The Graduate School, Northwestern University (/.../index.html)

Guidelines for Graduate Teaching Assistants and their Advisors

These are The Graduate School (TGS)-endorsed guidelines that model how to align expectations between faculty, instructors and their TAs. The recommendations include obligations for both the faculty advisor and graduate student teaching assistants (TAs), as well as suggestions for departments, DGSes and faculty.

TGS wishes to emphasize that TAships should be structured around the needs of the undergraduate curriculum as well as graduate students' learning outcomes.

Best Practices to Calibrate Expectations and Responsibilities

The Faculty supervisor undertakes to:

- Encourage TAs to partake of departmental and university programs that enhance pedagogical knowledge and proficiencies.
- Provide a timely overview of the syllabi so that TAs can prepare.
- Whenever possible, provide TAs with free copies of course learning and support materials.
- Orient TAs to their course, provide regular and meaningful feedback on their work, coordinate when there are multiple TAs on a course through regular staff meetings where course progression and problems are discussed, and ensure that grading practices are fair and consistently applied.
- In lecture classes, consider giving TAs the option to deliver all or part of a lecture in order to gain experience with this teaching mode.
- Be explicit about how TAing in a given course will contribute to the department's curriculum, and how the TA's efforts will contribute to her/his professional development. Stipulate the learning outcomes.
- Be available to meet with and mentor TAs in advance of and throughout the quarter.
- Observe TAs classroom teaching and give prompt and constructive oral and/or written feedback.
- Oversee the recording of course grades and take responsibility for the accuracy of data supplied to the Registrar.

The Student TA undertakes to:

- Dedicate 12-15 hours per week (averaged over the quarter) to TA duties.
- Approach the TAship as a learning experience complementary to other aspects of graduate education.
- Become familiar with university and college or school policies, requirements, and deadlines pertaining to topics such as academic integrity, safety protocols, maintaining a classroom respectful of diversity, as well as the Registrar's procedures and deadlines.
- Acquire proficiency in the course content and methodologies, complemented by appropriate pedagogical methods.
- Manage the assigned TA responsibilities along with other academic work, keeping to deadlines, advancing appropriately through academic milestones.
- Meet regularly the faculty supervisor, request feedback, and seek opportunities to continually develop pedagogical proficiencies.
- Hold regular scheduled office hours.

Important Considerations

Departments
• Departments/programs are urged to develop their own training events that recognize the unique teaching needs of their specific field. Departmental/program efforts (such as workshops, course manuals, and repositories of syllabi, assignments, and exams) supplement the supervision and mentoring undertaken by faculty in charge of a class.
• Departments should strive to equitably and appropriately assign TA responsibilities to graduate students, bearing in mind students’ year of study, academic interests, and professional goals. Regularly review CTECs and follow up with students and DGSs if concerns arise.

DGSes

• PhD and MFA students’ TA duties should be appropriately calibrated to their experience. For example, a student who is wholly inexperienced in the classroom might begin by observing and assisting a master teacher, grading, and helping to design exam questions, whereas a student with experience running discussion sections might eventually be given responsibility to run a course unit or even to design and run whole course.
• The Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching (http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/programs-events/grad/index.html) offers orientation, workshops, certificate program for graduate students, consultations, and bibliographic assistance with literature on college-level teaching.
• DGSes should become apprised of TA opportunities in allied departments (and, in some cases, other Chicago-area institutions) and, as appropriate, encourage advanced PhD students to investigate ways to broaden their experience.

All Faculty

• Even when a graduate student is the teacher of record, a faculty member should oversee their work.
• Graduate student teaching should be supervised by the teacher of record and observed by a faculty mentor minimally once per quarter (usually more, and repeatedly if serious concerns are noted), with prompt feedback provided. In addition, Searle Center staff will observe classes and offer feedback.
• Faculty are responsible for continuous and conscientious training, mentoring, and supervising of their teaching assistants. This includes ensuring that they are acquainted with good practices related to academic integrity, procedures when dishonesty is suspected, and processes for the adjudication of violations; tutoring options and writing support at Northwestern; the expectations of their college or school’s office of academic advising; and the role of their college or school’s associate dean for undergraduate studies.
• The faculty of record are responsible for all grades assigned in their classes. Therefore, they should carefully oversee TAs’ work as graders by providing clear and consistent guidelines and grading rubrics, samples of feedback, and spot-check TAs’ work.
• No TA may be paid to tutor any undergraduate student in the work of a class being taught by that same TA.
• No TA may be responsible for final assessment of the work of another TGS graduate student, even if they oversee their progress in a course. View TGS Policy (http://www.northwestern.edu/about/policies/teaching.html)
• TAs are full-time graduate students who contribute to the university’s mission for undergraduate teaching at the same time that their TA experience consolidates and advances other aspects of their academic and professional development at Northwestern. As such, their in-classroom commitments, time spent grading, and preparatory work should be kept within reasonable bounds. Approximately 12-15 hours per week, averaged over the quarter, is a reasonable rule of thumb.

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