

# WORKING WITH YOUR TA



Pitt

UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR  
TEACHING AND LEARNING

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# Introduction

*“When I first started working with TAs, I wish I had known how eager they were to discuss teaching issues. If you frame the questions right you can address the topics that mean the most to them.”*

—Professor (Natural Sciences)



Welcoming new faculty to the University of Pittsburgh, the Provost emphasizes the importance of the quality of teaching at Pitt. In welcoming new teaching assistants (TAs), the Vice Provost of Graduate Studies stresses the influence that those TAs will have on the academic development of Pitt’s undergraduates. This acknowledgment from our leaders confirms that both faculty and TAs are essential to fulfill Pitt’s mission of high quality undergraduate programs.

The instructional tasks associated with many large or complex courses could not be accomplished without the assistance of the TA. The faculty member takes the lead as the expert, assuming responsibility for the course while coaching TAs toward an understanding of what it means to teach well at a university. This mutually beneficial relationship has the potential to maximize the learning experience for students when the faculty member and TAs function as an *instructional team*.

Faculty and TA roles are optimized when they share these following characteristics:

- 1. Clear expectations of common instructional goals.** Common goals include helping students to meet course and lesson objectives by teaching towards the knowledge and skills that will be assessed. Both the faculty and the TA should complement one another in the process of teaching the information or skills that students are expected to learn for each class, including instructional activities and assessments.
- 2. Clear understanding of the roles of each team member and how the process will work.** The expectations of faculty for their TAs will vary based on the purpose of the course. The importance of clearly defined, consistent roles and processes increases as the number of sections multiplies. Undergraduates who attend one recitation or lab should have an instructional experience comparable to students in other sections of the same course.
- 3. Mechanisms for consistent communication.** Regular communication helps to confirm expectations and establish collegiality, thereby avoiding problems and making the process of problem solving easier. Regular meetings to review upcoming content, tasks, or strategies help TAs to prepare. Consistent communication also alerts the faculty member to common areas of misunderstanding among undergraduates and gives us the opportunity to provide proactive suggestions.
- 4. Respect for each other’s experience and perspective.** Working closely together enables the faculty member to recognize the developing skill sets of the TAs and to provide support or feedback so that TAs can improve.

A team approach should be established at the beginning of the semester before classes have begun by meeting face-to-face, assigning roles, clarifying expectations and establishing regular communication. Establishing a strong foundation will help you and your TA avoid pitfalls. The following examples from student evaluations of teaching reveal that undergraduates are acutely aware of dysfunctional professor-TA communication and the inconsistencies and uncertainties that may result:

## DYSFUNCTIONAL FACULTY-TA RELATIONSHIPS: COMPLAINTS BY UNDERGRADUATES

**Attendance Expectations:** *"I am in the same large class as my friend, but we are in different recitations. Her TA tells her to come to recitation only if she has questions. My TA takes attendance and I get points taken off if I am not there. And this is for the same class!"*

**Course Objectives:** *"I don't have a clue what will be on the final. The professor lectures on one topic and the TA talks about totally different things."*

**Inconsistent Grading:** *"We worked together on this homework which we were told is okay. We didn't copy but we did come to the same conclusions. I don't understand why we received two different grades."*

**Content Expertise:** *"My TA doesn't even come to lecture. He's from a different department and doesn't understand any of the questions that we have. Then, he tries to figure out the problems in class. It is a waste of time."*



Undergraduates recognize and appreciate consistency in the following areas:

- The relationship of the course to the recitations or labs
- Clarity and fairness of test items relative to course activities
- Grades assigned across multiple recitations
- Expectations of students from different sections regarding the key concepts and skills for which they are responsible

This booklet provides concrete suggestions for establishing and managing an instructional team consisting of a faculty supervisor and one or more TAs. It begins by exploring the roles of TAs and faculty, followed by strategies for working together, assuring course quality, and managing difficult and challenging situations. It also addresses mentoring opportunities for TAs who aspire to be future faculty, or for those preparing for careers outside of academia. The last section includes worksheets, timelines, and tools that you and your TA can employ throughout your course, as well as policies specific to the University of Pittsburgh.

A high quality education at Pitt is a significant financial, emotional, and social investment. This booklet hopes to ensure that TAs and faculty work together to provide the best possible return on that investment.

# ESTABLISHING ROLES AND WORKING TOGETHER

Before meeting with your teaching assistants (TAs), it is important to consider the roles that you and your TAs will play throughout the development, delivery, and evaluation of your course. Roles refer to the tasks that you and your TAs perform and to the type of relationship that can be established:

- between yourself and the TAs;
- between the TAs and the students in your class, and
- among TAs if there are several working together in your instructional team.

Regardless of the roles adopted by you and your TAs, the primary responsibility for all courses taught at the university rests with the supervising faculty.

As lab facilitators, graders, and recitation leaders, TAs shape the educational experience of undergraduates. TAs are students who, in addition to the course of study for which they will earn a degree, are learning to teach, and many are aspiring educators. TA appointments present opportunities for students to acquire and practice marketable skills.

## CATEGORIES AND APPOINTMENTS

According to University policy ([www.pitt.edu/~graduate/TATFGSAPolicyStatement.pdf](http://www.pitt.edu/~graduate/TATFGSAPolicyStatement.pdf)), TAs and teaching fellows are defined as follows:

- Teaching assistants (TAs): TAs are graduate students who are receiving support in return for specific instructional duties under the guidance of faculty mentors. Their appointment is made in accordance with the University regulations pertaining to TAs. According to university policy, no TA may teach post-baccalaureate courses.
- Teaching fellows (TFs): TFs are TAs who have progressed further in experience or education, typically holding the equivalent of a master's degree. TFs should not be assigned to teach graduate courses except in rare occasions where there is clear evidence of outstanding skills in specialized areas. In those cases, graduate faculty directly supervise the teaching fellow.



## WHO ARE TAs?

Departments throughout the university have identified the following tasks that different faculty expect TAs to perform. Note the variety and breadth of these jobs in terms of the skills required to do them:

<b>Course Planning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• assist in the planning or revision of a course</li><li>• create a syllabus</li><li>• review materials developed by the supervisor</li></ul>	<b>Teaching</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• labs</li><li>• recitations</li><li>• clinical skills</li><li>• pre-labs</li><li>• remediation sessions</li></ul>
<b>Creating Materials</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• quizzes</li><li>• rubrics</li><li>• exam questions</li><li>• entire exams</li><li>• problem sets</li><li>• assignments</li><li>• handouts</li><li>• online information</li><li>• lab activities</li></ul>	<b>Administrative Duties</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• mentor undergraduate students</li><li>• mentor new graduate students</li><li>• hold office hours</li><li>• proctor exams</li><li>• take attendance</li><li>• manage students grades</li><li>• update class CourseWeb</li><li>• update social media</li></ul>
<b>Grading and Feedback</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• quizzes</li><li>• exams</li><li>• problem sets</li><li>• papers and essays</li><li>• lab reports</li><li>• class participation</li><li>• clinical skills</li></ul>	<b>Other Duties</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• organize, supervise students or drive vehicles for field trips</li><li>• collect manage, and/or set audiovisual equipment</li></ul>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKLOAD

Clear and reasonable expectations for TA duties should be established. For example, keep in mind that leading a recitation each week requires a fixed amount of time, but the actual planning, along with other duties, can consume most of the hours allotted for TA appointments.

Weekly assignments for a TA/TF with a full appointment should not exceed 20 hours of effort on average. Fractional appointments (i.e., three-fourths, one-half, or one-fourth) should not exceed the corresponding fraction of the 20 hour standard. For further information, see the university's policy statement for teaching assistants, teaching fellows, and graduate student Assistants at [www.pitt.edu/~graduate/TATFGSAPolicyStatement.pdf](http://www.pitt.edu/~graduate/TATFGSAPolicyStatement.pdf).

Providing a summary list of tasks that you expect TAs to perform, along with realistic estimates of the time that you would expect those tasks to take, helps to communicate your expectations. If you find that the time for these tasks will exceed the 20 hour a week average, it will be important to prioritize which tasks you will assign to your TAs to achieve maximum efficiency, while maintaining course quality. It may also be helpful to talk about realistic expectations with faculty colleagues or departmental chairs, directors of graduate studies, TA coordinators, or the Coordinator of the Graduate Student Teaching Initiative at the Teaching Center.

As you review the tasks that you will assign TAs, remember that many TAs will have little or no experience with those tasks and will likely need support and guidance.

If you find that a task is taking much longer than you believe it should, talk with your TAs about their approaches and methods, and give guidance where appropriate. Try to be clear and specific with your advice because vague direction can compound the performance problem. Your experience can save TAs time, improve their performance, and reduce the number of hours that TAs are spending on their jobs.

## FACULTY ROLES

As a faculty member working with TAs, you wear several hats as the course instructor, the course team leader, and as a faculty mentor.

**Course Instructor.** You are the content expert for the course and are in the best position to teach the key concepts of your course, to assess your students' understanding and redirect students when misunderstanding occurs, and to engage your students as they acquire new knowledge and skills.

**Course Team Leader.** You are responsible for seeing that all aspects of the course run smoothly. As supervising faculty, you ensure that the design and development of the course should meet the curriculum and programmatic requirements of your department. The students' achievement should reflect the rigor of your objectives and the methods in which you engage your students. It is your responsibility to convey these elements to your TAs and to ensure that your TAs demonstrate to students the connection between the in-class activities, assessments, and the learning objectives. These responsibilities should be clearly defined and communicated early in your relationship with your TAs and consistently maintained throughout the semester.

If you have just one TA, you have more flexibility in assigning tasks. If you find that your TA has an aptitude for or is interested in developing a particular skillset, then you may want to assign tasks accordingly. Your communication could be informal at times; a conversation in the elevator or briefly before class might suffice. Nevertheless, regular meetings are advised and, according to university policy, faculty must meet with their TAs at least three times throughout the term. Weekly meetings will keep the channels for communication open and expectations clear for your TA.

If you have several TAs and many course sections, it is likely that you will need to exercise greater efforts to standardize the student experience across sections. Furthermore, you will want to be cognizant that any communication which you convey in informal conversations with individual TAs may require reiteration with the other TAs. Consider the impact on fairness; for example, if you provided direction to a TA who asked you how best to handle a particular grading situation, you should share this example with the other TAs who may encounter similar situations. All members of the instructional team should be aware of the guidance and support that they can expect from you as the supervising faculty, as well as the tasks for which they are responsible as the TA.

Regardless of the number of TAs that you have, establishing protocols for TAs to reference can improve efficiency. Common protocols are useful for TAs who are proctoring, creating assignments, setting up equipment, developing a CourseWeb site, or



grading class participation. If this is your first year in teaching a course, you may wish to assign your TA the task of developing protocols for routine tasks as a common reference for TAs in the years that follow.

**Faculty Mentor.** Keeping in mind that many TAs have no prior teaching experience, it is your responsibility to:

- answer questions about specific practices of the discipline with regard to teaching.
- provide teaching and teaching-related experience.
- emphasize the importance of building a strong teaching portfolio.
- provide support for teaching and information about sources of support for teaching at the university
- prepare TAs for unexpected hurdles.
- provide advice about balancing the various demands of research, coursework, and teaching responsibilities.
- assist in problem solving.

TAs appreciate constructive criticism. According to University policy, any TA who is instructing a laboratory, recitation section, or course for the first time should receive feedback several times based on observation, either directly or by means of a video recording. Feedback should be provided in writing (as well as in person), and appropriate suggestions should be given for improvement. In addition to constructive feedback, you may also wish to write an evaluation of the TA which can be included in a teaching portfolio. (See Appendix 4 for an observation checklist).

Student surveys should be distributed at least once during an appointment period to the undergraduates in the TA's class for the purpose of improving teaching. The survey results must be made available to the TA and the faculty member. In addition, you may wish to perform such surveys of your own teaching and share them with your TAs as a way of modeling your commitment to improve teaching. For more information, contact the Office of Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching: [www.omet.pitt.edu](http://www.omet.pitt.edu).

TAs come to the university with varying degrees of real world experience and exposure to the culture of academia. Depending on their background, their past experiences may differ from the instructional roles that they will encounter at Pitt. Setting expectations around professional behavior may help prevent misunderstandings.

Two common areas where TAs may need guidance:

1. **Electronic communication with students and other faculty and staff.** Recommend to TAs that they respond to all e-mails within a set amount of time. Instruct TAs on matters of confidentiality in e-mail, and provide examples of e-mail communication that is appropriate and inappropriate.
2. **The hierarchy of authority and the roles that different faculty play.** To address a misunderstanding between a faculty member and a TA, the TA should first approach the faculty member to reach a resolution. Subsequently, it may be necessary to consider contacting the department chairperson. If a misunderstanding occurs between a student and a TA, the TA should alert the supervising faculty.

Your influence on the performance of your TAs cannot be overstated. You are their coach, their instructor, their mentor and their model.



# QUALITY ASSURANCE

## THE FIRST MEETING

Ensuring the quality of your team begins during your first conversation as you establish trust, set expectations, and assess your TAs' instructional skills and knowledge about the content of your course. When you approach the first meeting as a time to get to know each other and other TAs, you facilitate an environment in which TAs can feel comfortable coming to you with questions.

TAs often confide that they feel alone and unprepared for their assistantships. Some TAs are hesitant to approach the professor with questions. This reluctance can be more pronounced depending on a TA's cultural background. Encouraging your TAs to bring questions about teaching to you will help allay any presumptions that TAs should be competent in areas in which they are actually novices. Approaching the first meeting as the team kick-off for the semester helps TAs feel less alone, since it becomes clear that everyone is working towards the same goal.

Assessing the TAs' skills and level of content knowledge will help you understand the areas where TAs need more support. For example, if a TA was an undergraduate TA (UTA) in the role of a peer tutor, that person might be better equipped to lead a discussion in a course that covers the same content. On the other hand, a TA who was never exposed to the content or who has not served in any instructional capacity may require more direct training to be effective in performing the job. While both TAs would need instruction in how to lead your recitations, the former UTA could begin with a better understanding of where undergraduates will make mistakes.

Specific answers to background questions prior to your first meeting can help you gain an initial assessment of your TAs. Copying and distributing *New Teaching Assistants: Getting to Know You*, in Appendix 1 of this booklet, can help you assess your TAs' skills, motivation and content knowledge. The answers to the questions in Appendix 1 can alert you to ways to motivate your TAs in addition to areas that need focused training. For example, if your TA does not know how to manage the classroom during discussions, leaving extra time to address this topic may be warranted. If your TA has never proctored an exam, then directions are needed in observing students and the actions to be taken if a violation is suspected. If your TA is expected to lead recitations, meetings to connect the class to the recitation and to review the key concepts and objectives are essential.

Appendix 2, **First Meeting Agenda**, provides a checklist for setting expectations with your TAs before the onset of the course to help everyone move into a smooth routine. The purpose of the first meeting is to establish:

- the overview of the course for the semester.
- each team member's role.
- the value of approaching your work as a team.
- a general understanding of specific skills and motivation each TA brings to the table.

## THROUGHOUT THE TERM

Just as with the students you teach, TAs benefit from constructive feedback in whatever task is performed. Scheduling time to observe your TA and provide feedback and then checking in to see that the feedback was followed helps TAs improve their instructional skills. Having TAs schedule informal mid-semester feedback from students about their facilitation of recitations or labs and discussing the feedback with you, also helps TAs improve. Setting time aside to review grading for exams guides TAs towards consistency in their grading. Even seasoned instructors perform tasks differently, which is why communication and standardization of expectations is important.

Appendix 3, **Ensuring Quality**, includes strategies to help ensure the quality of the various tasks undertaken by TAs throughout the term in communicating with undergraduates, conducting office hours, developing or modifying course materials, creating assessments, grading, teaching recitations or labs, and administering the CourseWeb site.

A myriad of skills come together for good teaching. Many of these skills are captured in Appendix 4, **the Classroom Observation Checklist**, and you can use all or part of this tool to provide feedback when observing teaching. Prior to observing your TA in the recitation or lab, you may want to have a conversation with your TA about the aspects of teaching that he or she feels could benefit the most from feedback. Then after the observation, schedule a feedback session as soon as possible so that the feedback is the most meaningful. If there are behaviors that you would like to see immediately improved (because they jeopardize learning), discuss these aspects of the observation in specific terms, and schedule another observation to ensure that improvement has been made.

Appendix 5, **End-of-Term Meeting Checklist**, is an end of term checklist or agenda for your last meeting of the semester with your TA. This is the time to review the progress over the term, what still needs to be accomplished, recommendations that the TA may have for course improvements, and recommendations for improving the process of the Faculty-TA relationship.

**The TA Handbook** online:

[teaching.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TA-Handbook.pdf](http://teaching.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TA-Handbook.pdf)

The handbook should be considered the first stop for TA instruction, followed by team meetings to discuss the details of how procedures should be applied. As the team leader, you should coach TAs as they learn about the art of teaching.



# CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Classroom management can be challenging for even the most experienced instructors. Teaching assistants (TAs) may have little or no practice in classroom management and will often welcome guidance and direction in this arena.

Different courses invite different challenges. For example, in discussion recitations, tangentially related or seemingly unrelated topics may result in the introduction of complex issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. This may place a TA in a position for which he or she is unprepared. As the instructor, you are aware of topics that might trigger sensitive discussions, and you can help TAs by discussing potential scenarios before they arise. Point out that it is university policy, as well as good practice, to treat all students with the same respect and regard. Making TAs aware of reliable resources for support and providing opportunities for TAs to practice challenging classroom scenarios with other TAs will enhance their confidence.

Some students may not recognize the authority of TAs as instructors or as subject matter experts. These perceptions may be compounded by the fact that TAs may find it difficult to assert their authority in the classroom, particularly if they are close in age to the students that they are responsible for instructing. Help TAs establish and maintain authority in the classroom through effective and consistent enforcement of classroom policies and guidelines about out-of-the-classroom contact, such as office hours.

If a student complains about a TA to you or to the department chairperson, be sure to discuss the matter with the TA before making any determinations moving forward. Members of your instructional team rely on you to represent them fairly and to help build trust in your TAs as effective instructors. To avoid grounds for complaints, advise TAs to keep accurate records of student work, return graded assignments promptly, behave in a professional manner towards students, keep a record of encounters with students, and inform you about any disagreements. In addition, advise TAs about appropriate management of students with complaints, and step in if a student fails to adhere to institutional guidelines in the classroom.

## HELPING TAs WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS

Undergraduates may have more consistent contact with TAs than with any other University employee. Your TAs may encounter students who are distressed, grieving, depressed, or anxious, and TAs may be the first to recognize potential problems with substance abuse.

In these situations, it is important that the TA know that it is not his or her responsibility to diagnose, protect, or counsel the student but to direct the student to trained professionals. TAs may have difficulty distinguishing between the role of a trusted authority figure and that of a confidante; for this reason, it is important to stress to TAs that distressed students should be referred to the appropriate campus resources, and such interactions should be documented and discussed with supervising faculty. Further information for TAs about these matters can be found in the TA Handbook: [teaching.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TA-Handbook.pdf](http://teaching.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TA-Handbook.pdf).



## RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITH YOUR TAs

*“The only time I’ve had a frustrating experience with a TA was when I had a TA who did not want to follow my course design.”*

—Professor

In any working relationship, conflicts can arise. TAs are graduate students, and their priorities may change throughout the semester. In some cases, TAs may question the pedagogical methods, course design, or job duties. As with any professional relationship, divergent ideas about the best courses of action can be difficult to agree upon. Establishing clear roles and expectations, as well as open and consistent channels of communication, early in the term can go a long way towards diminishing difficulties between your TA and you.

An open and honest dialogue about work standards and performance is the best approach to managing a professional relationship with a TA who is not performing his or her expected duties effectively. Try to analyze the situation and consider mitigating factors. Point out inconsistencies in performance and listen to the TA's reasoning before reaching any conclusions. If you find the TA has undermined your instructional efforts, such as speaking negatively about you to students or undercutting the rigorosity of your grading scheme, be direct in explaining your rationale and why such behaviors are not acceptable. If such a dialogue does not result in a satisfactory improvement in performance, an informal discussion or a formal complaint with the TA's department chairperson is an appropriate next step. Formal complaints must be copied to the TA as well as to the Employee Relations Department of the Office of Human Resources.

## **RECOGNIZING ISSUES OF RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY**

Professional relationships between faculty members and students are of paramount importance. Be aware that your position as faculty mentor puts you in a position of authority over TAs, which may make them reluctant to refuse work-related requests. You should therefore only ask your TAs to perform tasks related to the course to which they are assigned, and avoid asking them to perform tasks unrelated to that course (e.g., research-related tasks, editing, grading papers or writing test questions for other courses, running personal errands, or performing personal favors).

Faculty and staff members are not permitted to engage in or solicit Consensual Relationships (any intimate, romantic, sexual, or marriage relationship willingly undertaken by the parties) with students over whom they have Direct Supervision or with whom there is a reasonable likelihood of Direct Supervision. (This includes but is not limited to advisors, coaches, graduate student teaching assistants, teaching fellows, instructors, post-doctoral fellows in a laboratory, thesis committee members, and members of a department's graduate committee. It includes anyone appointed by the University as a teacher, researcher, or academic administrator, including graduate and undergraduate students so appointed). In the event such a situation is imminent or develops, the faculty or staff member must disclose the existence of the Consensual Relationship immediately to his/her supervisor, department chair, dean, or, where appropriate, higher administrative authority. The supervisor will then ensure that the faculty or staff member's Direct Supervision of the student is terminated as soon as practicable or avoided. In addition, the supervisor will develop and implement a management plan with the faculty or staff member to transition supervisory authority and to otherwise assure objective evaluation and supervision and management of potential conflicts. The management plan shall be focused on maintaining an appropriate professional relationship between the parties in the academic environment [...] Reference: Policy 07-14-01: cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/Policy07-14-01web.pdf

## **WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL TAs**

*"I work with many international TAs, and so I wish I had known how little they know about the American university system and how different it is from their home country context."*

—Statistics Professor

International TAs are becoming more numerous at American institutions of higher learning, and the University of Pittsburgh is no exception. These students may have little or no experience with the settings and expectations of the American classroom and can be taken by surprise by teaching strategies, approaches to classroom management, and attitudes of their students stemming from cultural differences.

Each academic center or department is responsible for evaluating its instructional faculty and staff for English language fluency and certifying that those individuals will be permitted to teach. TAs who are non-native speakers of English must be evaluated through a test designed to assess spoken English approved by the Office of the Provost and administered by the English Language Institute (ELI). All TAs receiving unsatisfactory scores will be provided with remediation in the form of tutoring or a class. An unsatisfactory score at the time of reappointment is sufficient cause for non-renewal.

In some parts of the world, students are required to be passive recipients of knowledge in higher education classrooms; students from those cultures may feel challenged or undermined by something as commonplace in the United States as a student raising his or her hand to ask a question. Differences in student and TA expectations can create a great deal of friction, resulting in disappointment for both parties. To make matters more complicated, cultural differences are often mistaken for something else; a student may assume, for example, that an international TA does not have sufficient English fluency to adequately explain an example, while a TA may assume that a student is being impudent and wasting class time by asking for additional or alternative explanations. This type of misattribution can make it still more difficult to resolve the situation—if a student complains to the faculty supervisor of a TA's poor English fluency, the faculty supervisor will likely take such a complaint at face value. Similarly, if a TA consults with a colleague or mentor about how to handle an impudent or disruptive student, that colleague or mentor is likely to take the TA's interpretation of student behavior at face value.

Thus, it is very important for a faculty supervisor to be aware of such pitfalls in order to avoid them. Before the semester begins, discuss the TA's experience at some depth. What characterized his or her experiences in the classroom? What were the expectations of students in those contexts, and how might the expectations of students at an American institution of higher learning differ? What role will the TA be playing in this particular course, and what exactly does that role entail?

The more you and your international TA openly discuss past experiences and the ways that the American classroom might deviate from these experiences, the better you can prepare your TA for the coming semester.

Throughout the semester, check in regularly with your international TAs who have little or no prior experience in American classrooms. Ask about student participation, about classroom climate, and about managing both student and TA expectations.

The English Language Institute (ELI) offers formal and informal tutoring sessions in English language skills for international TAs and, in conjunction with the Graduate Student Teaching Initiative at the Teaching Center, offers informal meetings with other international TAs to develop teaching skills appropriate to the American classroom. Free, specialized workshops for international TAs on topics ranging from the culture of the American classroom to leading discussion sections are offered through the Teaching Center.

## ACCOMODATING TAs WHO BECOME PARENTS

In the event that your TA becomes a parent following the birth or adoption of a young child, the Graduate Student Parental Accommodation Guidelines enable a full-time student to remain enrolled with all the associated benefits of full-time student status while enjoying a six-week Parental Accommodation period. This situation entails a modification of deadlines and academic expectations. Faculty members who supervise TAs who assume new roles as parents should offer flexibility to allow students to take advantage of the Parental Accommodation Period. During this period the students will continue to receive their stipend, benefits, and associated tuition support. Mothers who give birth must cope with the health consequences of childbirth and recovery in addition to new parental roles. Eligible graduate students with appointments who experience the health consequences of pregnancy will be excused from their regular duties for a period of time to be determined by a health care provider not to exceed the student's appointment period. During this period, they will continue to receive their stipend, benefits, and associated tuition support. If a student is being funded by an external grant, and the funding agency has terms and conditions which do not permit funding pursuant to this guideline, the department or school will fund the parental accommodation period. Eligible students who are supported by University of Pittsburgh fellowships will experience no change in their funding arrangements during the Parental Accommodation Period; they will continue to receive their fellowship support and benefits during the Parental Accommodation period. For more information, see the complete Graduate Student Parental Accommodation Guidelines at [www.provost.pitt.edu/documents/Grad\\_Parental\\_Accommodation\\_Guidelines2011.pdf](http://www.provost.pitt.edu/documents/Grad_Parental_Accommodation_Guidelines2011.pdf).



## **ACCOMODATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

If approached by a student seeking accommodations for a disability, a TA should seek the assistance of faculty mentors and Disability Resources and Services. Be sure that your TAs are aware of the support systems in place and how to access them. More information can be found at the Disability Resources and Services Web site: [studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drs](http://studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drs).

TAs with disabilities may require accommodations in order to effectively execute their jobs. TAs who believe that they have a disability necessitating an accommodation should contact both the faculty supervisor and Disability Services. More information can be found in the Staff Handbook: [hr.pitt.edu/handbook](http://hr.pitt.edu/handbook).

## **PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR VETERANS**

The past decade has seen a dramatic expansion in the number of Veterans transitioning from military to University life. The facilitation of this transition, including support for academic success and integration into campus life, should be a consideration of the faculty supervisor. Veterans have special tuition benefits through the GI Bill and other avenues. This can mean that registration, benefits, and appointments require an extra set of steps to facilitate. Part-time versus full-time status can affect the status of Veteran benefits.

Faculty supervisors should be sensitive to the needs of Veteran TAs and help TAs to appropriately accommodate their Veteran students. Any student, undergraduate or TA, who is called to active duty should take a copy of their orders to the Office of Veterans Benefit Services. That office will work with the Student Appeals Office to determine any funds owed to the student.

In the event that class activities such as long-term group projects leave other students at a disadvantage, the faculty supervisor should work directly with other TAs and the students to make this change as easy as possible.

Veterans may have special medical needs and, as in the case of any student suffering from medical problems or distress, should be referred to appropriate campus organizations, including Student Health and Counseling Services. Make use of the campus Office of Veterans Services (more information can be found at [www.veterans.pitt.edu](http://www.veterans.pitt.edu)).

To cancel registration due to military deployment or call to active duty, contact: Student Appeals Office, G-12 Thackeray Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; [payments.pitt.edu/tuition-adjustments](http://payments.pitt.edu/tuition-adjustments); phone 412-624-7668 during business hours or phone 412-624-7585 after business hours.



# FOSTERING TA DEVELOPMENT

As a supervising faculty member, you have an excellent opportunity to foster your TAs' professional development. Your influence—positive or negative—will be substantial. It may be helpful to conceive of a course in terms of parallel and intersecting educational goals: promoting the intellectual development of both the students enrolled in the course and your TAs, who are not only graduate students but, in the context of your course, students of pedagogy within your discipline. These goals for your students and TAs intersect insofar as the more a TA learns and improves as an educator, the greater the quality of education for students enrolled in the course.

It is worth having an initial conversation with your TAs to emphasize that their participation as part of your instructional team is not merely an “assignment” or a method of subsidizing their own education—it is an opportunity for them to achieve their own pedagogical goals and prepare for their profession. Encourage them to articulate their own goals clearly: ask your TAs what pedagogical skills they wish to develop, and consider providing suggestions of your own, based upon your conception of the skillset necessary for a well-rounded and successful educator. It is helpful to frame those goals in terms of compiling their own professional teaching portfolio. Such goals provide direction, purpose, and meaning to the various tasks your TAs will be asked to perform as part of your instructional team.

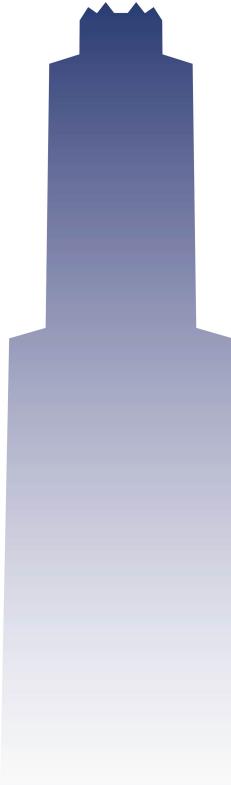
The example that you present as a supervising faculty member and educator is likely to have an impact upon your TAs. The model that you present may continue to influence their pedagogical choices far into the future, when they themselves become faculty or other professionals. (It is very common for current faculty to indicate that they teach in the way that they do simply because that is how they were taught or what they observed.) Modeling is most effective when you occasionally point out and explain particular strategies that you use. Consider doing likewise when something you have done has not proved entirely successful—your TAs are likely to appreciate your candor and the learning opportunity.

TAs are more likely to seek out supplemental opportunities for their own pedagogical development if a faculty member recommends that they do so. You may recommend that your TAs read an article in a disciplinary teaching journal or collaborate on a pedagogy publication themselves, that they sit in on a particularly dynamic instructor's class, seek out a class observation, attend a pedagogy workshop, or enroll in a pedagogy seminar.

## SUMMARY

You are in the unique position to challenge, coach, guide, and support the next generation of graduate students along with the undergraduate students who are relying on your TA to help them navigate the academic challenges ahead. We hope that this booklet was useful to you as you think about how to manage your instructional team. If you would like to discuss any aspect of course development, teaching, or working with Teaching Assistants, please contact the Teaching Center's Teaching Support unit at [teaching@pitt.edu](mailto:teaching@pitt.edu).





# GRADUATE STUDENT TEACHING INITIATIVE

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If you have a question about this booklet or you would like to speak with the coordinator of the Graduate Student Teaching Initiative, please visit:  
[teaching.pitt.edu/graduate-student-teaching](http://teaching.pitt.edu/graduate-student-teaching) or e-mail: [tahelp@pitt.edu](mailto:tahelp@pitt.edu) or [teaching@pitt.edu](mailto:teaching@pitt.edu)

If you would like to see a listing of upcoming Graduate Student Teaching Initiative workshops, please visit: [teaching.pitt.edu/workshops](http://teaching.pitt.edu/workshops)

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