What is it Like to be an Undergraduate?

The way we perceive something, or someone, depends upon our perspective: who we are, what we know, what we have experienced, where we are standing. So, although for many TAs the undergraduate experience is a part of the not-so-distant past, they feel themselves removed from the society of undergraduates, distant from their way of living and thinking. Having moved beyond the undergraduate level to the graduate they may forget what it was like to be an undergraduate. The TA who can remember this experience, however, and empathize with the trials and stresses of undergraduate life may be able, in the end, to reach more students than those who view them from afar.

Although the life of an undergraduate may seem idyllic when looked at through the eyes of the overburdened graduate student, it is not quite as simple as memory makes it. Most traditional undergraduates have a full schedule of classes, at least twelve credits (more often, sixteen or more). In addition to this, a majority of undergraduates must work at part-time jobs to subsidize their education. For many students, such a job is a necessity: without it, they would be forced to leave school. Furthermore, many of these students are living away from home for the first time in their lives—an emotionally and socially demanding period. Clearly, students who are overwhelmed by work and social life will have difficulties investing the time needed into their coursework.

Once TAs recognize that the life of an undergraduate is not always an easy one, they are in a position to really help students: to consider ways to translate this knowledge into action, to adopt teaching strategies that acknowledge and alleviate the problems that come along with being an undergraduate. Perhaps the most effective first step TAs can take is to stop thinking about their students as an amorphous mass—the undergraduates—and attempt to see them as individuals. Don’t make generalizations about students (i.e., undergraduates are lazy, all they care about is partying, etc.). Most students are sincerely concerned with their education and more than willing to work hard in order to succeed. You may be surprised at the details of your students’ lives, at the range of their goals, the weight of their responsibilities.

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Combining Teaching with Research

What is the connection between research and teaching? Is there a connection between research and good teaching? Do undergraduates benefit from faculty members or TAs who devote considerable amount of time to research rather than to teaching full-time? What are the benefits for the students in having a TA who is engaged in teaching, studying, and researching? What are the problems in this arrangement?

Although the benefits teachers gain from research are generally clear to those engaged in it, people on the other side of the fence may question the efficacy of such a dual system. Undergraduates and people outside of the academy often see the researcher as someone who is seeking to avoid the responsibility of teaching, someone in retreat from the "real world." The notion that jobs are rigidly compartmentalized—teachers teach, nurses nurse, waiters wait—does not hold true. Almost any job is a combination of many skills and duties; the most interesting fields are those that intersect with many others, where a person gets the opportunity to integrate many interests and talents into a single satisfying job. Teaching in a research university like Rutgers can be such a satisfying occupation, and, as it is important to note, it benefits not only the teacher but that teacher’s students and society at large.

The teacher/researcher, of course, is the obvious beneficiary; being paid to explore problems of interest in one’s chosen field is a joy. In addition, having the chance to discuss new ideas with a group of interesting (interested) students is a way of testing ideas. In addition, the act of teaching provides a constant opportunity to rethink old questions; this process often leads to a new way of looking at an old problem, even of solving it. Finally, in the end, the research may result in some real contribution to the field—the sciences, engineering, the humanities, the social sciences—that will benefit others in the field and the constituents served by the field.

Undergraduates, of course, benefit also. The teacher who is currently involved in research, who stays abreast of the field, is able to keep his/her teaching fresh: knowing about new ideas, new theories, new approaches to a subject are necessary to anyone actively involved in research. Students, therefore, are given a broader, more current, view of the field than might be available to a student with a teacher whose research ended when the degree was awarded. Students can be challenged and excited by a teacher whose subject seems open-ended and evolving rather than closed and final.

Undergraduates do have a legitimate complaint, however, when a faculty member wastes too much class time on an arcane, highly specialized problem. Unless students have mastered the basics in a field, they simply will not be interested in these matters. It is useful to bring in relevant ideas from research when they assist students in understanding the course material or when they offer opportunities for students to build upon their basic knowledge. TAs must balance their desire to keep their students aware of the latest ideas in a field with the students’ need to learn the basics of the field. The first without the second is meaningless.

In addition, problems arise when students perceive the faculty member or TA as too busy to really work with them. Faculty members who spend all their time in the lab and are unavailable to their students are not, of course, meeting their obligations to students, and students have a right to complain about such treatment.

The key to the research university succeeding for all members (continued on page 3)
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is the ability to balance the roles of researcher and teacher: one role cannot take priority over the other. If either role is neglected, the faculty member or TA is not fulfilling his/her obligation to the university, to the department, to the undergraduates.

Faculty members engaged in important research attract other such faculty members to the campus, who, in turn, attract better graduate students and undergraduates. Research also brings needed funds to the university in the shape of grants. Because a university gets its identity from the kinds of teaching and research undertaken by its faculty, by the level of commitment demonstrated to teaching and research, it is important that all members of the university community are aware of the nature of this commitment.

Office Hours

The importance of maintaining regular office hours cannot be overemphasized. Students must feel that they have access to their teachers, and, no matter how good a teacher you are, if the students feel that you are inaccessible, too busy to meet with them, they will feel cheated and may lose interest in the class.

Set office hours at the beginning of the semester and stick to them. Publish the hours on the syllabus you distribute at the beginning of the year. Remind students often that you are there every week, same time, same place, and that they shouldn’t hesitate to bring up any difficulties they are having in the class.

Even if students do not come, be there, be available. Bring work, especially at the beginning of the semester, so that if no students show up, as is often the case, you will not become frustrated at losing the time. However, always remember that this worktime is a gift—if and when students arrive, they should not be made to feel as if they are interrupting your important work.

Leave the office door open during your assigned hours or you may not hear the timid knocks of students when they finally work up enough nerve to see you in your office. When students come to the door, put your work aside and make them feel like welcome guests not unwelcome intruders. For some students, it takes an enormous amount of courage to go and speak to a faculty member face to face. Do not justify these fears.

Do not discount the importance of this kind of contact for your students. One-on-one tutorials with the teacher should be the norm not the exception. No two students learn in the same way, and such office visits are a means of helping you to discover the ways your students approach the course.

If students do not come to see you before midterm, as often happens, make sure they come in after by requiring them to make an appointment to see you after you return the midterm (or first significant written assignment). Many students who would not seek out this contact are nevertheless grateful for the opportunity to let the teacher get to know them a little better.
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Arrange for your students to meet with you in your office at least once during the semester. This will give you an opportunity to talk to each person individually, to discuss his/her work in the class and to begin establishing a level of personal rapport with each individual student. Some students believe that the only time they need to go see a teacher is when there is trouble brewing—an attitude held over from high school days.

Be understanding when students come to you with problems or with excuses for late or unsatisfactory work: they honestly do have tight schedules and are under a lot of pressure. Help them if you can; don’t put another obstacle in their way. This does not mean that you should fall for every line they give you, but don’t be so skeptical that you disallow all excuses. Dealing with them in a fair and honest manner is the best policy. Try to find ways that they can meet their commitment to your class without going under in the rest of their life.

If a student seems to have real difficulties in some area, consider how you can help. Know to whom you can refer them to receive the help they need. Remember that many undergraduates have not yet discovered the safety nets that the university provides for them. You can guide the students to the proper office where they can get help with their problems—the deans of students, the health center, the library, the writing center, the math/science learning center, wherever. If they can get other aspects of their lives working more smoothly, they will better be able to meet the obligations of your class.

DATES TO REMEMBER

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Teaching Assistant Project

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