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Best practice guidelines for undergraduate (UG) TA programs **Kathy Takayama, Associate Director, Sheridan Center**

These guidelines are based on published research and surveys of undergraduate TA programs/peer mentoring programs that describe practices which result in: i) effective learning outcomes for students in the course; ii) successful academic and career development for UG TAs; and iii) faculty/departmental satisfaction with regard to teaching and learning outcomes and effective TA-faculty partnerships. The core principles are based on Roderick's work, and build on the references cited.

1. The undergraduate TA selection process should be transparent.

Departments/faculty should have a transparent recruitment process with clear selection criteria. Selection criteria might include but are not limited to the following:

- Recent outstanding performance in the course (however, this should not be the sole criterion)
- Familiarity and competence with the subject matter
- Outstanding overall academic performance
- Written and verbal proficiency
- Relevant teaching/mentoring experience
- Interpersonal and rapport-building skills
- Availability
- Self-directedness
- Ability to set reasonable goals and priorities
- Ability to cope with stress
- Ability to articulate a strong motivation to assume a TA position

2. The tasks and responsibilities of undergraduate TAs should be negotiated with the students and clearly articulated.

While many faculty may require UG TAs to perform within well-established roles in their courses, where possible, negotiation of the TA's responsibilities in relation to his/her strengths and abilities can maximize the best outcomes for the students in the course, the TA, and the faculty member. Factors that can influence the design of TA roles include structural factors (course structure and schedule); TA availability, resources allocated to compensation, and rules regarding how many hours a student can work. However, in working collaboratively with TAs to determine how best they can contribute to the course, the TA may provide benefits that extend beyond the officially defined roles by taking greater ownership and providing useful feedback for the faculty member.

3. Training and ongoing mentorship should be provided for all undergraduate TAs.

Training programs developed around evidence-based models for effective pedagogical practice and effective mentorship enables UG TAs to understand their responsibilities, how to perform these responsibilities, how to work in collaboration with the other members of the course, and increases their sense of self-efficacy toward teaching and mentoring. An example of a training program might incorporate the following:

- Initial meeting between the undergraduate TAs and supervising faculty member(s).
- A written contract of expectations and roles should be devised. The contract may have options to be individualized for specific TA roles. The contract should clearly detail TA tasks and responsibilities, anticipated time required to perform each task (faculty should be mindful that it takes undergraduate TAs longer to assess student work), the process associated with each task, what counts as paid time, how time is logged, and rate of pay.
- TAs should receive training in ethical issues they may encounter, the university's code of conduct, and how to seek assistance in addressing any ethical/code issues that might arise. Such issues include confidentiality, plagiarism, cheating, and navigating dual relationships of peer and teaching assistant. Role plays can be an effective mechanism for ethics training.

- Faculty should ensure that TAs are provided with regular updates on any changes or variations from the course syllabus, and/or their roles as initially negotiated. One of the most oft-cited points for frustration for new undergraduate TAs is role ambiguity.
- Faculty and more experienced TAs should provide mentorship on an ongoing basis to undergraduate TAs.
- Faculty should try to provide regular feedback to TAs about their performance that can enhance their own learning, their skills, and their contributions to the course.

4. (Where appropriate) Undergraduate TAs should be provided with visibility and opportunities to display competence.

By providing UG TAs with the chance to demonstrate their abilities, knowledge of the subject matter, this establishes their credibility and students in the course are able to see their TAs as competent and knowledgeable. Research has revealed that the most central problem students in a course have with their undergraduate TAs is the lack of assistant visibility. TAs that are visible are perceived competent by students in the course, and a greater connection develops between the students and their TAs. Students will then be more likely to determine how their TA can be useful to them, and be more willing to seek assistance.

5. Undergraduate TAs should be engaged in the course and in student learning.

When UG TAs are engaged in the course in meaningful ways, student learning is enhanced and the TA experience is an enriching opportunity. Engaging TAs develops their skills, furthers their own learning, provides them with a sense of community, and enhances their self-esteem. Positive outcomes for the entire course occur when TA tasks are well-organized and integrated with the academic content of student learning.

Ways for meaningful engagement can include:

- Leading class discussions
- Leading tutorials or labs
- Providing formative feedback on student work
- Hosting a focus group to obtain student feedback on class activities or assignments

6. A holistic approach whereby UG teaching assistantships are designed to benefit all involved in the course (TAs, students, faculty members) leads to the application and sustainability of other good practices.

UG TAs can gain a better understanding of teaching, improve their own academic skills, and experientially learn more about academic careers. Their academic skills can be enhanced in the following ways:

- Development of an increased appreciation for faculty expectations and what distinguishes quality work that will benefit their own study skills
- Improvement of their writing and presentation skills
- Increase in the depth of their subject matter knowledge
- Improvement of time management
- Development of leadership and self-confidence
- Improved connection with faculty

Students in the course will benefit from access to a peer mentor/teacher. UG TAs can have the capacity to reach out and communicate to students differently than can faculty. Student engagement can be increased through greater time spent in out-of-class learning activities facilitated by UG TAs.

Faculty can benefit because UG TAs can serve as an intermediary between students and professors, and provide feedback on the course assignments, how well ideas are communicated, how well students are learning, and how students are experiencing the curriculum.

7. Fair compensation should be provided.

Fair compensation, whether monetary or course credit, should be provided and clearly articulated. Compensation should be consistent among UG TAs and mechanisms of accountability should be identified and communicated.

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