**Supervisors of Teaching Assistants**

When professors clearly convey their expectations to TAs at the beginning of the semester and throughout the course, and when TAs are encouraged to ask questions about their responsibilities, the enhanced dialogue can lead to a more fulfilling and effective working relationship between faculty and TAs. The following comments, raised during a discussion on “Supervising TAs” at a faculty workshop hosted by the Center for Teaching, can serve as a guide for faculty who work with TAs. Faculty can also refer their TAs to the Center for Teaching tipsheet “[Questions TAs Might Ask Their Supervisors.](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/docs/questions-tas-might-ask-their-supervisors/)”

**Handling Issues of Responsibility/Power/Authority**

* Clarify expectations and responsibilities, especially if the power/authority is divided among several faculty or TAs. Sometimes TAs are unsure of who is in charge, especially in multisection courses. Issues of consistency and fairness can arise among TAs. TAs can experience a sense of “heat from above.”
* Clarify expectations and let TAs know what can/can not be changed (syllabi, handouts, course policies, etc). Professors are often surprised when TAs modify syllabi and other departmentally-mandated materials.
* Communicate with the DGS or person who assigns TA responsibilities. Relationships between faculty-TAs and TAs-TAs can be exacerbated when the TA supervisor has no power to choose his/her own TAs.
* Understand the short and long-term needs of TAs: the need to get the TA work done v. the apprenticeship of the TA position.
* Clarify priorities: the functionality of needing to get the course work done (i.e. prepping or grading) v. communicating content.
* Keep in mind that training TAs includes their knowing the content AND knowing how to teach it.
* Have TAs assist in test writing/problem-writing so they have more responsibility and a sense of authority.

**Helping TAs Develop a Sense of Independence**

* Encourage TAs to take initiative.
* Encourage TAs to go to the professor and ask questions regarding their TA responsibilities.
* Understand that the faculty supervisor relationship to TAs can often be confusing.
* Realize that the faculty supervisor relationship to TAs can seem like parenting.
* Treat TAs as equals, like adults/peers.
* Understand that TAs often do not know where/how they fit in.

**Evaluating the Work of TAs**

* Make sure TAs get feedback on their performance, both formative and summative.
* Have other methods of assessing TAs rather than relying solely on student evaluations.
* Consider the pros and cons of both supervisor evaluations and student evaluations.
* Encourage the use of personal evaluations.
* Some supervisors like to be able to evaluate TAs in ways that affect future TA assignments.
* Faculty observations of TAs, using a standard scale, can provide helpful feedback to both supervisors and TAs.
* Communicate among the faculty about TAs’ performances.
* Some supervisors write notes to include with the student evaluations and these notes go to the TAs, department Chair, and Associate Dean.
* Encourage the use of the videotaping, small group analysis, and consultation services of the Center for Teaching.
* Let TAs know that probation for poor performance can happen.
* Let TAs apply for TA positions they want, as they will be more dedicated to a desirable job.
* Give annual TA awards.
* Use incentives, like the opportunity to teach a summer course, to encourage and reward good TA work.

**Managing Relationships**

* Consider the TA’s relationships with students.
* Be aware that students may take frustrations out on TAs.
* Resistance can happen in three directions: between TA and professor, among TAs, between TA and students in the course.
* Consider which aspects of the relationships are personality and which are structural.
* Be aware of how the dynamic can change when TAs are students in the supervisor’s courses. Supervisors can get to know TAs personally, but there can be an advantage to maintaining a learning distance between TAs and supervisors. Balancing this distance can be a challenge.

**Helping TAs Learn How to Balance the Pressures and Time Demands of a Graduate Career**

* Don’t give TA assignments until the second year.
* Remember that TAs are students and are trying to do research.
* Help TAs get rid of side issues so they can focus on their job.
* Encourage TAs to tell supervisors what is going on in their lives.

**Conveying Expectations**

* Make sure expectations and criteria are well defined.
* Tell TAs what you want.
* Exercise patience.
* Don’t expect TAs to be perfect.
* Understand that TAs may be scared.
* Remember that the success of the students reflects on the TAs’ success.
* Know that TAs will ask other TAs for guidance and that this can be confusing since different professors have different expectations (even for the same course).
* Adjust duties to TA’s abilities.
* Understand that TA’s knowledge of the content and their competencies will vary.
* Have a plan for dealing with unacceptable teaching behaviors.

**Training TAs/Dealing with Issues of Teaching Style vs. Strategy**

* Tell TAs whether or not they should write comments on graded work.
* Give TAs a guideline to follow for grading.
* Conduct a workshop in which all TAs comment on one paper so they understand the grading criteria.
* Use writing mentors to train TAs.
* Pair experienced and new TAs to grade assignments together.
* Have TAs grade one problem across the set and discuss the variation in their grading.
* Use group grading where different TAs are assigned a few problems for the entire set.
* Assign TAs for three semesters so that sharing and a history can be passed along.

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