

The End of Semester

Semester's end brings with it expanded responsibilities and duties for teachers. TAs might have to design or grade final exams (or both!), evaluate students' written work to assign final grades, and contend with a variety of increasingly urgent student demands. At the same time, graduate work may be coming due, and TAs must acknowledge and make time for their academic responsibilities.

Keep in mind that undergraduates, too, are facing the end of the semester—and many of them are beginning to panic. Attendance may become increasingly spotty. Some students may approach TAs for last minute help or tutoring. Office hours may become teaching sessions, and extra appointments may have to be scheduled. If TAs are not planning to allot extra time for appointments at the end of the semester, they should clearly inform the class as early in the semester as possible, so the students will have plenty of time to plan for a regularly scheduled office-hour visit. Some students will ask TAs to consider assigning them extra-credit or make-up work. TAs must decide beforehand whether this is fair to the rest of the class; whatever the decision, students should be informed of the policy. In some cases, TAs who have made their policies about attendance, office hours, and make-up work clear at the beginning of the semester and have reminded students periodically of their expectations will still be faced with students complaining that they are being treated unfairly or have not been warned. At the very least, however, the explicit and consistent communication of class policies can establish a tangible baseline against which such complaints have little effect.

Similarly, students should, as much as possible, be kept apprised of their standing in the class during the entire semester—how they are performing in terms of grades, what work they have pending, and what the course's grading and evaluation policies are. Keeping students informed at all stages of the semester about grading policies and about their own progress in the class can anticipate and defuse the resentment that sometimes arises from poor communication.

(continued on page 2)

Mentorship & Advising

TAs are often sought out by undergraduates as mentors; at the same time, graduate students themselves must work to establish a relationship with a faculty member to guide their own career. A mentoring relationship is one that can offer significant benefits to both parties but also may present serious hazards, so the pros and cons must be considered thoughtfully, thoroughly, before either becoming a mentor or seeking one. The Teaching Assistant Project and the Graduate School-New Brunswick have long been concerned with assisting graduate students in negotiating these delicate roles. During the 1998-1999 academic year, a number of new initiatives have been designed to address the particular advising and mentoring concerns of Rutgers graduate students.

A brochure on mentorship and advising that informs graduate students of their rights and responsibilities in a mentoring relationship is presently in production. This brochure will be distributed to all graduate students and graduate faculty

(continued on page 2)

The End of Semester

(continued from page 1)

Final examination time is a difficult period for students, and some may consider cheating if they are feeling desperate. TAs should make the students aware of the university's academic integrity policy at the beginning of the semester and remind them of it during the exam period. When proctoring an exam, take precautions to deter cheating. For example, if students use bluebooks, ask them to turn them in at the start of the session, and quickly flip through them to make sure they are blank. Before returning the books, the TA should number them so that no pre-written bluebooks are introduced.

Occasionally, a student who is particularly worried about his or her performance may become combative and try to manipulate a TA into accommodating certain demands, but it is important to stick to established policies. The key to dealing with such situations in class is to not let yourself or

the other students become infected with the panic that may be the source of a combative tone. Address concerns fairly and honestly, but if the classroom dynamic is unduly disrupted by such conversations, then they should be conducted outside the class.

Finally, TAs need to be aware of the potential difference between a panicked student who is undergoing a specific reaction to a specific (i.e. your) class and a depressed or troubled student whose difficulties cannot be solved within the parameters of the student-teacher relationship. A TA is neither qualified nor obligated to get involved in a student's personal problems, and, in fact, "getting involved" can often lead to ethical difficulties. This is not to say that one should not be compassionate or understanding when dealing with troubled students, but it is crucial to direct the student to the resources and services that are best equipped to handle them. Rutgers has counseling centers on the Cook (2-9150), Douglass (2-9609), Livingston (5-4140), and College Avenue (2-7884) campuses, and peer counseling services are also available (247-5555). While students should not be forced to go to counseling, simply making that option available may be the most productive and responsible way for the TA to help them.

Mentorship & Advising

(continued from page 1)

members. A lunchtime workshop on mentoring will be offered in the near future. Watch the pages of *TapTalk* and consult the TAP website for further information on these programs. In addition, a panel discussion on the subject has been proposed for the 3rd Annual Teaching/Learning Conference, to be held on January 23, 1999.

Recent media coverage of the suicide of Harvard graduate student Jason Altom has focused public attention on mentorship and advising. Altom, a fifth year student in the Department of Chemistry, left behind a letter blaming his adviser, Nobel laureate Elias J. Corey, for his death. The Harvard Chemistry Department has responded by implementing a committee-style (rather than one-on-one) advising system, offering more stress management, counseling, and career development sessions, and encouraging monthly social events at which students can interact informally with faculty. (For further information, see the *New York Times*, October 21 & 27 and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 23.) *The Chronicle* also maintains an on-line colloquy (<http://www.chronicle.com/colloquy>) in which are archived numerous responses to the Harvard situation and to the larger issues of graduate student mentorship.

(continued on page 4)

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.
Editor:
Linda G. Schulze
Assistant Editor:
John Scanlon

Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.
TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(732) 932-7034
lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu

Mentorship . . .

(continued from page 2)

Graduate students who are having difficulties with an advisor should consult with their program director or department chair, who may be able to clarify the responsibilities of each party. At the very least, the director or chair is in a position to discuss the situation with the advisor or to suggest an alternate arrangement. If the departmental response is unsatisfactory, or if, for any reason, you are unable to consult your chair or director, contact Dean Barbara Bender, (Graduate School—New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, CAC; 932-7747; bbender@rci.rutgers.edu).

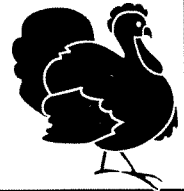
Tapped Out

(continued from page 3)

be neatly aligned. To pretend that the classroom can be a safe space from this persistent conflict, or that one can ignore bureaucratic realities by effacing the differences between teacher and student, is to court disaster. It's not about deciding whether I'm with or against my students; my relationship with the system is more complicated than a "part of the solution or part of the problem" binary. At certain moments in the classroom I do represent the institutions of authority I might otherwise critique. Sometimes, therefore, I have to be The Man, however much it pains me.

November

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 9 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 10am |
| 11 | Veteran's Day
Remembrance Day (Canada) |
| 12 | Workshop on Academic Integrity: Issues for TAs
25 Bishop Place, 12 noon |
| 24 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 1pm |
| 24/25 | Changes in designation of Class Days: Thursday & Friday Classes |
| 26 | Thanksgiving |



COMING IN DECEMBER

- | | |
|----|--------------------------------|
| 9 | Dissertation & Thesis Workshop |
| 10 | Last Day of Classes |

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181
(732) 932-7034

Tapped Out – The Diary of a New TA

by Rupert Peals*

To imagine a professional life spent working “against the system” is a familiar and romantic trope, particularly among groups of academics of a certain critical bent. Seeking to escape the deadening influence of “The Man” (or at least seeking to avoid the more routine and bureaucratic aspects that come with being in The Man’s employ), we enroll in graduate school and encounter the delicious rhetoric of intellectual freedom.

The degree to which graduate students buy into this narrative is debatable, but what is more certain is that the transition from student to teaching assistant works quite clearly against any possible romantic notions of the academy. When it comes to being a TA, in other words, one’s relationship to The Man becomes more vexed. If the first few classroom sessions leave you flushed with excitement and eager to promote the acquisition of knowledge, then the first stack of papers, quizzes, lab reports or exams, accompanied by a constant stream of institutional notices,

dicta, and newsletters (ahem) will introduce you to the more mundane aspects of academic employment. Grading, rosters, scheduling, attendance policies, office hours, academic calendars: it is difficult to cull intellectual satisfaction or visions of freedom out of such quotidian materials. To assert or to admit as much is not necessarily to give in to cynicism or advocate the status quo. Rather, it represents a recognition of the constant negotiations that take place between educational and intellectual ideals and the actually existing classrooms in which they are played out.

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching has been coming to terms with my place in the administrative apparatus. It is incredibly tempting to identify more with my students than with my own position (I’m a teacher, but I don’t always feel like THE TEACHER) and to share with them a healthy suspicion of the institution. It is a dangerous undertaking, however; students are enrolled in my class, and in the university, for a host of unrelated reasons, and to project a uniformly cynical or resistant attitude onto them can be an irresponsible and insulting gesture. More importantly, when it comes time for me to perform necessary administrative functions my credibility is

likely to be compromised. I can too easily imagine the awkward conversation that might be produced out of such a situation:

Student: “Hey there, Mr. Peals—still fighting the power?”

Rupert: “You know it, Jimmy; we must be ever vigilant.”

Student: “So, uh, Rupy, how did I do on that ridiculous cultural construct known as a ‘test’ that you were forced to impose on us last week?”

Rupert: “Well, uh, Jimmy, while I recognize the inherent problematicity of a grading paradigm that requires you to master a rather oppressive and arbitrary hierarchy of knowledge, you got an F.”

Student: “Dude?! This is unreal. I feel like I don’t know you anymore. That’s it—I want my *Rage Against the Machine* CD back! What a sell-out!”

The absurdity of the foregoing example (aided no doubt by my almost complete ignorance of contemporary undergraduate speech patterns) identifies it as both a gross simplification and worst-case scenario. Teachers are involved in simultaneous and often conflicting relationships, so that responsibilities towards the administration, students, and the teacher’s own academic work can rarely

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym