

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

*Volume 21, Number 6, 2009-10*

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)).

# Using Undergraduate Students as Teaching Assistants

**Joseph “Mick” La Lopa, *Purdue University***

## **Introduction**

When I first became a member of the faculty in the Department of Hospitality at Purdue University, a graduate student was assigned to serve as my TA. As required by the department, the graduate student typically assists with the basic administrative duties of the class (e.g., grading, taking attendance, recording grades) in the fall semester and in the spring semester of the same course, develops, delivers, and assesses a couple of lesson plans. Faculty members are subsequently asked to consult with the graduate TA in order to point out strengths and areas of improvement in the plans.

The main problem I encountered with this arrangement was the disrespectful attitude too-often displayed by the graduate students and represented a departure from my own experiences as a graduate student. I was first introduced to the idea of using an undergraduate as TA when a student, who had performed well in my junior-level sales class, requested a position as my TA. The experiment was so successful that no graduate students have served as TA's since. I now recruit three undergraduates to help me teach my junior-level human resource management (HR) course, two undergraduates for my junior-level sales course, and 20 undergraduates to help teach my large introductory course.

## **Recruitment**

I recruit the bulk of undergraduate TA's for this large freshman introductory course (with an enrollment between 200 and 250 students). Enough undergraduates are recruited to establish a 12:1 - TA to student ratio - in the class. This ratio enables the TA's to help with the performance of three vital tasks in such a large, but important class: first, helping with the required administrative duties, secondly, properly mentoring those students in their section (which contributes positively to departmental retention rates) and finally, grading short writing assignments (thus, allowing me to rely less on multiple choice tests for assessment). None of these would be possible without these TAs. It is also worth noting that when this many undergraduate TAs are recruited, at least one is promoted to TA Supervisor, to ensure that the rest of the TAs follow basic expectations.

The recruitment process has become much easier over the years for the large introductory class because TAs are selected from the pool of those upper classmen who have taken the course. These students experienced the positive attitude, stellar attendance and academic performance of the older TAs in the course when they took it as freshmen. Each successive group of TAs sets the tone for future TAs. And, it isn't difficult to choose new TA's among these past students since the grade book for past classes is kept on file. New TA's are selected from the group who worked hard, demonstrated a serious attitude and mastered the material. Those selected for the junior-level HR and sales class are also typically recruited when taking this introductory class, using the same criteria, and then employed as a TA the following semester.

Once selected, the undergraduate student is required to sign up for a three-credit independent study. Unlike a graduate student, an undergraduate does not earn remuneration for the work they do as a TA; they instead earn a grade. Due to University requirements the independent study must be given a course title to indicate the nature of the course. The addition of the adjective 'advanced' to the course title serves as an additional bonus for the TAs. For example, a student that one day might want to work in sales, appreciates a course entitled "Advanced Sales Management," when serving as TA in the sales class. This system has worked quite well over the years

especially when the grade will, indeed, show up on their transcripts. I find it remarkable that there have only been four instances where a grade less than an “A” has been issued to an undergraduate TA for their performance and learning as ‘course managers’, given the number I have worked with.

### **Duties and Responsibilities of Undergraduate TAs**

Since undergraduate students expect a professor to teach them the course materials, no undergraduate TA is ever allowed to “teach” course materials to classes via a lecture, or any other pedagogy.

Accordingly, the undergraduate TAs primarily perform administrative and facilitating duties associated with the course, such as, taking attendance, grading papers (using a well-defined grading rubric), and recording grades. There are some key differences in what TAs are called upon to do beyond administrative duties in each of the three classes. These differences are a function of the way each course is taught. The TAs in the HR class are allowed to perform leadership roles that do not require any evaluative feedback or other forms of ‘instruction’. They might lead discussions, which allow students to compare answers to homework and discuss differences. The TA’s in the sales class may facilitate a brainstorming session (learned when taking the class) to help guide students in selecting the products they will sell as part of the hands-on sales requirement.

The most important role that the TAs in this “intro” course perform is that of mentor. Since the TA’s are upperclassmen, they are in a perfect position to help orient incoming freshman to the culture of the university and our program. Their role in my courses allows the TA to field questions an incoming student might think to be “too dumb” or inappropriate to ask the professor. International students are matched, whenever possible, with TA’s sharing the same language background to help socialize them to the American classroom.

### **Pros and Cons of Undergraduate Student TA’s**

The biggest advantage to using undergraduate students as TA’s is that I no longer have to confront problematic attitudes displayed by graduate students. The undergraduate students are truly honored to serve as TA’s and take their jobs very seriously. They can be counted on to perform their duties and responsibilities without question. In fact, in all the years of recruiting and selecting hundreds

of undergraduates to TA the three classes, there have only been five individuals who earned less than an “A” for their efforts. Students who serve as TAs each get a letter of recommendation at the end of the semester, which spells out how they were selected, and the job they performed as TA. Typically, these references are used when looking for internships or permanent placement upon graduation. I also treat the group of TA’s to an end-of-the semester luncheon to express my appreciation for their service.

One of the challenges associated with using undergraduate students is related to the risk of leading their peers. The students that they teach - especially the junior-level classes -will most likely be some of the same individuals they will sit alongside in other classes.

Accordingly, they need to be able to keep the roles of co-student and TA/manager, separate. In turn, this challenge leads to the problem of peer pressure. For example, there are strict rules on attendance in the sales class and late assignments are never accepted in any of the classes. That does not stop those who violate the policies from applying peer pressure to win special favors from the TAs. Because those asking for favors are “friends,” former boyfriends/girlfriends, or classmates in general, TAs must be reminded to enforce strictly the policies listed in the syllabus. I must remind them that to diverge at all from these rules will surely cause them a host of unforeseen problems.

Originally, I also faced a problem presented by the gap between what was expected of them as TA and their perception of those responsibilities. In answer to that challenge, I crafted a “TA Expectations” document, spelling out their duties and responsibilities. At the start of class, new TAs read and sign the document to indicate they understand what is expected of them. This procedure, I believe, eliminates any confusion on their part and enables them to properly fulfill their duties.

### **Summary**

Given the procedure for recruiting and selecting undergraduate students to be TA’s and the pros and cons mentioned, there is every reason to continue using them to help administer my classes. I completely trust undergraduate TA’s to keep an accurate record of attendance, grade assignments based on the rubric, and adhere to the

course policies concerning attendance and assignment deadlines. Other educators should consider using the recruitment techniques suggested in this essay to select bright undergraduates to serve as a TA. They will reap many benefits from their work.

## **References**

The Department of Maryland's Computer Science Department has a TA workbook at:

<http://www.cs.umd.edu/Grad/ta.handbook.shtml>

Prieto, L. & Meyers, S. A. (2001). *The Teaching Assistant Training Handbook: How To Prepare TAs for Their Responsibilities*. New Forums Press, Inc. Stillwater, OK.

Zaki, E., Allen, N., Almula, B., Al Motawaha, F., & Fakhro, A. (2009, May). Roles and Responsibilities of Teaching Assistants in Primary Independent Schools of Qatar *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 11(7)

Bureau of Labor Statistics, in its *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2008-2009 Edition has an overview of the job of a Teaching Assistant in detail at: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm>

---

*Essays on Teaching Excellence*

Editor: Elizabeth O'Connor Chandler, Director  
Center for Teaching & Learning,  
University of Chicago  
[echandle@uchicago.edu](mailto:echandle@uchicago.edu)