

Existing Best Practices and Recommendations

The Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (TA) Task Force at SUNY Oswego was convened in October 2014 with the charge of examining current practices relating to TA use, identifying best practices both from within and without the institution, and making policy recommendations to Faculty Assembly for an institutional policy governing the use of TAs. These recommendations can be found in the accompanying document: **SUNY Oswego Policy for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants**.

The final membership of the task force is as follows:

Michelle Bishop, First Year Experience Librarian, Library Representative
Denise DiRienzo, Director of Experiential Learning
James Early, Computer Science, UUP representative
Christine Hirsch, Communication Studies, SCMA Representative
Napatsorn (Pom) Jiraporn, Marketing, School of Business Representative
Brad Korbmesmyer, Interim Dean of Graduate Studies
Adrienne McCormick, Dean of College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Michael Nehring, Technology, School of Education Representative
Jennifer Olori, Biological Sciences, CLAS Representative
Kirsten Parsons, Biological Sciences, Task Force Chair
Jessica Reeher, Communication Studies

In the process of fulfilling its charge, the task force has examined existing policies for teaching assistants at a variety of other institutions, including the Guide for Undergraduate Teaching Assistantships put forward by the SUNY Faculty Senate Undergraduate Programs and Policies Committee (2011-2012), an examination of the policies at sister-institutions like SUNY Fredonia and SUNY New Paltz, a review of policies utilized by non-SUNY institutions including the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota, and an examination of literature related to TA mentorship and training.

In addition to gathering information on external policies, the task force distributed a survey on 19 January 2015 to Chairs and Program Directors of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, School of Education, School of Business, and the School of Communications, Media, and the Arts. Chairs and Program Directors were asked to fill out the survey themselves and to distribute it to their departments so that faculty could fill it out no later than 4 February 2015. A reminder email was sent on 27 January. The survey closed on 5 February. The survey was designed to collect information regarding roles and responsibilities of undergraduate TAs and feedback from instructors regarding the value of the TA experience. We also looked at departmental TA surveys previously administered in the Departments of Art and Communication Studies, the results of which were provided to the task force.

A total of 74 people answered the survey. Respondents were primarily from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, where Biological Sciences, Modern Languages, and Sociology made up a large portion of the responses, particularly pertaining to TAs. The School of Business, School of Education, and School of Communication, Media and the Arts were also represented.

Instructors who have TAs utilize them in a variety of ways.

Class size was not a predictor of TA usage, although TA responsibilities seemed to differ by class enrollment. 36% of the classes that used TAs had enrollment from 0-30 students. These types of classes tended to use only one TA, and were more likely to be identified as a lab section. 28% of classes that used TAs had enrollment from 30-60 students. These were the most variable as a group; some of these classes had only one TA while others had multiple TAs, and descriptions of TA tasks varied widely. 23% of classes using TAs had between 60-100 students enrolled, and 13% of classes using TAs had over 100 students. These two groups were more likely to report multiple TAs. TAs in these sections were more likely to be grading or taking attendance, and were reported as important to the effective functioning of the course.

More than 75% of the respondents who indicated that they had lecture TAs indicated that their TAs attended all or almost all of the lectures over the semester. In TA lecture experiences, the most common responsibilities were answering student questions, assisting with proctoring exams, and running student study or question and answer sessions. More than 90% of respondents who indicated that they had lab or studio TAs indicated that the TA attended all or almost all of the lab/studio meetings over the semester, and within the labs TAs were likely to assist with answering student questions and with set-up and tear-down.

It seems as though TAs are occupying roles that are beneficial to instructors, but not affording major savings in time or effort; rather, having a TA often occupies more time for the instructor. Less than 10% of respondents indicated that having a TA costs them no extra time:

"Having a TA can shift my use of time somewhat but it does not save me time. Mentoring a TA takes time and effort to be effective and meaningful. If I wanted a "helper" for "menial tasks" I would hire a student worker for pay."-Member of Sociology Department

"While I do ask them to do more menial things like keep dry erase markers with them for those days when all markers have disappeared from the classroom and keep attendance, the real value of the TAs comes from their ability to engage students as peers. Particularly in the intro course, students are often scared to ask the professor for help or clarification at the outset. TAs are approachable and help us overcome gaps in my instruction. Their feedback to me on what is/isn't "sticking" for students is a significant help in revising instructional practices." -Member of English Department.

"I do not have my TAs do any menial tasks for anything that does not serve an objective of gaining knowledge about teaching and learning. This semester I gave my TA more leeway with in-class activities she wanted to develop and freed her from more mundane tasks such as attending each class and taking notes. TAs are not there to lessen my teaching or office duties. This is a class for them to learn and all tasks they complete should be related to that end. I have had excellent results with my TAs and they have all commented on how much they learn through the experience." –Member of Anthropology Department

Most instructors who have TAs view Teaching Assistantship as an academic activity.

Over 75% of the TAs reported in the task force survey received academic credit, either through a department course, through an independent study, or through a GST course. Most instructors indicated that learning outcomes were clearly defined for their TAs either through a contract or learning agreement, a syllabus, verbal conversation, or some combination of these experiences. Evaluation of TA performance (and grading of the TA experience) consistently included evaluation of whether the defined learning outcomes were met. Some instructors also formalized their role in the TA experience through their syllabus or agreement:

"I prepare a "Teach Anthropology" syllabus that outlines their duties and mine" – Member of Anthropology Department

"We spend fall semester recruiting and interviewing seminar leaders. We spend the spring running training sessions for the course (they have all taken the course they will run). We are very clear about our goals and objectives, both of us for them and of all of us --as a team --for the students who will be in their sections." –Member of History Department

TA experiences are mentorship experiences.

Over 85% of instructors reported that they view themselves as mentors for their TAs, and their reported training practices, meeting schedules, dissemination of content materials, and rapport with their TAs support this. Instructors report sharing readings related to content materials via email, regular communication about classroom policies and procedures, and frequent meetings throughout the semester outside of the class that the TA is engaged in:

"My TAs and I prepare some lecture materials, class activities, and class assignments together cooperatively. They play an active role in classes. Also, I give my TAs opportunities to prepare materials, activities, and assignments for classes themselves (under my supervision). To the extent that they are comfortable, I encourage them to take as active role in the class as they wish. I consider this a mentoring process" – Member of Sociology Department

Across disciplines instructors use having TAs as an opportunity for increased reflective teaching:

"Usually during our weekly meetings to prepare for class I will ask the TA how they are finding the experience, whether they have any new questions about the TA experience/teaching techniques, and what they feel they are getting out of the experience. We discuss what went well and what didn't, and what we can modify for the next week. At the end of the semester we do a similar, but more directed and detailed discussion. This year I was able to ask whether the TA felt they met their own learning objectives, and describe areas where they felt they needed more experience." –Member of Department of Biological Sciences

"We have regular meetings and I consider my TAs to be partners in the development and delivery of the course. They all write final reflection pieces as part of the new process established in Spring 2014 but I think the most valuable reflection work is done face-to-face. The input of TAs has, over the years, dramatically influenced course revisions, all for the better." –Member of English Department

"[The TA served as a] Student Mentor - engaged GEO 101 in brief discussion about different aspects of college life before the lab each week. –Member of Department of Atmospheric and Geological Sciences

Across campus, TA experiences are usually positive experiences for instructors, TAs, and students enrolled in classes with TAs.

SUNY Oswego has myriad examples of best practices currently existing on campus. Instructors are putting time, thought, and incredible effort into crafting experiences that are positive for TAs, and are receiving benefits from having TAs as well:

"My TA's keep me updated on social norms, trends and the culture on campus. They are an invaluable resource and keep me on point! Love Them!!" –Member of Sociology Department

"The experience is eye opening for each TA" –Member of Department of Communication Studies

"[TAs are] crucial to helping students acclimate to the pace and projects envisioned for the class. –Member of Health Promotion and Wellness Department

"During their Open Office Hours - 4 hours per week, my TAs act as supportive leaders and peer-mentors. This can include: offering assistance with where and how to find activities on campus, tutors, internships, declaring a major or minor, using MYOswego to their advantage, locating clubs/activities, career building and/or investigating, assist in helping students hone thesis topic, assist in understanding and locat[ing] scholarly research using the Penfield library databases, proofing papers, helping with

APA writing, helping students with organization, helping students with DegreeWorks, helping students study for exams, and assisting in understanding any concepts that students ask for help with." -Member of Human Development Department

"[TAs] monitor student lab work for safe practices." –Member of Technology Department

"TAs are "models" as well as an additional resource for students. If I say "You should study like this", the effect is not the same as a TA saying "Studying like this is the way to go" -- it's more believable and acceptable from a peer. And sometimes students feel nervous or ashamed to ask an instructor questions -- "She might think I'm dumb" or "I know I should I know this" or "This is so easy, I must be stupid" -- but it's ok to ask a TA. Plus TAs can give feedback that students don't know to give ... such as "That problem took way too long" or "There was an error in the solution to this example"."
-Member of Mathematics Department

The Undergraduate TA Task Force aimed to build on these existing best-practices in developing its Policy for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants in order to increase their reach. We believe that every TA experience should be an authentic experience with opportunities for genuine growth and development, beneficial to the TA, the instructor, and students enrolled in classes with TAs. We also sought flexibility in the policy so that instructors and departments that currently have excellent practices can continue to do so, while instructors and departments that are just beginning to contemplate TA experiences or who seek to improve on existing practices can do so within the same framework.

Acknowledgements

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