

Mid-Semester Evaluations

Like all instructors at Rutgers, Teaching Assistants are required to administer end-of-semester evaluations which provide invaluable information about one's strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. Often, however, it is helpful to have an additional mid-semester review of the class in order to get immediate feedback. Why wait until the end of the semester to find out that a routine course activity or requirement is considered ineffective or that the students don't really understand your lectures? An opportunity to modify assignment questions or alter teaching techniques may help to make the second half of the semester work more smoothly than the first. Asking for reviews mid-semester can be a risky proposition, however; harsh evaluations may shake a TA's confidence. The key is not to panic and attempt to make radical changes to the course structure or in your teaching style. Instead, take the opportunity to make a few effective adjustments and apply the large concerns to a more long-term process of pedagogical improvement.

An important step when distributing evaluations is to assure student anonymity. Students are not likely to be entirely honest if they feel that their grade will be jeopardized by frank comments concerning the quality of the class or the characteristics of the teacher. One solution is to let students take an evaluation form home so that they can type up their responses and thus feel secure that their handwriting will not be identified. Another approach is to create an evaluation that only requires students to circle answers to multiple-choice questions. A more formal option is to have an outside person—a fellow TA or another graduate student—administer the evaluation and collate the results; in such cases students should be assured that their TA will never see the actual evaluations. The outside evaluator can also confer with the class and get feedback about the TA's performance and the structure of the course. A final, more technologically enhanced option is offered by the Teaching Excellence Center. The Center provides an informal mid-course online survey that students can submit anonymously through the web. Instructors apply for the use of the survey

(continued on page 2)

Quick Tips: Counseling

As we make our way through an unusually long and harsh winter, it is a good idea for TAs to be aware of potentially troubled students. For a variety of reasons, students often confide in TAs, who therefore need to listen closely and keep the lines of communication open. Even if students' problems seem trivial to you, do not treat them lightly. Remember that many of your students are living on their own for the first time and trying to cope with increased academic and social demands. Your compassion and understanding are important. Some students do not ask for assistance directly, but there are a number of signs which can alert you to the fact that a student may be in trouble:

- Marked decline in quality of course work and quality or frequency of class participation; escalating absences or failure to submit assigned work; comments in a student's written work that arouse concern.

- Prolonged depression, often indicated by a sad expression, apathy, weight loss or gain, sleep disorders, tearfulness, or a marked change in personal hygiene.

(continued on page 3)

Mid-Semester Evaluations

(continued from page 1)

by completing an information sheet, and the results are sent in your choice of format: email, spreadsheet, html file, or plain text. For more information, contact the Center: <http://teachx.rutgers.edu>.

When it comes to designing an evaluation, what are the right questions to ask? What kinds of questions will elicit useful responses? How can you ensure that the information you receive from the evaluations will allow you to improve your teaching? It is crucial for TAs to determine beforehand what kind of information they want to obtain. Evaluations might include questions about particular assignments and what students think of them, questions about the way the class is run, questions about the instructor's performance, questions about the material being presented - there are numerous options. The TAP template for a comprehensive evaluation is included on page 3 of this newsletter. The sample evaluation covers students' feelings about their ability to fulfill the course

requirements successfully (and be rewarded accordingly); their judgment as to the worthiness and relative difficulty of these requirements; their estimation of the TA's overall teaching style and effectiveness of methods; and their suggestions for course improvements. We encourage you to modify this template to suit your own particular needs, or to develop your own evaluations. Unless a TA chooses the multiple-choice option, an evaluation form should encourage students to be as specific and detailed as possible in their responses. For example, the first question on the sample evaluation asks students to explain their judgment regarding the difficulty of the course. These explanations will help TAs find the specific information they need to help improve their teaching.

The Stanford teaching handbook (<http://www-ctl.stanford.edu/teach/handbook.html>) outlines some further innovative ways of obtaining feedback from students. The "Documented Problem Solution" combines regular homework assignments with course evaluation, and is particularly useful in getting feedback in courses that stress problem-solving: "the instructor asks students to solve a problem, but also to write down step-by-step what

they were thinking at each stage of the problem-solving process. Reading through these solutions gives an instructor a sense of how well the students are developing their general problem-solving skills, and can help him or her determine how much class time should focus on improving this academic skill." Another model, suggested by Stanford and several other teaching centers, is the "one-minute paper": hand out index cards or half-sheets of paper at the end of class, and have students answer one or two specific questions like "what was the main point of today's reading?" or "was anything confusing about today's discussion?" These papers are easy to read, and allow for quick adjustments to your teaching methods.

A useful supplement to student-generated feedback is peer or third-party evaluation. TAP offers two services to help TAs in this area. The POP, or Peer Observation Program, coordinates peer-level observation and evaluation among teaching assistants. We can also arrange to videotape TAs in the classroom and have the tape reviewed by an experienced teacher. See the TAP web page for details.

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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(continued on page 4)

Sample Questions for a Mid-Semester Evaluation

The mid-semester evaluation is a useful way of discovering whether you and your students have the same impression of how the course is going and gives you an opportunity to make adjustments if they are needed. Leave plenty of white space to encourage students to answer at length.

By answering the following questions in as much detail as possible, you will help me improve the remaining weeks of the semester. Please answer as fully and honestly as possible, and use the back of this form if necessary.

1. Do you find the subject matter of this course easy, average, difficult? Explain.
2. At this point, what grade do you expect to get in the class? On what do you base this expectation?
3. Have you been able to keep up with the reading assignments in this class? If not, approximately what percentage of the readings have you been able to complete?
4. How much time do you spend preparing for this class outside of regular class hours?
5. Do you feel that you can ask questions or make comments in this class? Explain?
6. Is the class material presented in a well-organized manner?
7. Can you relate the lecture to the outside readings?
8. Are you able to understand what I am saying? Do I enunciate clearly? Do I speak too rapidly?
9. What suggestions could you give to improve the class?
10. How would you describe your own work in the class so far? Are you satisfied with your effort and progress? Where have you noticed improvement? Where do you see a need for further work to be done?
11. Add any additional comments you would like to make about the class. Use the back of the form if necessary.

Counseling

(continued from page 1)

- Nervousness, agitation, excessive anxiety, irritability, aggressiveness, nonstop talking, and bizarre or strange behavior or speech.

- Extreme dependency on faculty or staff, including excessive office hour attendance or email correspondence.

- Talk of suicide either directly or indirectly.

If you are unsure about the severity of the student's problem, or the steps to take, a Counseling Center staff member will help evaluate the problem and offer suggestions for assistance. The various College Counseling Centers provide personal counseling and psychological services for students at Rutgers. All full-time university students are eligible for this free and confidential service. No information about a student is released, and no record of a visit to the Counseling Center is retained on permanent university records, so it cannot appear on a transcript or any official

(continued on page 4)

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

Counseling (continued from page 3)

document. Links to all the counseling centers on the New Brunswick campus are available online at: <http://www.rutgers.edu/menus/perscounseling.shtml>. Or, call Campus Information Services (732-932-9342) for the appropriate phone number.

Graduate students are, of course, just as likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. TAs should acknowledge that they too might sometimes need help; they should also recognize that their unique position as both teacher and student produces special problems. The sooner you seek help—for yourself or your student—the better.

TAP Calendar

3/5	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	1:00p.m. ¹
3/6	<i>An Introduction to Seeking External Funding</i>	4:30p.m. ³
3/8	<i>Applying for NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Awards in the Social Sciences</i>	4:30p.m. ³
3/20	<i>Applying for the AAUW Dissertation Fellowship</i>	12:00 noon ³
3/21	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00a.m. ¹
3/21	<i>Teaching Summer Classes: Course design, book orders, syllabus preparation²</i>	
3/22	<i>Applying to the SSRC Graduate Student Programs</i>	4:30p.m. ³
3/27	<i>Workshop: Proposal Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences - Part I</i>	4:30p.m. ³
3/29	<i>Workshop: Proposal Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences - Part II</i>	4:30p.m. ³
4/12	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop:</i>	10:00a.m. ¹
4/19	<i>Academic Integrity²</i>	

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.

2. Workshops at 12:00 noon at the Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, CAC. Please call (732) 932-7747, or email Alex Bachmann at abachman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you would like to register for a workshop.

3. Presented by the Center for Humanities and Social Science Research (CHaSeR). For details and to register contact Teresa Delcorso: (732) 932-2705 or delcorso@rci.rutgers.edu.

Teaching Assistant Project

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