



The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

96 Waterman Street
Box 1912, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912
(401) 863-1219 Sheridan_Center@Brown.edu
www.brown.edu/sheridan_center



How Faculty Can Work with TAs Effectively

Antonio Ramirez (*Philosophy*) & Thorsten Battefeld (*Physics*)
Sheridan Center Graduate Fellows

It is nearly impossible to overstate the impact that good teaching assistants can have on the success of a course. Because of the unique role they serve, motivated, well-informed and well-prepared TAs can make the difference between confused and confident students, between vapid and vigorous discussions, and between haggard and happy instructors. TAs need guidance from instructors if they are to do their jobs well, however. Without providing such guidance, instructors may deprive their students (and themselves) of a tremendous resource. As such, a well-balanced reflective teaching practice must attend to the needs and concerns of TAs.

The following tips, culled from recent discussions with the Sheridan Center's network of Graduate Student Liaisons, may be well worth considering as you prepare for upcoming courses:

Prior to the Beginning of the Course:

- *Find out what your department does to train and prepare TAs.*
 - While some departments offer extensive training, others may not offer any. Some departments provide new TAs with handbooks that explicitly explain their duties, while others do not. By making yourself familiar with your department's TA training practices, you can avoid the pitfall of assuming that your TAs know more about their responsibilities than they do. While you may not be able to provide any kind of in-depth training yourself, you can at least determine those areas where explicit instructions will be needed.
- *Bear in mind the amount of notice that your TAs have of their course assignment.*
 - While some departments inform TAs of their assignments a month or more in advance, others provide only a few days (if any) to prepare for their duties. If your TAs have inadequate time to fully prepare for their role in your course, you may want to consider strategies for lightening their workload in the first week or two. This may do quite a lot to help them "get up to speed," in turn enabling them to better help you as the term carries on.

- *Find out how much experience your TAs have.*
 - Experienced TAs may require very little in the way of supervision. If your TAs have little experience as instructors or graders, however, then they may benefit from your mentoring as they settle into their responsibilities. This can be particularly true in departments where little or no TA training is provided.
- *Provide your TAs with a syllabus as early as possible.*
 - An early review of the syllabus enables your TAs to know whether they will need to brush up on any of the readings or topics to be covered in your course. Even if your syllabus is not ready in its final form, it may be a good idea to share what you have with your TAs well in advance of the first day of class.
- *Meet with your TAs at least once before the course begins.*
 - A pre-course meeting serves several crucial purposes. By spending “face time” with your TAs before the first day of class, you provide them with an opportunity to ask you any questions they might have about course content, class policies, and your general pedagogical preferences. In turn, a meeting may enable you to get a better sense of the teaching style and qualifications of your TAs. Most importantly, a pre-course meeting can help to establish a solid rapport between you and your TAs, which can set the stage for future interactions as the term progresses. Your course will be a collaborative instructional effort—get to know your collaborators!

During the Course

- *Consider attending at least one of each TA's sections or labs.*
 - Surprisingly, the most direct way to assess how well your TAs are supplementing your lectures is the most frequently ignored. By attending one section or lab and subsequently meeting individually with your TA to discuss your observations, you can address the needs of your course while simultaneously providing invaluable guidance to a developing educator. Your TA can use your comments to identify the strengths of her performance as well as those areas in which she can improve, enabling her to maximize the benefit she provides to your course.
- *Provide your TAs with clear grading rubrics.*
 - If your TAs will be grading student work, it is essential that they understand the criteria according to which that work is to be evaluated. A clearly written rubric is the most efficient way to ensure that your TAs are grading according to your expectations. A rubric can also enable your TAs to grade more quickly and confidently, which can significantly decrease the turnaround time for returning student assignments.
- *Periodically review samples of assignments that your TAs have graded.*
 - Before returning your students' work to them, take a moment to review the evaluative comments and grades that your TAs have provided. Do they accurately reflect your expectations as established in your rubric? Your TAs will appreciate your feedback, and you will benefit from the peace of mind that

accompanies knowing that your students are receiving fair, consistent evaluations.

- *Meet with your TAs on a regular basis.*
 - Regular, brief meetings with your TAs are an excellent way to ensure the communication necessary for an effective collaboration. By quickly checking in with your TAs, you provide a forum for addressing any of their questions and concerns, but also for asking them for their own assessment of the state of the course. Your TAs may be keyed in to your students' response to lectures and readings in unique and helpful ways. Don't be afraid to ask your TAs for their input! It should be noted that regular meetings can be especially important for large courses involving multiple TAs.

Attending properly to the concerns of your TAs often involves minimal effort, and results in a win-win situation—by taking the time to ensure that clear communication prevails between you and your TAs, they will improve as educators and you will benefit by making maximal use of the resources they can provide. Since these resources can frequently save you more time than you will spend with your TAs, the above tips can yield both pedagogical and prudential benefit for university instructors.