachie, author of *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, now in its twelfth edition, mirrors the comments of many students with his research findings.

In general, if an instructor is enthusiastic, friendly, and seriously interested in the subject, the students will also be interested. Use your own experiences as a student to help determine which professional qualities and attitudes you want to incorporate into your teaching - the qualities you admired in the excellent instructors you have had are the same ones you should cultivate as an instructor.

How do I manage the interpersonal problems that may arise when I teach?

It is important to remember that the University serves a diverse student population, and you can expect a range of student abilities, attitudes, and learning styles. Socially, students also differ in their maturation levels; some are still rebelling against authority and will test you. Others do not notice that

their behavior is disturbing to their peers, and some simply do not care. Some students enjoy learning; others merely tolerate classes and focus on their social life. In spite of all this, TA's generally get along well with students.

Providing a safe and tolerant learning environment is one of the requirements for any instructor. Often, just talking to a student one-to-one and calmly pointing out a problem will solve it. If the problem continues, you might invite your faculty mentor to observe your class and offer suggestions. If the behavior is especially disruptive or difficult, you may wish to consult the staff at FSU's Counseling Center (644-2003) or encourage the student to seek assistance from them. It will usually magnify the problem if you embarrass the student in front of the class or if you resort to sarcasm or anger.

Balancing of Roles

How do I balance the conflicting, simultaneous roles of student and teacher?

Reinforced by their teaching successes, TA's may increasingly spend more and more time on teaching preparation at the expense of their own coursework. TA's need to remind themselves continually that their primary objective as graduate students is to complete their degree. TA's who find they are falling behind in their own coursework because of the

demands of the courses they teach should see the Director of Graduate Students in their department, their major advisor, or their own course instructors to discuss ways to create more balance in their schedules. Consultants in the Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) are also available to talk with you about this situation (contact a PIE consultant at pie.fsu.edu). Suggestions on time management in this chapter may also help.

How do I manage my personal life, studies, and teaching responsibilities simultaneously?

Ultimately, graduate students' ability to manage their time effectively is one predictor of immediate and long-term success. The responsibilities involved with a teaching assistantship underscore the importance of time management. A direct and honest discussion among experienced TA's, faculty, and new TA's about these responsibilities is time well spent during the initial TA training program.

Managing time effectively requires developing a strategic plan of action. In addition to laying out a semester-by-semester program of study, it is useful to outline weekly and daily schedules. The plan should include actual classroom contact and office hours, teaching preparation and grading time, seminar readings and writing assignments, exercise routines and leisure activities, and other important personal obligations.

Often students determine that "there isn't enough time in a day to do everything," at which point prioritizing responsibilities will help meet both academic and personal objectives. A written schedule clearly demonstrates that time associated with teaching, by necessity, cannot consume a disproportionate amount of the work day. Acquiring the ability to manage time effectively both adds to the overall learning experience as a TA and is a critical part of becoming a professional in academe or in the business world.

Advice from Experienced TA's

To Increase Integrity

- Tell students about yourself, sharing academic and professional interests.
- Make your expectations of their performance clear.
- Convey seriousness and be consistent.
- Dress professionally. Do not wear clothes that are too revealing or too casual (e.g., ripped jeans).

To Increase Competence

- Remind students they are responsible for their willingness or unwillingness to learn.
- Get into the essential content of the course early.
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for your subject.

- Get feedback from students on whether you are doing a good job, so that you can improve if need be. Offer students the chance to evaluate you in mid-semester, so that you may make the necessary adjustments to benefit their learning experience.
- Bring extra chalk, erasers, and other teaching materials to class.
- Take into consideration that students learn differently.

To Increase Composure

- Spend time preparing for the first week of classes. Be organized.
- Remember the students are new learners in your subject.
- Check out the room before class. Become comfortable using the classroom equipment (e.g., computers, projectors) and know whom to ask for help in case of difficulties.

To Increase Sociability

- Pass out a “get to know you survey” on the first day of class, or post one to your course website.
- Find out who your students are. Use index cards to collect information on backgrounds, goals, and interests as they relate to your class.
- Convince them during the first classes that you see them as individuals, not numbers.

- Before class, spend a few minutes interacting with students.
- Call the students by name. Create a Photo Roster to help you associate names with faces.

[Excerpted from Daryl Weisman and Ancilla Parducci, Teaching Associates. First Day and Syllabus (1997). Fall Teaching Conference.]

Maintaining Professionalism

Undergraduates expect a TA to conduct class with the same professionalism as faculty. Consider the following pointers on maintaining professionalism:

- Avoid discussing departmental faculty, other TA’s and their classes, assignments, grading, or course policies.
- Do not socialize extensively with students outside of class (e.g., date, flirt, party with), unless it is a whole-class activity. Even the appearance of flirting with a student can create misunderstandings and cause problems – be careful to avoid it.
- Make certain you understand the University’s policy on sexual harassment and sexual battery. Sexual harassment policy training is required of all TA’s. More information is available at the Office of Audit Services.
- Evaluate students’ work fairly and impartially, and avoid discussing students’ marks in public or giving out a grade to anyone but the student to whom it belongs.

- Prepare for all student-instructor encounters. Meet classes as scheduled and keep scheduled office hours.
- Use appropriate language and humor.
- Try to stay on track with course topics.

Workload Management

Consider the following scenario:

Time: Late on a Saturday evening near the end of the semester.

Place: Your apartment.

Situation: You are sitting at your desk. In one corner of the desk sits a mountainous pile of ungraded student papers. In the other corner is an equally towering pile of books for the final paper and exam in one of your graduate courses. In the center of the desk are the materials for the class you are to teach on Monday.

Question: Where do you begin? The most natural reaction would be to begin the preparations for Monday's class - after all, that is the most immediate pressure because you must walk into class on Monday and face the class - prepared or not. Failure here means immediate embarrassment in front of a large group of people; success provides immediate gratification. This TA'sk, then, becomes the most seductive one, and the sense of concrete achievement it provides may allow you, at least temporarily, to forget the burden of papers and

graduate work. Very soon, however, the feeling of pressure will again begin to build up, intensified because deadlines have drawn even closer.

Guidelines

To avoid crisis situations, begin the semester by creating some rules for yourself. You may not always be able to keep them, but you should try to adopt them as general guides.

- If you must establish priorities (and sometimes you must), remember your own graduate work. One of your greatest responsibilities is to your graduate program. Thinking practically, you must realize that your teaching assistantship is dependent upon successful completion of your own courses.
- Do not let the work pile up. Break down long-term goals into short-term goals. Large blocks of free time are difficult to find once the semester gets underway; instead, calculate how many papers you would have to read every day to return the papers to students in a reasonable time. If you have 30 students in a class, reading four or five papers each day will enable you to read them all in one week.
- Be willing to ask for help as the semester progresses, if you find yourself consistently behind with both your graduate work and your teaching, it is time to reassess your methods. Speak to your faculty advisor or TA supervisor about your problem.

- Learn to say “no.” Many TA’s take on too many responsibilities. It is much better to do a few things well and completely than to do many things poorly and incompletely.

Recommendations to help you organize your time

- Rank all tasks in their order of importance, which will give you a realistic perspective.
- Make an outline of all deadlines you must meet during the semester. This way you can determine what is due and what you can delay quickly.
- Enter all tasks and deadlines in a date book or calendar. Looking at this date book daily will allow you to maintain a realistic notion of what remains to be done. Flag important dates in the calendar, and write a reminder in your calendar before the due date for each tasks, allowing yourself enough lead-time to complete it.
- Each evening, make up a prioritized “to-do” list for the next day. Each morning, before you begin your work, go over this list to plan your day, starting with the most critical tasks first.
- Consider creating a wall chart with critical tasks and dates marked. Post it over your desk so that you can read it every day.
- Use project-management software on your computer to schedule critical tasks and dates.

- Find out what hours of the day you work most efficiently, and schedule important TA’sks during these hours of peak performance.

Adapted with permission from The Teaching Assistant Handbook (1988). *Teaching Assistant Project*, The Graduate School, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

Program for Instructional Excellence

The Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) programs operate on a comprehensive teaching assistant (TA) training model facilitated by both department-based and university-based training. University-based training is meant to complement rather than replace the excellent programs that exist in a number of departments. University-based training guarantees that all TA’s have access to professional development services. Because TA training varies considerably among departments, campus-wide preparation ensures that a minimum level of training will be provided. All services provided to faculty such as workshops, consultations, and support for technology integration are also available to TA’s. Information about PIE and its services and programs can be obtained at pie.fsu.edu

Workshops and Teaching Consultations

Workshops, panel discussions, and teaching consultations particularly relevant to TAs are available at no-cost throughout the year.

PIE Teaching Conference

To help prepare TAs for immediate undergraduate classroom responsibilities, PIE conducts an annual two-day teaching conference each fall semester in the week before classes start. The conference is free to participants and focuses on policies and services of the University as they relate to teaching. Award-winning faculty and TAs conduct sessions on a variety of topics, including course planning and delivery, interactions with students, and assessment of student performance. Conference participants have an opportunity to earn a PIE Certificate through submitting reflective statements on the sessions they attend and by writing a teaching philosophy indicating knowledge and a commitment to teaching at FSU.

Outstanding Teaching Assistant Awards (OTTA)

The Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) also sponsors the Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award (OTTA) program. These awards are given to TAs in recognition of their distinguished contributions to undergraduate student learning through excellence in instruction. These TAs receive a certificate and cash award at The Celebration of Graduate Student Excellence, an annual spring event.

PIE Associate Program

The PIE Associate Program improves teaching across campus by helping departments enhance their TA training programs and establish interdisciplinary connections and community among graduate students at FSU. At the end of the spring semester PIE calls for interested departments with experienced TAs to apply for acceptance into the PIE Associate Program.

Applications are reviewed and representatives from departments are chosen for PIE Associate positions. PIE Associates receive a stipend for their work and serve for one year and may apply to continue participation in the program at the end of their tenure. The stipend received for participating in this program does not reduce the amount received for a teaching assistantship.

PIE Associates model what they have learned about good teaching and adapt it to the specific needs of their department and discipline. Departmental programs are closely coordinated with the university-wide program and together demonstrate how general teaching principles are applied within various academic disciplines. The PIE Associate experience advances not only campus-wide TA training but also gives valuable experience in service to committees and focus groups.

Online Resources

Online resources are available at pie.fsu.edu that allow TAs to explore a wide variety of pedagogical strategies, techniques, and technologies that increase teaching effectiveness and enhance student learning.

TAs will find resources to help them apply instructional technologies such as podcasting and “clickers,” use proven methodologies that engage students and help them learn online and in the classroom, and implement rigorous, meaningful assessments of teaching and learning.

More about PIE Recognitions

PIE Teaching Certificates

During the Fall Conference, TAs can earn a PIE Teaching Certificate. Examples of topic areas from previous conferences include: Course Development, Course Delivery, Assessment and Evaluation, Social Interaction, and Professional Development.

Outstanding TA Awards

Each year, undergraduate students and faculty members nominate outstanding teaching assistants. Up to 15 recipients of this University award are recognized at the Spring Celebration of Graduate Student Excellence, held in April.

Resources on TA Training

Books/Articles

- Anthony, W. P. (1981). *Management: Competencies and incompetencies*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2005). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed.). Lexington, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Nyquist, J. D., Abbott, R. D., Wulff, D. H., & Sprague, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Preparing the professorate of tomorrow to teach: Selected readings in TA training*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.