

## The Age Difference: Understanding Returning Students

One of the rewards of teaching is that each semester presents exciting challenges, including the opportunity to work with new students from diverse demographic and educational backgrounds. At a large university like Rutgers, TAs will, most likely, have returning adult students in their classes—students who may be twenty years older (or more) than the TA. Returning learners are typically 25 years old and have either returned to school to complete their degrees, or are beginning baccalaureate study for the first time. Many have raised families and participated in active careers, and their reasons for enrolling can vary from taking a few classes for personal enrichment to completing a degree program for career advancement.

For some TAs, it can be intimidating to be younger than one's students. It is important to understand that, at least fundamentally, returning students are in your class for the same reason as the traditional age undergraduates: they want to learn the subject matter; earn a good grade; and they want to have a positive experience. There are, however, some critical differences that need to be noted so that problems do not arise down the road.

### The Age Difference

Many young TAs worry that continuing students will have trouble affording them the proper respect, given that they are so much younger than the student. Questions of respect are not unique to classrooms with large age differences. Many typical undergraduates may also have issues with being taught by someone who is only a few years older than they. If you conduct yourself professionally, all students, both young and experienced, will hopefully see you as someone they can learn a great deal from regardless of your age. Loss of respect from your students has little to do with your age and everything to do with how you conduct yourself in the classroom.

## Taxed About Taxes? What You Need to Know!

Tax time can be a maze of confusion for graduate students. How do I claim my fellowship? What about my Teaching or Research Assistantship? What about tuition remission? My on-campus job? Will I get any money back? Do I owe money to the IRS? All of these questions can be answered at the Tax Workshop for Graduate Students. Learn timely tax information and where to look for savings. This workshop is especially important for graduate students holding fellowships and assistantships. The workshop will only address tax issues for U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Get started early and put a stop to the worrying.

**Brian Levine, MBA, CPA**

**Monday, February 25th  
6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.**

**Graduate Student Lounge  
College Avenue Campus**

Contact Amber Carpenter if you have questions about the workshop: 932-7449/  
acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu

## Returning Students...

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### The Needs of Returning Learners

Returning students often have families and jobs as well as their university workload. While this does not exempt them from the requirements of the class, the instructor needs to be aware that returning students (or any students with these types of responsibilities) often have a great deal on their plate. This, of course, does not give them carte blanche with regard to missing assignments or class, but recognition of these differences may help to create a smoother student-teacher interaction.

### Going Overboard

Being a returning student is not reason for the instructor to single out the student. Calling on students for their 'experience' simply because of their age ("Bob, you were around during the Great War, right?") is unseemly at best. Their status as returning students should merely serve to make you aware of their needs and expectations; it is not an invitation for you to

exhaust 'the wealth of experience' they may have simply because they are older than you. While students may volunteer their relevant experiences, constantly calling attention to their age serves only to alienate the student from the rest of the class.

### Expectations

The expectations of returning students are no different than those of the typical undergraduate: they want to be challenged, they want to come away from the class feeling that they have learned something important, they want to feel that the instructor cares about these goals. Some TAs have the idea that returning students have a greater work ethic and are more goal oriented than the typical undergraduate. Regardless of whether this is true (as research suggests), it should not affect your class instruction or how you address returning students as opposed to the typical undergraduate. To do so would suggest that your instruction should be modified due to the presence of students with better work ethics, and that your instruction varies as to the commitment of your students, which is unwise. You should welcome those students who are willing to work hard and you should have a flexible teaching approach that can account for student differences, but making uninformed judgments can only hinder your instruction.

At first blush, TAs may find

themselves unsure of how to address returning students in their class. Many returning students may also feel awkward in a classroom filled with many students much younger than they. As an instructor, part of your job is to conduct your class in such a way that everyone has the opportunity to learn and feel welcomed. All students expect and deserve this.

**Questions for  
the TA Forum?  
Contact the TA  
Project  
Helpline at  
932-1182 or go  
online at [http://  
tapproject.rutgers.  
edu/asktap.html](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/asktap.html)**

**Get A Job!  
Careers in Academic  
Workshop  
February 21st, 12:00  
noon to 1:00 p.m.  
25 Bishop Place  
College Avenue  
Campus. To Register,  
call **932-7747****

*TapTalk* is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

*TapTalk*

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# Potential Problems: Writing Skills

TAs who have taught courses that require some form of composition always notice a range of writing ability in their students. While some students have perfect prose, communicate their ideas well, and have an impressive command of composition, many others have poor writing skills. They may lack an understanding of grammar, often misspell words, or generally have trouble constructing adequately formed papers. Instructors may overlook such problems, but this can only hurt the student.

All TAs need to assign at least a brief writing assignment early in the course so that potential problems may be spotted before it is too late. In such cases, TAs have a responsibility to inform students that their writing skills need vast improvement, and refer students to the writing center. Paying attention only to the 'ideas' in a paper, which may be apparent to the instructor only after arduously working through layers of errors, only encourages the student to remain entrenched in his or her poor writing.

Many students have the misperception that as long as their ideas are good, writing skills do not matter. Further, most word processing programs have grammar and spelling checks that may give students a false sense of

security. Students should understand that while you may choose not to deduct points for poor grammar or spelling, these mistakes make it much more difficult to understand the argument they are trying to make. If the instructor simply cannot discern the student's ideas, he or she will do poorly on the assignment. This, however, does not imply that it is the TA's duty to correct all the student's mistakes, or even to offer detailed corrections of a given paper. Most TAs simply do not have the time to make extensive comments on students' papers, especially when the errors are of a grammatical nature. Simple, recurring problems can be pointed out to the student, but corrections in obvious examples of poor writing skill are both practically and pedagogically best left to the university writing center where individual tutoring is offered each semester.

Provide clear and written information about your expectations when grading assignments. Make it understood to the students with poor writing skills that it is not a suggestion but an imperative that they seek help if they wish to pass your course. Not only will this greatly improve their writing skills and thereby improve the communication of their

ideas, but it will be clear to your students that adequate writing skills are necessary.

**The College Avenue Writing Center: 932-1149**

**The Douglass Writing Center: 932-9212**

**The Livingston Writing Center: 445-5658**

## The Pedagogical Insight Corner for the Curiously Minded TA

*Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.*

-Oscar Wilde

*Wit ought to be a glorious treat, like caviar. Never spread it about like marmalade.*

-Noel Coward

*Many people would rather die than think; in fact, most do.*

-Bertrand Russell

*It's a damn poor mind that can only think of one way to spell a word.*

-Andrew Johnson

## Get In Touch!

Tap Office:  
**http://**

**taproject.rutgers.edu**

Graduate School - NB:

**http://gsnb.rutgers.edu**

TA Helpline: **932-11TA**

TA  
Helpline  
Call  
932-11TA  
Monday-Friday  
between  
the hours  
of  
8:30-4:30

**Want to be a Movie  
Star?**  
*Then get your class videotaped!*

Call 932-11TA for details  
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

## TAP Calendar

2/7	<i>International TA Workshop: Student Behavior</i>	12:00 noon <sup>5</sup>
2/19	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00 a.m. <sup>1</sup>
2/19	<i>Interviewing and Salary Negotiations</i>	4:30-5:30 p.m. <sup>3</sup>
2/21	<i>Careers in Academe</i>	12:00-1:00p.m. <sup>4</sup>
2/25	<i>Tax Workshop for Graduate Students</i>	6:30-8:30 p.m. <sup>2</sup>
3/4	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00 a.m. <sup>1</sup>

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at [sirman@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:sirman@rci.rutgers.edu), if you plan to attend a workshop.
2. Graduate Student Lounge College Avenue Campus . Please contact Amber Carpenter if you have questions. ([acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu)) or 932-7449.
3. Busch Campus. To Register call 445-6127 ext. 14.
4. 25 Bishop Place. College Avenue Campus. To Register call 932-7747.
5. Busch Campus Center. Buffet Lunch will be provided. Contact Alex Bachman 932-7747

**Interested in Peer Observa-  
tion of your classes?**  
**[http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/  
pop/pop.html](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html)**

### Teaching Assistant Project

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