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## *The Role of Graduate Teaching Assistants in the Classroom: The Undergraduate's Perspective*

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Undergraduates frequently lament that they are at the mercy, academically speaking, of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). In many respects they are. In large, and even mid-size classes, GTAs grade undergraduate papers, exams, problem sets, and lab reports, and assign course grades. Beyond grading, GTAs clarify ideas and concepts presented in lectures and in assigned readings, and serve as the instructor's assistant and spokesperson.

### **Survey**

The two 1999-2000 Sheridan Center Graduate Fellows Mark Herlihy (American Civilization) and Carolann Koleci (Physics) surveyed members of the Brown junior class in April 2000. The results of that survey underscore the importance of GTAs to the academic life at the University, and shed light on the qualities that undergraduate students believe effective GTAs possess. The results indicate that students respond favorably to GTAs who are accessible when assistance is needed; to those who challenge them intellectually in discussion sections, labs, and recitations; and to those who provide constructive feedback to their written work. Many GTAs do all this and more, the results reveal, but students also expressed dissatisfaction with some of the GTAs that they have encountered.

The results, in the form of responses to a series of questions posed to each member of Brown's junior class, and opinions they shared in a free response portion of the survey, reveal the need for some GTAs to learn how to effectively lead discussion sections and to evaluate students' work. The survey also reveals that GTAs are a subject about which students have strong feelings. One measure of student's interest in the role and performance of GTAs, is the fact that 249 out of 1141 students responded to the 16-question, e-mail survey, which, as surveys go, constituted a good return. Even more striking is the fact that 51 of the respondents shared their views of GTAs in response to the final,

and optional, open-ended question, asking them if they had any additional thoughts on GTAs.

The survey questions are designed to determine how the Center can help support GTAs in the future. Rather than asking students to assess their experiences with GTAs in general, we asked them to pick a course within their concentration that included a discussion section, laboratory or recitation taught by a GTA. We then asked students to characterize their overall experience in the course as being positive, negative, or neutral, and to base their responses to most of the questions on the course they chose. One hundred and forty-nine students elected to describe a course in which they had a positive experience, 29 picked a course that they deemed to be a negative experience, and 71 chose a neutral course.

### **Survey Results**

Clear patterns and correlations emerged among the responses, depending on whether students chose to focus on a "positive" or "negative" course. In courses deemed a negative experience, 14, or almost half of the respondents, stated that their GTA was only "somewhat accessible" for help with course work, while 4 of the 29 students believed their GTA was "not accessible at all." In contrast, students who assessed classes they considered to be a positive experience indicated that 29 percent of the GTAs in these classes were "extremely accessible" and 54 percent were "accessible."

In "negative" courses, according to students, GTAs were not only inaccessible when their assistance was needed; they were somewhat remote even in section, lab, and recitation. Seventeen of the 29 students who described a negative course contended that their GTA did not learn their names. In "positive" courses, only 32 out of 147 respondents claimed their GTA did not learn their name.

Whether or not a GTA learns students' names may not have any bearing on the kind of learning environment he or she creates, or on his or her effectiveness as a teacher. Among the students who assessed a negative course, however, the data suggests that very little rapport existed between them and their GTAs. To a question concerning how often they consulted their GTA outside of discussion section, lab or recitation, 8 out of 29 students answered "occasionally," 12 indicated "almost never," and another 8 marked "never." Among the 149 students describing a positive course, 115 said they "frequently" sought out their GTA for assistance, while 30 said they "occasionally" seek such assistance.

Responses to questions concerning how GTAs lead discussion sections, labs, and recitations also showed differences among students describing negative and positive course experiences. More than 1 in 3 students describing a negative experience indicated that their GTA did not encourage them to participate during class meetings. Forty percent of

students evaluating a negative course also believed that their GTA did not intellectually challenge them in section, lab or recitation. Students describing a positive course felt quite differently. The vast majority believed their GTA encouraged them to participate, and brought a level of intellectual sophistication to their class meetings.

Many responses to the final open-ended question addressed problems with GTA-led discussion sections for courses. According to one student, "All too often, discussions are painfully silent, dominated by a few students, and in some cases, restricted to a regurgitation of the material in class." Wrote another student: "Honestly, almost all of my TA-led sections are a complete waste of time. Discussion is usually very superficial and not helpful. Many of my TAs do not facilitate discussion very well, and do not try hard enough to make discussion interesting. They often keep things on a very simple level, even though I know they have more detailed knowledge that we would like to hear."

Yet another student asserted: "I felt that my TA had not been trained with methods to teach the section in creative ways that would engage the students. He would ask broad questions that did not spark discussion. He did not seem to be interested in teaching at all and did not show his enthusiasm for the material, as much as he could have. He seemed more like a repository of information rather than someone concerned with imparting that information in an interesting way so that we understood. Sometimes the discussion would be more like quizzes to see if we knew everything correctly, instead of real discussions where we debated different ideas. I have found that this is the case with many graduate TAs."

Several students offered suggestions on how to improve discussion sections. "I've learned the most from TAs who require preparation for the section meetings," wrote one student. "They're usually fifty minute periods, and the more structured the discussions, the more productive they tend to be." Another student contended, "TA's need to be taught [discussion] facilitation techniques, be given greater freedom to create lessons and TEACH. The most effective sections I have had have been when the TA explores the topic of the section in broad terms, experiments with debates where students are forced to take positions, splits the section up into groups, etc."

The survey also asked students to consider the ways in which their GTAs had evaluated their written work. As with many of the responses to other questions, students differed in their opinions depending on whether they had chosen to describe a course they considered to be a negative experience, or one they deemed positive. Of the 29 students describing a negative course, only 1 said the GTAs "always" provided useful constructive feedback, 12 said such feedback was given "sometimes," 9 indicated "almost never," and 6 "never." Students describing a positive course experience believed that GTAs usually gave useful feedback to their work.

Comments made in response to the last, open-ended question of the survey revealed other concerns that students have about GTAs and their role in education at Brown. The comments ran the gamut, reflecting both good and bad experiences with GTAs. As one student wrote, GTAs are "sometimes really helpful .... sometimes completely useless." Some sentiments, however, were shared by a number of students. Sixteen mentioned that they experienced difficulty understanding some of their GTAs for whom English is a second language.