

The Status of TAs: An Assessment

Other issues of this newsletter have dealt mainly with pedagogical matters that TAs might find useful in carrying out their responsibilities as teaching assistants. The focus will shift a bit in this issue, concentrating instead on the TA's position in the university, the role rather than responsibilities; for, whatever the assignment, whatever the workload, whatever the program, the classification "teaching assistant" is common to all, and it is that status that is often misunderstood. The question of status is not trivial because, after all, how we feel about our position and how others view us has an affect on the way we perform our jobs.

TAs know the difficulties of their position. Being both students and teachers, they are caught between two worlds. Excluded from the prestige of being a faculty member yet burdened by responsibilities far beyond those of the average student, TAs often feel excluded from both groups. They are expected to carry out their teaching assignments while keeping up with coursework and their own research. Spare time is a rarity. TAs are even deprived of the satisfaction of a sense of communal suffering--"we're all in this together"--since the nature of TAs' responsibilities vary widely from program to program and even within programs. For the most part, however, TAs accept these facts without complaint and work hard to develop their teaching skills because they view their teaching assistantship as an apprenticeship, a needed introduction into a profession where they can hope to receive future rewards for time and energy invested now. Yet, in spite of their hard work and dedication, their position is often unappreciated or misunderstood, their value to the university underestimated, *especially by those outside of the university.*

Recently, for example, TAs have become the focus in a new argument about the quality of higher education in this country, and have come, for many, to symbolize one of the weaknesses, indeed failures, of the U.S. educational system. TAs are viewed as a bad solution to the problem of faculty members who have lost interest in teaching. On top of this, they are cited as one of the causes of the appallingly inadequate grasp of basic knowledge found among large numbers of undergraduates. That both of these arguments against TAs are unreasonable is clear to anyone closely involved in a TA program. Unfortunately, to recognize that these two perceived problems are, at least, oversimplifications does not much help the TA who is struggling--usually successfully--to provide his or her undergraduates with a quality education.

Added to these problems, TAs now have something new to think about: media-image problems. A commercial currently being aired on television should be a cause for concern not only among TAs but also among Rutgers faculty, administrators, students and their parents. The commercial is for Iona College, a small liberal arts college in New York. In this advertise-

Educators Look to the Future of the Profession

The importance of nationwide TA training and development was the focus of a recent conference, attended by over 500 TAs, faculty, and administrators from all across the U.S. Serious and widespread interest is finally being focused on the training of TAs, their rights and responsibilities, their future in the professoriate, and the obligations of the university to TAs. The conference was entitled, "Preparing the Professoriate of Tomorrow for Teaching: Enhancing the TA Experience"; its purpose was to analyze and discuss successful TA training projects and plan strategies for improving the situations of TAs across the country. Two of the keynote speakers offered overviews on the state of university teaching and teacher development across the country, looking not at TAs alone but at all members of the professoriate.

Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, sought to define some basic aspects of good teaching. According to Boyer, effective teachers had to be:

- a. well-informed; they had to have something substantial to teach;
- b. able to relate knowledge to the readiness of their students;
- c. able to stimulate active (creative) learning in the classroom;
- d. an open and authentic human being; to have integrity; self-confidence to let the student know who they are.

Necessities of Life: Make-Up Exams

Creating an exam that is a useful learning tool for the student and an effective evaluative instrument for the teacher is never a simple task. Much thought, effort, and time goes into the creation of such an exam. What can a teacher do, however, when students are absent on the day of the exam and then request make-up exams? Must the teacher invest an equal amount of time in making up an exam for those one or two students who failed to show up as they did in making up the original exam? Is it fair to the rest of the class to allow others to take the same exam at a later date when there is a chance that they may confer with fellow students on the content of the exam? How can a TA deal with this problem?

The best strategy is to head off the problem before it happens. To begin with, a TA should carefully delineate his or her policy on make-up exams, consistent with university policy, on the very first day of class. According to university policy, "a student may not be permitted to take a deferred examination unless his/her absence from a scheduled examination has been authenticated and excused in accordance with policies governing class attendance; faculty members may require students to produce

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evidence of the reason advanced for inability to take a final exam at the scheduled time and place." (*Handbook for Faculty*, Rutgers University) Furthermore, it is important to remember when making up exam schedules that "It is the policy of the university to excuse without penalty students who are absent because of religious observance, and to allow the makeup of work missed because of such absences. A student absent from an examination because of required religious observance will be given an opportunity to make up the examination without penalty." (*New Brunswick Undergraduate Catalog*, Rutgers University)

Given these guidelines, the TA should do two things at the very beginning of the semester. First, be certain that exams do not fall on any religious holidays. The university issues a list of religious holidays to the staff every year; this list is also reprinted in the *TA Handbook*. If one of your exams inadvertently comes into conflict with a religious holiday, you are obligated to give the student a make-up exam. Second, tell your students that anyone who is absent for an exam *must* bring in a note excusing the absence. Make it very clear to your students that without a written excuse, no make-up exam can be given. Include this information on your syllabus, printed in bold type. At the risk of being judged coldhearted by your students, tell them at the beginning of the semester that if an exam is missed because of a death, they must bring in some proof; unless you do this, you may find the mortality rate of grandparents in your classes astonishingly high.

Once you've done all you possibly can to discourage students from

frivolously missing exams, you must be prepared to deal with those few students who do have valid excuses for missing the exam and deserve a make-up. Different types of exams entail different types of make-ups. For example, an exam that requires essay answers may not have to be drastically altered while a fill-in-the-answer test may demand significant rewriting; you must decide how closely the two tests can resemble each other while still maintaining the integrity of the exam. In either case, it is always best to have the student make up the exam as soon as possible after the original test date and before you have returned the graded exams to the rest of your students.



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Although these qualities do not seem easily measured, Professor Boyer urged that a combination of self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and student evaluation be combined to present an accurate and full estimation of a teacher's abilities. He reminded the audience that the purpose of evaluations is not to critique the professor but to evaluate the process of teaching and learning *as it is going on*. Without some kind of ongoing evaluation, it is difficult for teachers to improve their teaching skills in an effective manner.

James A. Anderson, Professor of Psychology at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Benjamin E. Mays Academy of Scholars, was concerned about the failure of American colleges to achieve teaching excellence--among

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ment, a group of students and educators from Iona extol its virtues. Numbered among the selling points of this institution is, fairly enough, the strong commitment the faculty has to its students--but, unfairly, the strength of this commitment is evidenced by the pledge that their students will never have to worry about being taught by a teaching assistant. The implications of this ad are, at very least, disturbing, reflecting negatively upon all universities that employ TAs but, most directly, upon TAs themselves.

Clearly this ad uses the phrase "teaching assistant" as a code-word for inexperience and incompetence, calling into question the abilities and professionalism of TAs. These charges are simply not born out by facts and are easily enough refuted. According to surveys conducted at Rutgers, a large percentage of TAs have had previous teaching experience, either at the college or other levels. Furthermore, experience is not a valid criterion for judging teaching effectiveness; one could teach for twenty years and never learn to be a good teacher. TAs are, for the most part, enthusiastic, actively committed to teaching, and working hard to develop their teaching skills and present

innovative and useful courses to their students. In fact, many students, in evaluations, have singled out courses taught by TAs as the best courses that they have ever had. The ad also ignores the reality that there can be incompetent teachers at any level--TA, junior faculty, senior faculty--and that a good institution will try to weed out incompetent teachers, no matter what their rank. Also implicit in the ad is the suggestion that colleges employing TAs are somehow short-changing their students, that students taught by regular faculty receive a better education. The ad does not say that universities with the greatest number of TAs are usually large research universities with Ph.D. programs, more likely to attract top faculty, thus exposing students to a type of researcher/scholar/teacher and a range of opinion and information that smaller liberal arts colleges simply cannot provide.

The only real defense against such fallacious attacks is for TAs to continue to demonstrate their commitment and their ability in the way they have for years--one semester at a time, one class at a time. There is no quick fix for these problems plaguing higher education; they cannot be solved overnight. Meanwhile, TAs can demand their rights as apprentices. Every program in the university should offer their TAs the instructional support necessary to perform their duties and should make an effort to be responsive to their needs. It is unlikely that the job of the TA will become any easier in the immediate future--change in such areas is often slow--but the university and all its departments must continue to ensure that TAs are treated as full and respected members of the university community.

TAs are urged to contribute to a dialogue on these issues for *TapTalk*; why not take a few minutes

Notes From the Field

What is the most difficult part of being a ta? How do you cope with it?

I work in the computer lab for the undergraduate School of Business. My job is something new, so the biggest problem for me has been that the role is not clearly defined; it's difficult to get faculty to recognize who we are and what we're doing. It's slowly changing, as we make efforts to reach out and communicate with faculty members who don't even know we're here, but we still need more faculty input.

Sharon Zydney
Communications &
Information Science

Perhaps the most difficult thing is being prepared to interact with students, and just knowing all of the technical information needed in a lab. When you are just a year or two older than your students, it's sometimes hard getting them to listen. But it's important to make them listen because their grades will be affected in the end if they don't.

Paul Stoecker
Chemistry

The worse part, I guess, is nervousness about getting up in front of group and knowing I'm probably going to embarrass myself. There's experience I have to gain to be a good teacher, and I can only gain it by doing. It's scary but exciting.

Leigh Grossman
History

during the winter recess to share your opinions with other TAs? Send your comments to: *TapTalk*, Office of the Graduate Dean, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus.

Coming in February

Tax Tips: A Workshop for TAs



Look for details in February *TapTalk*.

Educators Meet

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all segments of its teaching staff--and offered ways to improve the quality of teaching in this country. He suggested a number of reasons that college teaching has failed to achieve excellence:

- a. Little attention is paid to student evaluations.
- b. There is little accountability in the academy. Even when ineptness is identified, nothing much is done.
- c. Historically, teaching is subject and content centered, not student-centered.
- d. Diversity has been ignored.
- e. Student feedback is ignored.
- f. Teaching across the curriculum has been ignored
- g. Teachers refuse to teach higher cognitive skills along with content.

What can be done to remedy these ills? According to Professor Anderson, there must be a growing

movement toward accountability; more administrators with vision must be found; the university must recognize the presence of diversity among its members and seek to meet the needs of this diverse population; and finally, there must be more demand for real faculty development.

Interestingly, both of these noted educators agreed that more serious attention must be paid to student evaluations and feedback. Both also stressed the need for teachers to take the initiative--to demand training where it is not provided, and, when possible, to share their knowledge with others in the profession. This call for comprehensive faculty development is already being heeded in some sectors of the university, but, until it is heard by all, the university can never hope to achieve true excellence.

DATES TO REMEMBER



DECEMBER

6	Critical Incidents Workshop- Economics Dept.
13	Regular Classes End
14	Fall Exams Begin
22	Fall Exams End Change of INC grades for Fall 1988 term must be received by Office of Academic & Students Services due by this date.
23	Winter Recess Begins

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