
TA / Peer-Tutor Guidelines

The aim of these guidelines is to foster an academic support system in which TAs and peer tutors are provided with the resources and support they need to maximally improve student learning and classroom outcomes.

A strong TA and tutor program provides many benefits for everyone involved. TAs gain leadership skills and improve their ability to write and present. Both TAs and tutors gain a better understanding of the subject matter at hand, learn about how to teach, develop a better understanding of faculty expectations, and cultivate a stronger connection with the faculty.

Students taking the courses benefit from having a peer mentor not only for the academic assistance they receive, but also because peer mentors and students share a fundamentally different relationship than that shared between professor and student. A strong TA / peer tutor system can increase engagement by creating out-of-class opportunities for students to interact with course materials and principles. The more personalized nature of the peer-to-peer interaction allows for TAs and tutors to tailor the learning process to each individual's learning style.

Finally, faculty members benefit from a strong TA / peer tutor system. The unique interaction between peers can give rise to different types of course feedback that might normally not rise to the faculty member's attention. Peer mentors can therefore act as a conduit between students and faculty, providing feedback on course structure and presentation, assignments, and how well students are absorbing the material.

The structure and substance of these guidelines are largely adopted from the undergraduate TA program at Brown University. Those guidelines may be found [here](#) and are adapted from Roderick's work. Additional information was adapted from the [Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Guidelines](#) used by James Madison University.

<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/teaching-assistants/undergraduate-tas-0/ugta-resources-faculty-departments/best-pr>

https://www.jmu.edu/academic-affairs/_documents/uga-guidelines-sample-agreement.pdf

1 Transparent selection process

Academic departments should develop a standardized approach in selecting students for TA or peer tutor positions. It is important that the criteria used in the selection process for both positions be transparent and freely available.

In selecting students for these positions, departments should assess for some combination of the following criteria:

- Strong course performance and understanding
- Conspicuous patterns of growth and resilience
- Clear desire to assist other students
- Stated interest in pedagogy
- Past teaching/mentoring experience
- Strong communication 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 Roles

2.1 Faculty Role

Individual faculty members play the role of both facilitator and mentor. It is important for faculty members to work closely with TAs and peer tutors, providing them with a clear understanding of what is expected and ensuring they have access to any support necessary for the execution of those responsibilities.

Faculty should have an initial meeting with their TAs and tutors at the beginning of the semester. Any changes made to the course structure or syllabus during the semester should be communicated. Faculty and more experienced TAs and tutors should be available to provide regular feedback and mentorship for newer TAs and tutors.

2.1.1 Playing to a TA's strengths

Where appropriate, it may be a good idea to provide your TA with some latitude in designing their responsibilities. Consulting with your TA about their strengths and how they envision their role allows them to take some ownership over the position, freeing them up to apply their creativity, develop leadership capacity, learn to be more self directed and cultivate an experiential understanding of what an academic career entails. Their unique perspective as a student may empower them to develop interesting new assignments, ideas for labs, explanatory techniques, ways of obtaining feedback, or produce other benefits.

2.1.2 TA visibility and engagement

Lack of assistant visibility is a key barrier to TA-student engagement. Providing TAs with the opportunity to display their competence is a good way to reinforce their credibility and increase their visibility amongst the students. When students see their TA as knowledgeable and having a strong grasp on the material, they are more likely to engage with their TA, develop a connection, and seek assistance where needed. Further, not only does providing TAs with a tangible way to actively contribute augment student learning, it also positively impacts the TA's self esteem and requires them to further develop their skills. Working with your TA to develop course-relevant opportunities for them to shine has the potential to positively impact everyone involved. Here are some suggestions for engaging your TA:

- 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

2.2 Teaching assistants

The TA position encompasses a variety of responsibilities to help ensure the smooth execution of the course and to assist in improving student outcomes. TAs can help to improve the course overall, help to with lab sections, collect

student feedback, conduct study sessions, and help to identify struggling students. TA responsibilities may include the following:

- Assist with grading
- Provide feedback on written assignments
- Identify students who may be in need of academic support
- Help develop course materials, classroom activities and lectures
- Develop study guides and other materials for student use
- Assist with lecturing
- Lead lab classes, study skills sessions, review sessions, and tutoring meetings
- Facilitate feedback sessions.
- Assist with data collection and analysis.
- Support class management by taking attendance, distributing materials, facilitating group activities, etc.

2.3 Guidelines for peer tutors

The peer tutoring position is one of the most personalized forms of academic support. It is important for peer tutors to develop a rapport with their tutees, and to employ appropriate language, tone, demeanor, attitude, and communication skills. Peer tutors should pay special attention to inclusive practices, recognize different learning styles, and tailor their approach to the individual, cultivating confidence and trust. Peer tutors should practice strong listening skills, working to guide their tutees to the appropriate solution through asking questions, rather than by providing the answer. Peer tutor responsibilities and practices include:

- Strong familiarity with course schedule and materials
- Clear communication with tutees about scheduling, follow through on commitments

- Strong understanding of effective learning strategies
- Familiarity with inclusive practices and techniques for mentoring
- Practicing strong listening skills
- Peer advocacy

3 Quality assurance and improvement

All TAs and peer tutors should attend the pre-semester orientation seminar developed by Instructional and Curricular Design Services (ICDS) during which they will receive information on their responsibilities and how to effectively execute those responsibilities. During the semester ICDS will also facilitate quality improvement meetings and provide TAs and peer tutors with follow up materials and short modules designed to improve their efficacy as peer educators. Topics covered in the pre-semester seminar and during the semester via materials, meetings, and modules will include:

- Information on research verified pedagogical / study techniques
- Inclusive practices
- Mentoring skills
- Ethical considerations
- Basic professional expectations (including providing a written contract)

4 Identifying students who may benefit from tutoring

It is often difficult to identify students who are struggling until after an exam is over or a deadline has passed. This may be due to a number of factors including a student's reluctance to self-identify. Providing an early ungraded skills evaluation and/or low stakes quizzes and assignments is a good way to identify students who could benefit from academic support services. Doing this in class is a good idea, because it precludes out-of-class collaboration and thus provides a clear picture of each student's current level of understanding.

Also, consider leveraging your TAs and graders to help in this regard. They share a unique student-to-student dynamic with class enrollees and are positioned to identify students requiring additional academic support early. Faculty members should keep this in mind and consult with their TAs early and often.

Students who do poorly on the assignments, or who are identified by TAs or graders can be given supplemental material, directed to attend office hours, utilize other academic support services, or be advised to meet with a tutor.

<https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching-resources/interacting-students/supporting-vulnerable-students>

5 Compensation

Students employed as TAs or peer tutors should be compensated fairly. Compensation schemes should be clearly articulated and equivalent between TAs of similar experience. Means of evaluation should be clearly communicated.

Procedures should be put in place that recognize and provide additional compensation for TAs and peer tutors who have performed especially effectively, worked diligently to improve their knowledge, and/or dedicated a significant portion of their time to helping other students.

6 Additional Resources

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Keimig, R. T. (1983). *Raising academic standards: a guide to learning improvement*. Washington DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Park, C. (2004) *The graduate teaching assistant (GTA): lessons from North American experience*. Teaching in Higher Education, 9:349-361.

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Roderick, C. (2009) *Undergraduate teaching assistantships: good practices*. Mountainrise, the international journal of the scholarship of teaching and learning, Spring 2009.

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