

## Testing the Teacher

Exams not only test the students but also test the abilities--pedagogical, organizational, administrative, creative--of the teacher. To enable you to pass these tests credibly and to increase the validity of your students' test scores, there are several practical matters that should be considered when preparing an exam.

In order for students to do well on a test, it is important that they know beforehand the type of test for which they are studying. Research has shown that students study for the type of test that they believe they will be given: they will study differently for a multiple choice or short answer test than for an essay test. Letting them know early in the semester the types of tests for which they will be responsible will help them prepare more effectively. Deciding upon the format early in the semester will benefit the teacher, too. Many experts suggest that teachers set aside time after each class or at least once a week to prepare one or two test questions relating to the work that has just been covered. By writing out questions (and the answers, *especially* for essay questions) while the classes are fresh in your mind, you gain a better idea of the material covered and its relationship to the main objectives of the course. When test questions develop naturally from the course as it progresses, students have fewer occasions to complain after the test that the material was not covered in class. An added benefit comes when it is time to construct the test because the teacher will have on hand a file of questions that accurately reflect the content of the course. (And, of course, these questions can be referred to and revised in future years when the instructor is teaching the same course.)

Teachers with a file of potential test questions can spend more time before the exam refining and rewriting these questions to insure that they are as clearly stated as possible. Have at least one person proofread the test to point out any words or phrases that seem confusing or misleading. Perhaps the best system for insuring clarity is to trade exams with a fellow TA who is teaching the same course, each taking the other's exam. Such an informed critic may spot ambiguities or be able to make constructive

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## Videotape Review of Teaching Available

The Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) can assist TAs in developing their teaching skills by providing the equipment and the technicians for videotaping classes during the academic year. TAs may then borrow the videotape in order to view it with a faculty member from their graduate program; if the graduate program does not have a faculty member available or the equipment to review the tape, a review session can be scheduled through TAP. Tapes will not be released to TAs *unless* a faculty review session has been set up. After the session, the tapes should be returned to TAP for reuse (TAs may erase the tape before returning it).

In the past, TAs have found the tape/review process extremely valuable in analyzing their teaching strengths and weaknesses, and in using the feedback they receive as a tool for improving their teaching skills. TAs who wish to include a videotape in their teaching portfolio are urged to schedule a second taping later in the semester or in the following

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suggestions on how to improve the test.

Although it may seem minor, teachers should take special care that the instructions for the test are written out clearly at the top of the test. Writing directions on the blackboard on the day of the test is risky; in your haste, you may introduce errors or omit important words or sentences, thus confusing students and distracting them from the test itself. Instructions written on the board may be difficult for some students to read; they also give students a reason to be looking around the class while the exam is going on, making it difficult for the teacher to distinguish between students who are attempting to read the directions and students who are attempting to read their neighbor's paper. By making the directions a part of the test page, your pre-test proofreaders can tell if the directions are clear or if there are any mistakes in the text. The instructions should be

simple and brief as possible yet detailed and accurate. If students do not have to answer every question, state precisely how many they are required to answer in each section. Do not provide complicated systems for gaining extra credit; students should not have to spend more time deciphering directions and calculating points than answering questions.

For many teachers, the students' performance on the test is the best yardstick for measuring the validity of the exam. Other teachers, however, find it beneficial to have the students evaluate the exam in terms of difficulty, relevance, and fairness. A brief evaluation form distributed at the beginning of the first class after the exam, *before* the students receive their graded papers, can give the teacher valuable feedback on the students' responses to the text.

If students believe that a test was fairly and thoughtfully constructed, with the intention of helping them to demonstrate their knowledge rather than trying to reveal their ignorance, they will generally accept even a low grade with good grace and be motivated to improve.

[For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised in this article, and for more information on aspects of testing and grading, see Jacobs and Chase, *Developing and Using Tests Effectively*, Jossey Bass, 1992.]

*If a student tells me that s/he has a disability, is it my responsibility to accommodate the student's special needs? I have never worked with disabled people before, so how do I know what to do?*

It is the responsibility of TAs to help to make the university an accessible place for all of their students, including those with physical or learning disabilities. The "Provost's Committee for the Concerns of Students with Disabilities" is a campus-wide committee established to assist students with disabilities and to advise faculty, staff, and students of the various resources and programs that exist on the campuses. Each college has its own contact person who can assist TAs in helping their students:

**Livingston College:**

Mark Lucas ext. 2398

**Douglass College:**

Nycha Schlegel ext. 9374/9822

**Rutgers College:**

Skip Shive ext. 7107

**Cook College:**

Valerie Smith-Stephens  
ext. 6822.

Students who are unsure about whom to contact should call Carol Hartman at the Graduate School (ext. 7034), or Matthew Weismantle, SIAC (ext. 9090) for assistance.

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

Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:

Linda G. Schulze

*TapTalk*

25 Bishop Place

New Brunswick, N.J.

08903

(908) 932-7034

# IN THE PROGRAMS

On October 22nd, the Department of **Political Science** held its first teaching meeting of the year. The luncheon meeting focused on "Student Writing and the Discussion of Politics" and was led by Scott McLean and the political science graduate students who are teaching English 101. Participants discussed ways of integrating the undergraduate writing process into political science discussion groups.

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On Saturday, November 20th, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., a workshop for **Foreign Language** Instructors will be held. Franz-Joseph Wehage, Chair of the Modern Languages Department at Muskingum College in New Concord, Ohio, will discuss "Video in the Foreign Language Classroom."

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

# NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

## Working Students

According to a June 21, 1993, article in *Higher Education & National Affairs, American Council on Education*, the percentage of undergraduates who work while attending school has been rising in recent years. The report attributes this increase to "the higher average age and the greater financial needs of today's students, as well as their desire to gain hands-on experience to prepare themselves to compete in an increasingly tough job market." An informal survey of Rutgers undergraduates indicates that a significant number do hold some sort of job, part-time or, in many cases, full-time. How does this information affect the way that a TA approaches a class?

For many undergraduates, college is one among many activities to which they have made a commitment and, although it is certainly not a lesser one, it may not always be the primary one. Many students *have* to work to support themselves because they receive no financial help from their families. The students are in a double bind: without a job they would not be able to attend college; because of the job they may not be able to give school their fullest attention.

Students should not be penalized because they have to work. This means that deadlines for papers and dates for tests and course readings should be announced early in the semester and, as much as is practicable, observed. It is not fair to move up the date that a paper is due or to add substantially to the reading assignments as the course progresses. Students who work often have to budget their time with special care, perhaps preparing reading assignments ahead of time, or, saving time at the last minute to complete an assignment.

Work, however, should not be accepted as a reason for failing to complete assignments or for doing poorly in a class. Students must find a way to balance their school work with the rest of their responsibilities. Students who fall asleep in class because they have worked late the previous evening or who fail consistently to finish assignments because of their job are not achieving the required balance. Teachers have an obligation to intervene and try to help these students understand the necessity for finding a way to manage *all* aspects of their lives in a balanced and acceptable way.

# Videotaping

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semester so that this record of their teaching ability will benefit from the initial tape/review session. The procedure for the video/review is:

1. Contact TAP offices (932-7747) to set up day and time for videotape technicians to tape class. Resources are limited so TAs who set up appointments early in the semester have a better chance of being accommodated.
2. Notify the technician of your plans for review, providing the name of the faculty member who will review the tape. TAs who choose to review the tape

with a TAP staff member must schedule an appointment to do so; in this case, the technician will keep the tape.

3. Tapes must be returned to the TAP office after the review session so that they can be reused. TAs who wish to have a videotape for their teaching portfolio are urged to schedule a second session later in the semester or in the following semester; videotapes must be provided by the TA. If you have any questions about videotaping, call the TA HelpLine at 932-11TA.



## November

- 14 Foreign Language Exam
- 18 Aspects of Publishing: Editorial & Economic Rutgers Student Ctr. Room 411 ABC Refreshments
- 24 Friday Classes
- 25-28 Thanksgiving Recess
- 29 Dissertation Workshop 25 Bishop Place. Call 8122 to register.

### Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean  
 Graduate School-New Brunswick  
 25 Bishop Place  
 New Brunswick, N.J. 08903  
 (908) 932-7034