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Enhancing GTA Training in Academic Departments: Some Self-Assessment Guidelines

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Faculty developers can assist supervisors of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and department chairpersons in examining the quality and comprehensiveness of their GTA training program. Five general guidelines and a series of 30 specific self-assessment questions are described to assist in this process. In addition, the use of these self-study procedures by a Department of Communication at a large urban university is illustrated.

Undergraduate students can benefit from the fact that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) often bring to the classroom a general sense of freshness and enthusiasm for both teaching and their discipline, as well as the ability to relate to students' difficulties in learning course subject matter. Without adequate preparation and training, however, GTAs and the students they teach often experience considerable frustration and disappointment. A GTA training program, led skillfully by faculty in the discipline, demonstrates to GTAs that teaching excellence is important and can be learned; this is especially true when participation in training activities is required and/or when course credit is awarded.

The impact of departmentally-based GTA training programs can and should be enhanced by faculty development practitioners.

Academic departments generally are, we believe, in the best position to offer GTA training. As Smock and Menges (1985) have noted, departmental programs of GTA training are "controlled by the discipline; the content and methods are based in the discipline and reflect the discipline's beliefs about learning and teaching" (p. 25). Further, the teaching assistants of today are the potential faculty members of tomorrow (Diamond & Gray, 1987b); thus, training in the art, craft, and science of teaching merits a significant place in students' graduate studies. Unfortunately, relatively few faculty assigned to supervise GTAs have received systematic assistance in establishing GTA training programs. Some, in fact, were never GTAs themselves. Faculty developers can provide significant assistance to faculty supervisors of departmentally-based GTA training programs by offering general guidelines for establishing successful GTA training programs, by conducting appropriate skill-building workshops, and by identifying resources for further study.

To assist faculty developers, GTA supervisors, and department chairpersons in stimulating examination and discussion of departmentally-based GTA training, five general guidelines for self-assessment are described below. Each is followed briefly by a short statement of rationale. In addition, a series of self-assessment questions based upon each guideline is presented. One note of caution — these questions are best used to stimulate candid reflection and open conversation about a broad range of GTA training issues. They should not be used simplistically as a checklist nor should faculty feel compelled to grade existing programs with such familiar symbols as D- to A+.

Further, these guidelines and accompanying self-assessment questions are neither exhaustive in nature nor equally appropriate to every campus or department. They can, however, provide a useful starting point for promoting honest and scholarly reflection on the quality of currently available GTA training offered within one's department.

Guidelines for a Departmental Self-Assessment

Guideline 1: GTAs should be provided with a substantive orientation program designed to facilitate their introduction to both their department and their teaching assignment.

Departments have one opportunity to make a strong and positive first impression on their GTAs; a thoughtfully designed and skillfully implemented orientation program can create this type of first impression. Further, survey data suggest that

GTAs prefer preservice instruction for several reasons: freedom from personal academic responsibilities allows concentration, TA camaraderie develops, professors and graduate teaching assistants interact without the pressures of undergraduate student responsibilities, practice is possible in empty classrooms, and free time is available to develop teaching materials and collaborate on curriculum and syllabus development (Parrett, 1987, p. 71).

For purposes of self-assessment in this area, a department might want to ask itself the following seven questions:

- (1) Are GTAs given adequate advance notice and sufficient information about the department's orientation program and their upcoming teaching assignment to arouse interest and motivation rather than create unnecessary stress?
- (2) Do the planned orientation activities offer GTAs a comprehensive introduction to the people in, and policies of, the department?
- (3) Do the planned orientation activities provide enough guidance and instruction to raise GTAs' confidence in their ability to be successful as both classroom instructors and students?
- (4) Do the planned orientation activities include sessions on teaching methods needed in the first weeks of class (e.g., what to do on the first day, creating a supportive classroom environment, and facilitating discussions)?
- (5) Do the planned orientation activities provide adequate opportunities to address the unique instructional challenges facing international teaching assistants?
- (6) Do the planned orientation activities enable GTAs to form a strong support network with both their faculty and peers?

- (7) Do the faculty members and staff who facilitate the orientation activities demonstrate the professional competencies and personal attributes that provide GTAs with a compelling model of dedication to excellence?

Guideline 2: GTAs should be provided with a comprehensive set of written materials that assist them in their initial teaching efforts.

One of the most commonly reported problems that GTAs experience involves not having enough time to meet both their teaching and academic responsibilities; instructional materials should be developed, therefore, to help maximize GTAs' efficiency in meeting their instructional responsibilities. For example, on student evaluations undergraduates often report that a course and/or instructor lacked structure and organization. Most new GTAs, however, are doubly disadvantaged in this regard because they lack personal familiarity with the course, and they generally have been given very limited advance notice to prepare for their first teaching assignment. Departmentally provided written materials are probably the best method to help GTAs be better prepared and feel more self-confident as they enter their classrooms on the first day of classes.

For purposes of self-assessment in this area, a department might want to ask itself the following three questions:

- (1) Are materials given to GTAs describing department policies and procedures written in a thorough, thoughtful, and well-organized manner?
- (2) Are GTAs given sufficient written materials to prepare them for the course they have been assigned to teach (e.g., an exemplary syllabus to follow, samples of handouts and/or visual aids to enhance class presentations, several well-constructed examinations)?
- (3) Are GTAs given adequate information about instructional resources available from various campus service units (e.g., the Audio-Visual Department, the Center for Teaching Enhancement, and the Office of Evaluation and Testing)?

Guideline 3: GTAs should be provided with periodic, discipline-based, instructional skill-building training programs.

Based upon a survey of GTA training offered by 136 speech communication departments, Yoder and Hugenberg (1980) noted that "A fairly common assumption of communications departments — and college teaching in general — is that if the teacher knows the subject matter, then he/she will be able to communicate that material to the students" (p. 16). But, as one GTA in architecture noted on a recent national survey (Diamond & Gray, 1987a), "Just because I can draw, doesn't mean I can teach" (p. 21). And as noted by Kaufman-Everett and Backlund (1980), "A large portion of graduate teaching assistants are expected to learn instructional techniques as they teach.... [This] method encourages the floundering of many novice instructors" (p. 343).

Just as graduate students are expected to participate in a series of structured experiences to learn the scholarship of a discipline (i.e., through academic course work, internships, individual study projects, etc.), GTAs also should be provided with substantive structured learning experiences that teach them how to teach skillfully (e.g., a credit-bearing course, and a workshop series with required attendance).

A recent survey of nearly 1,400 teaching assistants at eight major research universities (Diamond & Grey, 1987b) noted that GTA responsibilities most commonly included grading (97%), holding office hours (94%), preparing tests (72%), leading class discussions (71%), conducting review sessions (69%), and lecturing (60%). Though training in such areas can contribute significantly to GTAs' skill and proficiency in these fundamental areas of instruction, between 25% and 32% of the survey respondents reported receiving inadequate supervision in these areas. Well-designed and skillfully delivered workshops will arouse GTAs' motivation, stimulate personal reflection, teach important pedagogical skills, model alternative approaches to instruction, and potentially enhance GTAs' self-confidence (e.g., Eison, Bonwell, & Janzow, 1990).

For purposes of self-assessment in this area, a department might want to ask itself the following seven questions:

- (1) Are GTAs offered a systematic series of workshops that provide a discipline-based context for enhancing their understanding of the teaching/learning process and for further developing their instructional skills?

- (2) Does the department offer adequate incentives to encourage active and regular participation by GTAs in these programs?
- (3) To what degree have seminars and workshops addressed GTAs' major instructional issues and concerns and modeled instructional excellence?
- (4) To what degree have seminars and workshops provided participants with handouts, article reprints, and bibliographic materials to assist their post-workshop learning efforts?
- (5) Are experienced GTAs actively involved in designing and conducting training activities for their colleagues in the department?
- (6) Have seminar planners solicited appropriate evaluative feedback from participants to revise and improve subsequent programs?
- (7) Are more intensive opportunities for individual assistance routinely provided for and used by GTAs with special needs in instances in which workshops and/or other types of group training are not enough (e.g., training to improve one's public speaking skills, and counseling to address personal problems that interfere with skillful teaching)?

Guideline 4: GTAs should be observed in action periodically in the classroom and provided with appropriate feedback.

Chickering and Gamson (1987), along with numerous other experts on higher education, have noted that "Learning is not a spectator sport." After being introduced to current writing and research on the art, craft, and science of skillful university teaching during orientation programs and follow-up workshops, GTAs should have opportunities to practice what they have learned, followed by constructive feedback and/or coaching. Weimer (1990) has echoed the views of many experienced faculty developers when she noted that "Teaching can be improved in two ways: weaknesses can be eliminated and strengths can be emphasized. Most often the emphasis is on the first way, and certainly that does work.... But the value of making strengths still stronger should not be overlooked" (p. 62). Both approaches, however, require that the GTA supervisor be personally familiar with each GTA's individual strengths and limitations in the classroom, and that the GTA view his or her supervisor as a credible (i.e., knowledgeable and trustworthy) source of instructional feedback and guidance.

For purposes of self-assessment in this area, a department might want to ask itself the following seven questions:

- (1) How often is each GTA's teaching observed by his or her supervisor and is this schedule sufficient to provide the GTA with needed feedback?
- (2) Are GTA supervisors skilled in using sound classroom observation techniques?
- (3) How helpful and effective is the supervisor-provided feedback in assisting the GTA's efforts to improve his or her teaching performance?
- (4) Are more experienced and talented GTAs used by the department as peer observers and mentors to assist less experienced GTAs?
- (5) Is videotaping and collaborative viewing by the GTA and GTA supervisor used to supplement supervisor feedback following classroom visits?
- (6) What additional types of formative evaluation data (e.g., mid-semester student feedback) are regularly provided to the GTAs and what assistance for improvement based upon this data is provided?
- (7) How satisfactory are existing departmental procedures or policies describing what supervisors are expected to do if a GTA's teaching performance fails to meet minimum levels of acceptability?

Guideline 5: GTA supervisors should meet regularly to design collaborative strategies which enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of GTA training activities in the department.

In their recent analysis of faculty collaboration, Austin and Baldwin (1991) note that faculty collaboration involves individuals who "work closely together and share mutual responsibility for their joint endeavor" (p. 4). According to Wildavsky (1986) the ultimate rationale for collaboration "is for the participants to make use of each others' talents to do what they either could not have done at all or as well alone" (Cited in Austin and Baldwin, 1991, p. 5).

Recent summaries of research findings on cooperative/collaborative learning in college and university classrooms (e.g., Cooper & Mueck, 1989; Cooper, McKinney, & Robinson, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991) suggest that, in general, cooperative approaches are significantly more effective than individualistic or competitive

efforts. One might expect similar outcomes from projects undertaken as cooperative efforts among GTA supervisors.

For purposes of self-assessment in this area, a department might want to consider the following six questions:

- (1) When discussing the role of GTAs in the department and designing GTA training activities, do GTA supervisors consider such important structural issues as GTA teaching loads and types of teaching assignments?
- (2) Do GTA supervisors meet to develop strategies to
 - (a) address current GTA training needs and problems,
 - (b) formulate long-range training plans,
 - (c) enhance their own competencies as GTA supervisors,
 - (d) ensure departmental compliance with standards for GTA training and supervision established by collective bargaining agreements or by various accreditation agencies (e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools)?
- (3) Do GTA supervisors discuss how published scholarship and research on GTA training can contribute productively to departmental training efforts (e.g., Andrews, 1985; Chism, 1987; Eckstein, Boice, & Chua-Yap, 1991; Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989; Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991), and mentoring in higher education (e.g., Boice, 1990; Fink, 1990; Lavery, Boice, Thompson, & Turner, 1989; Merriam, Thomas, & Zeph, 1987)?
- (4) Are GTAs given frequent and systematic opportunities to provide GTA supervisors with input regarding the types of training activities they believe are most beneficial?
- (5) Do GTA supervisors seek the assistance of, or collaboration with, appropriate campus service units when designing or offering training activities (e.g., the Audio-Visual Department, the Center for Teaching Enhancement, the Counseling Center, and the Office of Evaluation and Testing)?
- (6) Are GTA supervisors provided with adequate time, resources, and support from the department for this important teaching function?

Guideline Use in Practice: A Case Study

To demonstrate how these guidelines might be employed, the second author used the criteria as a self-assessment tool in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Highlights of this self-assessment activity have been summarized below for illustrative purposes.

In this department, sixteen graduate students were employed as GTAs. Nine taught Fundamentals of Human Communication, five taught upper division courses, four assisted professors teaching large lecture courses, and one was a research assistant. GTAs teaching the fundamentals course were closely supervised by a faculty member, and they attended regularly scheduled staff meetings and training sessions. GTAs who taught upper division courses, having previously demonstrated their competence in the Fundamentals course or other teaching experience, were considered more advanced teachers. They were supervised by various course directors and had no formal training program. GTAs assisting professors in large classes performed specific grading and discussion tasks and received training from the faculty members they assisted.

Guideline 1: Have the GTAs been provided with a substantive orientation program designed to facilitate their introduction to both their department and their teaching assignment? During an annual orientation week, GTAs were introduced to all faculty, staff, and fellow graduate students. Sessions explored office procedures, computer facilities, the GTAs' instructional responsibilities, and the GTAs' scholarly role as well as providing time for interpersonal networking (e.g., a wine and cheese tasting, a potluck lunch and dinner, and the Graduate Communication Council pizza lunch). In addition, time was scheduled for students to see their advisers.

Sessions also were provided to help GTAs in their role as classroom instructors. GTAs assigned to teach the Fundamentals course attended course-specific sessions on the course syllabi, active learning strategies, lecturing techniques, and discussion leadership. In addition, campus-wide sessions by the Center for Teaching Enhancement (CTE) included such topics as "Teaching Excellence," "Handling the

First Day of Class," "Improving Lectures," "Time Management for GTAs," "Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment," "Leading Effective Discussions," and "Preparing and Using Audio-Visual Aids." These workshops were attended by all Fundamentals GTAs and some upper division GTAs. Informal guidance was also available to all GTAs in the department from faculty and experienced graduate students. The orientation described above provided considerable information in a short period of time. It is difficult to determine how much was retained by GTAs and if they were able to apply the suggestions they received when issues arose during the course of the semester. No formal evaluation of the department's GTA orientation was conducted.

The faculty and staff were especially well-qualified for their orientation assignments. Departmental GTA workshops were conducted by the Director of Fundamentals of Human Communication. Campus-wide training was conducted by the Director of the CTE and several distinguished teaching faculty. All the facilitators had received teaching awards and had attended or taught short courses on university teaching. An evaluation of CTE sessions indicated that participants perceived the facilitators to be modeling the kind of pedagogy they were teaching.

Guideline 2: Have GTAs been provided with a comprehensive set of written materials which would assist them in their initial teaching efforts? GTAs were provided with detailed written instructions concerning office procedures and responsibilities. Unfortunately, no written guidelines were provided for the use of and access to audio-visual equipment. This proved to be the source of some tension and difficulty; the department is now in the process of developing written guidelines for scheduling and using this equipment.

GTAs scheduled to teach the Fundamentals course were sent a draft of the syllabus, a textbook, and an instructor's guide in July. A revised syllabus, the first two weeks of lecture notes, exercises, and handouts were provided during the orientation. Throughout the semester, the GTAs were given additional course materials for each section of the class. New GTAs typically used the majority of the common course materials that were provided. It might be noted that these

materials were also available to GTAs on computer disk, allowing the GTAs to easily make desired modifications. Upper division GTAs were provided with copies of syllabi and samples of assignments and exercises used previously. These GTAs were free to develop their own versions of the syllabus and assignments.

One of the most helpful general instructional resources provided is the "Instructional Resource Guide for New Faculty and Graduate Teaching Assistants" developed by the CTE. GTAs evaluated the usefulness of this handbook and most reported using the handbook when working with students who needed personal counseling and tutoring. While several have reported reading the entire handbook, others have indicated that they had not read it in its entirety; they were keeping it for future reference.

Guideline 3: Have GTAs been provided with periodic, discipline-based instructional skill-building training programs? Workshops and seminars on the following topics had been offered by the Director of Fundamentals of Human Communication, the CTE, and other faculty: "Collaborative Learning," "Using Student Evaluation of Teaching to Improve Classroom Performance," "Grading: The Issue that Won't Go Away," "Teaching in the Multi-Cultural Classroom," "Problem-Solving During Office Hours," "Conducting Peer Observations to Improve Teaching," and "Constructing Effective Multiple-Choice Examinations."

GTAs assigned to teach the Fundamentals course were required to attend all departmental workshops and the majority of those offered through the CTE. Upper division GTAs were invited and encouraged, but not required, to attend any training sessions. In practice, this system resulted in participation by Fundamentals staff in most programs but little attendance by other GTAs.

Evaluations indicated that GTAs preferred departmentally-based training because it addressed more clearly the specific instructional issues and pedagogical techniques related to their course. Several commented that it was exciting to learn about a particular teaching strategy and then be able to implement it immediately in their classrooms. GTA comments about the university-wide training revealed that while GTAs appreciated the general pedagogical issues covered,

they were less relevant to their particular teaching assignment than workshops held within the department. Not surprisingly, these GTAs asked for more department-sponsored training and less attendance requirements at university seminars.

GTA evaluations of the workshop facilitators praised the use of active learning techniques and modeling of a variety of different teaching strategies. Workshop leaders also provided written materials for future investigation and action (e.g., an outline of major ideas covered, relevant article reprints, and bibliographic references).

Training by faculty facilitators was supplemented by senior GTAs. For example, one GTA was hired to help plan orientation, while three GTAs developed and facilitated a session for new staff members on collaborative learning, and a doctoral student conducting research on communication apprehension co-facilitated a session on that topic.

Beyond group training, individual help was available. Each GTA had access to a course supervisor for counseling about specific problems or issues that might arise in his/her teaching. In addition, help with language problems was also available through the English Language Institute. Fortunately, communication GTAs have not needed nor used the facility.

Guideline 4: Have GTAs been periodically observed in action in the classroom and provided with appropriate feedback? Video-taped observations occurred once per semester for GTAs teaching the Fundamentals course. During a follow-up conference, the GTA and the course director viewed the video tape together. The tapes have been the source of rich discussions with topics ranging broadly. End-of-the-year evaluations indicated that this practice was the most useful part of the GTA training for the Fundamentals staff. Unfortunately, some supervisors have chosen not to observe their upper division GTAs.

In addition, all Fundamentals GTAs were involved in conducting peer observations. Each GTA visited a peer's class to observe and provide feedback in a conference session. This exercise allowed GTAs of different experience levels to observe and learn from one another; observers often report learning as much from observing as they do from being observed.

The sufficiency of these observations is debatable. With beginning instructors, more observations are useful. More advanced GTAs may not need as many classroom visits. Some GTA supervisors believe that their presence in the class is detrimental to the undergraduates and to the GTAs. Both common wisdom and research data suggest that if observation is to be used for development, it should occur regularly, not just for annual evaluation purposes.

GTAs received many types of evaluation and feedback. All GTAs received regular student evaluations of teaching (SETs). GTAs summarized their SETs into strengths and areas to be improved. Based upon the summaries, each GTA chose a few goals to work on in the next semester. The GTA and the director later discussed strategies for achieving these goals and the GTA wrote a formal plan for his/her personnel folder. During the following semester, the supervisor and GTA reviewed SETs and course materials for evidence of improvement. In addition, the Fundamentals supervisor summarized her evaluation in written form after each classroom observation and video-conference and provided a copy for the GTA. Supervisor feedback for upper division GTAs varied widely, from written evaluation of classroom observation to no feedback at all.

In cases where a GTA failed to perform his/her duties adequately, university policies describe a process for removal. These steps are described in the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Graduate Student Union and the University. Currently there are no departmental guidelines or procedures delineating steps for improvements or remediation before removal.

Written evaluation of the GTA training programs is limited to the Fundamentals staff who complete detailed end-of-the-year evaluations; additional oral feedback is sought in course review sessions. No systematic evaluation of training is provided for upper division GTAs.

Guideline 5: Have GTA supervisors met regularly to enhance GTA training? Regrettably, this had not been tried.

Recommendations: Having used these guidelines, the Department of Communication identified several strengths and weaknesses in its

GTA training program. The department has established a comprehensive orientation for all GTAs and provides a variety of workshops, written materials, and evaluation procedures for GTAs teaching the Fundamentals course. The department has also developed strong ties with the CTE and is drawing upon that resource for guidance and additional information.

Three specific weaknesses in the department's training efforts emerged. There is currently no coordination between training for GTAs who teach Fundamentals and their upper division counterparts. Based upon the assumption that upper division GTAs are experienced teachers, the absence of formal training, observation, and evaluation might not pose a significant problem, but the GTA supervisors have not met to discuss these issues. Further, no attempts have been made to coordinate supervision efforts within the department nor to formalize policies regarding the assignment of GTAs to upper and lower division courses. In addition, evaluation of GTA training needs to be stronger. Finally, the lack of departmental policy regarding remediation of poor GTA teaching performance remains a problem.

On the basis of this assessment, three formal recommendations have been forwarded to the Director of Graduate Studies.

- 1) The Graduate Committee and supervisors of GTAs should meet periodically to set and evaluate policies regarding coordination of GTA training.
- 2) GTA feedback should be systematically sought on each element of their training.
- 3) A non-departmental policy should be developed to deal with steps for remediation in teaching performance.

Conclusion

In light of current demands for increased accountability, academic departments are searching for new ways to assess the effectiveness of their instructional endeavors. Based upon the case study from the Department of Communication, it is clear that the self-assessment guidelines suggested above can provide one means for departments to assess the quality of their GTA training programs. These criteria constitute a comprehensive and grounded instrument for fulfilling

assessment purposes. The guidelines identify numerous avenues for improving GTA teaching and indicate additional means for enhancing training programs.

Few needs are greater in higher education than the need to provide skillful professional training to the graduate students today who will become the college and university faculty of tomorrow. Fortunately, attendance at the first three national conferences on GTA training suggest optimistically that institutional attention to this important concern is growing rapidly. As faculty developers help faculty and administrators prepare to face the challenges of a new century, it is the authors' hope that this trend becomes a national norm and that someday soon structured and systematic instructional training becomes available to all GTAs within their own academic departments. This article's contribution to the community of faculty developers working toward this end is a set of guiding principles and self-assessment questions to stimulate reflection and discussion about GTA training at the departmental level.

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