Advanced Graduate Teaching Cohort (AGTC) Final Report, 2023

Overview of project implementation

Our program built a diverse community within the Cornell teaching assistant (TA) graduate student body. We identified a gap in existing graduate TA programs – in particular, there was a need for support networks and community for those interested in further developing their teaching skills beyond TA orientation programs. The Advanced Graduate Teaching Cohort (AGTC) was created to fill this gap and provide the framework for graduate students to further develop their teaching skills, learn what it takes to become a more effective teacher, and most importantly, network with peers who have expertise in a wide range of subjects within the university. A call for applications to join the AGTC was generated and distributed to over 40 different organizations within Cornell including departmental DEI organizations, departmental graduate student associations (statistics, engineering, mathematics, chemistry, public policy, architecture, computer science, animal science, plant science, ILR school), Latin American student societies, the CTI listserv, and enclosed in the weekly announcements from the Graduate School. Distribution was achieved through email and by hanging up flyers in department buildings. Our goal was to reach out to as many graduate students as possible at Cornell, with a particular focus towards reaching those from backgrounds historically underrepresented in academia.
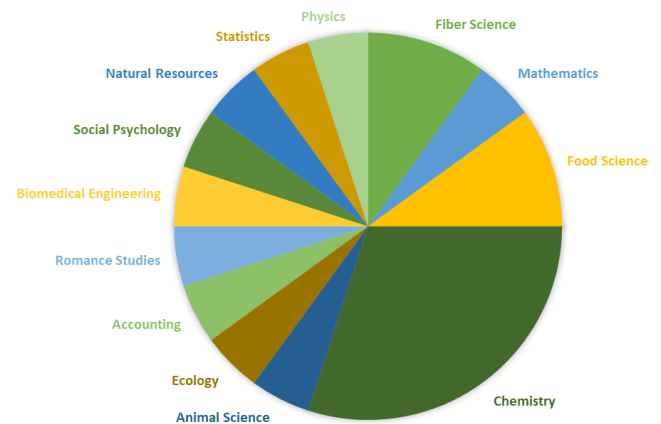

Figure 1: Departmental representation of participants selected for the 2023 AGTC program.

Twenty seven graduate students applied and **twenty applicants** were selected from many different departments across the university (Figure 1). An application evaluation rubric was created based on the instructions outlined in the call for applications. We required participants to be available to attend both in-person program sessions, to have TAed at least one semester at Cornell, and to *not* be graduating before the Fall 2023 semester. Cover letters from applicants were evaluated based on their interest in teaching, their commitment to DEI initiatives, their TA experiences, and their explanations of how participating in AGTC would enhance their professional development goals.

Work completed, outcomes, and impacts realized

In this section, we will describe the AGTC program in detail. We first describe the content and results of Session 1 of the program. Then, we detail our agenda and outcomes from Session 2. Finally, we conclude with outcomes and impacts of the program as a whole.

Session 1
Our first session within the AGTC program was a 3 hour, in-person, hands-on meeting. The session had three parts, each with associated learning objectives (listed below):
1. Evidence-based inclusive teaching for TAs (Workshop)
    a. *Objective:* Describe evidence-based inclusive teaching practices that TAs can employ in their classroom.
    b. *Objective:* Identify classroom scenarios where individual TAs can employ these new practices.
2. Challenges and solutions for TAs (Group Discussion)
    a. *Objective:* Identify and discuss challenges that TAs face in their disciplinary classroom setting
    b. *Objective:* Identify and discuss solutions to the challenges that TAs face in their disciplinary classroom setting
3. Individual development plan (IDP) for teaching-related opportunities (Independent work)
    a. *Objective:* Identify resources and programs for advancing individual teaching goals at Cornell**.**
    b. *Objective:* Make a plan of action for utilizing Cornell's teaching/mentoring resources.

In part 1 (Evidence-based inclusive teaching for TAs), participants reflected on their own experiences of feeling included or excluded in a classroom setting. After a discussion of the impact of inclusive teaching on student learning, participants brainstormed successful inclusive teaching strategies that they have seen as a student or tried as a TA. This activity gave participants ideas of new teaching strategies they could adopt in their own classroom. In our post-session survey, **all participants** indicated that they agreed or somewhat agreed with the statements: "*I can describe various inclusive teaching strategies*" and "*I can describe how to employ an inclusive teaching strategy in my classroom, as a TA.*" One respondent to the survey commented that they "*will use a lot of the techniques [they] learned in the classroom environment*". **This outcome reinforces the *Belonging at Cornell* goal of promoting fair treatment**, as our AGTC participants are now better equipped to practice evidence-based, inclusive, and fair teaching practices as TAs .

In part 2 (Challenges and solutions for TAs), participants worked in groups to identify challenges that they have seen or experienced as TAs. Participants then brainstormed ideas to address the identified challenge of their group and of other groups, based on the previous discussion of inclusive teaching strategies. Despite time constraints in this section, **over 75% of participants** expressed agreement with the statement "*I can find solutions to challenging classroom situations*" in our post-session survey. Participants also cited the benefits of learning with fellow TAs, with one survey respondent saying "*I appreciate the sharing by fellow members … and how [they] handle situations while TAing*".

In part 3 (IDP for teaching-related opportunities), participants were presented with an informational packet and associated worksheet for mapping out teaching-related opportunities that they could engage in while at Cornell. The post-session survey indicated a **strong positive response to this activity**, with participants commenting that they encountered "*lots of resources [they were] not aware of*". This part of the program is an example of the **long-lasting impact of the AGTC** – participants are now equipped to continue advancing their graduate student experience while at Cornell.

During Session 1, our Belonging at Cornell grant funding provided coffee and tea, lunch, and AGTC branded mugs for the group. We also used the funding to pay room rental at PSB 401.

Session 2
Our second session involved a 2-hour program that focused on continued community building and professional development within the cohort. The session was made up of 2 parts, each with associated learning objectives (listed below):, discussing the value of high structured instruction followed by IDP discussion. Objectives for this session were to:
1. The value of high-structure instruction (group discussion)
    a. *Objective:* Describe the role of high-structure in creating an inclusive classroom, using the book chapter "The value of Structure" by Kelly A. Hogan and Viji Sathy.
2. Individual development plan (IDP) for teaching-related opportunities (group discussion)
    a. *Objective:* Discuss completed IDPs among peer groups.
    b. *Objective:* Develop connections and community between cohort members.

For part 1 (The value of high-structure instruction), participants read a chapter, "The value of high structure", from the book "Inclusive Teaching" by Kelly Hogan and Viji Sathy. In groups based on their PhD field of study, participants discussed their answers to questions about the text. During this time, participants had the opportunity to communicate their ideas and listen to others about what they learned from reading the chapter. In addition, they discussed the importance of incorporating high structure into a course and how high structure courses can help build inclusivity within a classroom community. After the group discussion, we connected our lesson on high-structure instruction to an activity from Session 1. In Session 1, participants were asked to write down inclusive teaching strategies they had tried or wanted to try in their classroom. In Session 2, we asked the participants, after reading the book chapter, to select a teaching strategy they would like to use in their classroom and convert it into a "high-structure" strategy.

When we surveyed participants after this session, **94% of respondents** agreed that they could identify high-structure classroom strategies and **89% of respondents** agreed they could discuss the impact of high-structure instruction on students. Participants also had positive comments on the lesson: "*I think it was super helpful and allowed me to learn more about high structured courses and see what is being done and what can be improved*" and " *I enjoyed discussing how to implement high structures; it was very helpful to hear what people from other departments have done"*. Integrating the book chapter and "homework" discussion questions allowed for participants to build on what they had learned in Session 1 and take time to think about new concepts that were presented to them. During session 2, we facilitated further discussion and built on ideas participants had come up with. One participant commented: "*the reading and the following discussion was very helpful. I actually didn't know the concept of high structure in learning....and this helped me to identify why some courses I TA in are successful and others not as much*".

Part 2 (Individual development plan (IDP) for teaching-related opportunities) of Session 2 involved further examination of each participant's IDP. For this part of the session, participants were arranged into pre-assigned groups based on their year in graduate school. In these groups, they discussed their IDP documents and brought up any questions or challenges they had after working on their IDP. Feedback from this portion of the session was positive with **all participants agreeing that they knew where to find more teaching resources at Cornell.** Some written feedback included: "*great compilation of the resources that are available for TA*s", "*I really appreciated compiling all the opportunities in a list!",* and "*The IDP is such a great resource. Not only provides "high structure" for my future plans, but also provides many opportunities that I am excited to apply*." During this session, our hope was to encourage discussion amongst peers where they could learn from each other and come up with ideas for future opportunities and engagement at Cornell. A comment from the post-survey feedback

highlights that this was in fact achieved: "*I think it was **interesting to hear other students' perspectives on the next steps to get to the next level in their teaching journey,** especially at different levels in their academic journey and **to gain inspiration from them.**"*

During Session 2, our Belonging at Cornell grant funding provided ice cream for the group. We also used the funding to pay room rental at the Big Red Barn.

Overall

Taken together, Sessions 1 and 2 of the **AGTC had a positive impact on the sense of belonging and on the professional development aspirations of the participants**. For instance, **all participants** agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement, "The AGTC formed a community after Sessions 1 and 2" in our final evaluation survey. Importantly, there was considerable growth in the closeness of the AGTC community between Sessions 1 and 2. After Session 1, only about 50% of participants agreed with the statement: "If I have questions during my TA career, I would consider reaching out to an AGTC member". By the end of Session 2, **94% of participants** either agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement. These results show that **the AGTC program achieved the *Belonging at Cornell* goal of fostering a sense of belonging** within the Cornell community.

AGTC participants continued to engage in teaching and mentorship opportunities after completion of the AGTC program. Many AGTC participants also attended the Center for Teaching Innovation's (CTI) University-Wide Teaching Conference, the Graduate School's Future Faculty Institute, and the Colman Inclusive Leadership Program, just to name a few. The AGTC also led to strong interest in the CTI Graduate Teaching Fellows program, where CTI leaders reported one of the largest and strongest groups of applicants in program history – including numerous AGTC members. Importantly, **AGTC members are also giving back to new graduate TAs at Cornell**. Over a quarter of the AGTC participants have volunteered their time with the Graduate School's new TA orientation welcome event, to be hosted in August 2023. This result shows that **the AGTC program also supported a major goal of *Belonging at Cornell*, as our participants show a willingness to recommend Cornell as a great place to be for incoming graduate students**.

Explanation of challenges and obstacles to meeting program objectives

While the AGTC program enjoyed numerous successes, we also learned of ways to make the program better in the future. The amount of time (5 hours total) that we had with participants made developing a community challenging. We found that time constraints limited our fruitful group discussions – resulting in less connection between members of the cohort. It is also important to note that our participants were very busy graduate students! We had many applicants note that they would have loved to join the cohort, but our program dates interfered with previous commitments. Thus, simply increasing the time commitment of the program may *not* be a sure-fire way to build the AGTC in the future.

Another challenge in the program was the distribution of fields of study of applicants. While we are proud of the diversity of fields that joined the AGTC, it is notable that over 25% of the group was from the Chemistry department. These members did an excellent job branching out to meet other AGTC participants, but having fewer individuals from any one department might have created more incentive for participants to network with their peers.

Lessons learned and next steps

The success of the AGTC program was noticed by the Center for Teaching Innovation (CTI). AGTC members took part in CTI workshops and applied for the CTI Graduate Teaching Fellows program in large numbers. As such, the CTI is currently exploring ways to continue offering the AGTC program annually.

The AGTC program also served as a valuable lesson in participant recruitment. We enjoyed strong interest in our application, which we attribute to advertising to student organizations and DEI offices/committees directly. Teaching and professional development opportunities are typically advertised most strongly by Graduate Field Assistants and within-department communication, but student organizations and DEI offices/committees proved to be excellent partners in spreading the word about our AGTC program. In addition, we hung up numerous flyers in graduate student spaces (i.e. student offices). These flyers contained QR codes, and we could track the scanning of those codes. Our tracking shows that the QR codes were scanned hundreds of times, showing the utility of that method of advertising!