

Wake-Up Call

By the end of the seventh week of every term, all teachers are required to submit a mid-semester roster, indicating on it the students in the class who are in danger of failing the course. The registrar then sends each of these students a formal notice apprising them of their unsatisfactory progress. Although this may seem just another unnecessary bit of paperwork devised to make the lives of TAs more difficult, warning notices can serve as effective wake-up calls for marginal students, prodding them to seek the help that they need to pass the course or, alternately, to drop a course for which they are unable or unwilling to devote the needed time and energy.

For most undergraduates, early October still seems like the beginning of the semester. Students are just settling in to a comfortable routine, gradually adjusting to the rhythm of college life. The fact is, of course, that they are now seven weeks into a fourteen week semester, a critical point where certain small adjustments could effect changes that might make the difference between success and failure. Most vulnerable to miscalculating the demands of the semester are first year students, and, because so many TAs teach introductory sections they should be especially diligent in identifying students who may be in trouble, notifying them of their status in class at mid-semester, and offering suggestions on how to improve their performance.

In order to assess students' progress fairly, TAs should base their evaluations on at least one major graded assignment or exam. Any other single standard of measurement--class participation, minor quizzes, lab reports--cannot give an accurate picture of the students' abilities or of their potential for success in the course. Even good students may fare poorly on a first exam or paper, but requiring one early in the semester forces students to focus attention on the demands of the class and allows them the opportunity of seeing the extent to which they have mastered the materials of the class.

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Videotaping for Fall Semester to Begin

All TAs are encouraged to schedule an appointment early in the semester to have the class, lab, or recitation they are teaching videotaped by a member of the TAP staff. Videotaping has been established as an effective means of evaluating and improving teaching performance, one that gives teachers a unique opportunity to view their own teaching from a different perspective, a view more closely corresponding to that of their students. TAs who are concerned about their ability to communicate well with their students and would like to improve their classroom skills should find the experience a rewarding one.

Viewing the videotape with an experienced faculty member in the TA's program is a key element in achieving the maximum benefit from this activity. The ideal person with whom to view the tape is the faculty member in charge of the class; if the TA is not directly responsible to any faculty member, s/he could approach the program's TA coordinator or another sympathetic faculty

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Students who have completed a major paper or exam by the mid-point of the semester have a fair idea of where they stand in relation to other students in the class. In addition, the teacher is no longer an unknown quantity to them: they have been introduced to his/her method of testing and standard of grading. Taking the next test or writing the next paper will be that much easier because students have gained some experience of the teacher's expectations and style of testing and grading.

Those students who are not actually failing the course but whose work or attendance habits are so erratic that their ability to pass the course is questionable should also receive a warning. The warning will serve notice to these students that although they may be technically passing at this point, their continued success seems dubious.

Teachers would be wrong just to record warnings on the

roster and forget about them, leaving the university computer to do the dirty work, i.e., informing the student. The university computer takes time to generate the notices, time that the student could be using to improve his/her grade. Students, of course, should not be surprised by the news that they are failing a course; they may, however, have resisted thinking too seriously about the implications since they feel that it is still early in the semester. Inform students privately that they are in danger of failing; if a number of students are to receive warnings, you may wish to post a copy of the warning roster *without names displayed* (see page 3, Students' Right to Confidentiality) and advise failing students that they should make an appointment to meet with you as soon as possible to discuss ways of improving their work in the class. (If huge numbers of your students are failing, however, you need to explore the reasons with the faculty member in charge of the course to discover whether the problem is with your students or with the way you are conducting the class.)

By paying serious attention to the progress of your students at this time in the semester and focusing sharply on those who need help, you will have fewer distressed students at the semester's end.

Videotaping

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member. TAs who are unable to arrange for someone in their program to view the tape may make an appointment to view it with a member of the TAP staff.

Use the viewing time well. Give the faculty member a copy of your syllabus beforehand so that the organization and goals of the class are apparent. Allow the observer to focus and direct the session. Do not be discouraged by negative comments, and do not give more weight to the negative than to the positive. Ask the faculty member to put his/her observations in writing so that you can include them in your teaching portfolio as evidence of your active efforts to develop as a teacher. Some TAs have their class videotaped again later in the semester or in the following semester to gauge the progress they have made.

TAs can schedule an appointment for videotaping by calling Beth Griech or Jay Crosson (932-7034) or stopping by the Graduate School, 25 Bishop Place, CAC, as soon as possible.

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:

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CORRECTION

THE "QUICK GUIDE" TELEPHONE CARD DISTRIBUTED TO ALL GRADUATE STUDENTS HAS AN INCORRECT NUMBER LISTED FOR DOUGLASS LIBRARY. PLEASE NOTE THAT THE CORRECT NUMBER IS:
9346.

IN THE PROGRAMS

Approximately 350 newly-appointed TAs, GAs, and PTLs attended the August 27th Teaching Assistant Orientation for the New Brunswick campuses. This day-long orientation provided new TAs with a basic introduction to teaching at Rutgers through a number of lectures, panel discussions, demonstrations, and workshops. The day was planned to move from general discussions of the roles and responsibilities of TAs to more specific pedagogical strategies employed by TAs in various classroom situations in the different disciplines.

Commitment to developing excellent teaching skills, however, cannot be a one-day affair, and TAP continues to offer support during the academic year to assist TAs in improving their teaching through publications, workshops, seminars, and videotaping. In addition, TAP offers assistance to all graduate programs in developing programs that meet the specific needs of TAs in that discipline. The importance of such on-going discipline-specific programs cannot be underestimated--as the evaluations from the summer orientation indicate, TAs want information that pertains directly to the classes they will be teaching. It is useful for TAs to take an

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NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Students' Right to Confidentiality

Students do not give up their right to privacy when they enter a college classroom. TAs have both an ethical and a legal responsibility to see that the students in their classes are protected from unnecessary disclosures of confidential information.

Class rosters, distributed three times a semester, list the names and identification numbers of all students registered for a class; in many cases, the student identification number is also the student's social security number. Because The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits, among other things, the release to the public of educational records (such as grades) or certain personally identifiable information with the student's name, TAs must take care in the use they make of rosters. In order to insure the privacy to which all students are legally entitled, TAs should exercise care in using these documents.

1. Class rosters containing students names and social security numbers should not be distributed or circulated to the class for any purpose, *including the taking of attendance*. It is the responsibility of the TA to protect the privacy of every student on that roster. If the TA wishes to use the

roster to take attendance, a xeroxed copy that contains the names *but not the social security numbers* of the students may be used.

2. TAs who wish to use their roster to post grades may do so *only* if the students' names do not appear on the posted sheet. The list of social security/student numbers may be posted with the grades, but the names must be removed.

In addition to safeguarding the information provided on the roster, teachers should respect their students' right to privacy in other areas. Tests and papers should only be returned to the students themselves; never allow a friend to pick up another student's graded assignment. When speaking to students about grades, do so privately, in your office or after class when the other students have gone. The only other person to whom the TA may speak about the students' grades are those who have a professional "need to know," such as other faculty members involved with that student.

The 1992 *Teaching Assistant Handbook* and *Voices from the Field: Experienced Teachers Talk about Teaching* are available at the TAP offices, Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, CAC.

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA

Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30-4:30

In the Programs

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active role in designing workshops in their own disciplines and essential that they attend them regularly. Many programs have already instituted training sessions; in programs that have not yet established a formal system of TA development, the TA Coordinator can work with TAP to develop a realistic plan.

This column will describe the programs being offered to TAs in individual programs in order to inform and inspire those in other disciplines. Programs are encouraged to send information about their activities to the *TapTalk* editor for inclusion here.



- 7 Yom Kippur
- 12 Columbus Day
- 21 to Nov. 23 All requests for course drops during this period must be approved by the Office of Academic and Student Services and accompanied by a letter from the instructor indicating grade and/or academic status of the student as of that date.
- 25 Daylight Savings Time ends.
- 26 Dissertation Workshop, 25 Bishop Place (932-8122)
- 31 Halloween

Teaching Assistant Project

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