



MSU TEACHING ASSISTANT PROGRAMS

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Guidelines for Creating Effective TA Development and Training Programs¹

Key Considerations: Teaching Assistant training/ seminars/workshops, etc., should, as much as is possible:

- Inform TAs of University/College/Departmental/Program Structure
- Cover key information contained in Departmental Graduate Handbooks
- Assist TAs to meet MSU teaching rights & responsibilities with resources and training in workshops and, if possible, with follow-ups throughout the semester
- Make TAs aware of campus resources where they can receive assistance
- Inform TAs of student responsibilities

Considering Steps to Building a TA Program

- 1. If possible, form a committee/task force to design and implement a program.**
 - Include Faculty and advanced TAs in program planning.
 - Have at least one faculty member responsible for directing and implementing the program. If possible, assign a senior TA(s) to assist in the design of the program.
 - If time does not permit, work with the faculty of record or faculty supervisor to identify the teaching and professional development goals/objectives for TAs teaching the course, tutoring, grading, etc. Design *regular* assessment and advising opportunities to make ensure goals are being met.
- 2. Determine your TAs' needs.**
 - A needs assessment survey of your TAs' concerns/desires for more teaching development activities would help you create a program that meets the stated needs of your students. The TAP has an adaptable instrument available as a template.

¹ These non-binding guidelines are intended to help departments respond to changes in the MSU GEU Contract, specifically those referenced in Article 15 (GEU Agreement: <http://grad.msu.edu/geu/agree.pdf>). These recommendations, shaped by my extensive development experience at MSU, also summarize key points culled from programs at UCLA, UM-Ann Arbor, UBC (to begin in 2009), Stanford, and UT-Austin. The TAP is available for detailed consultation on program development. Contact Kevin Johnston, kmj@msu.edu, for more information. I am greatly indebted to Matt Kaplan, of The University of Michigan's Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, for his guidance on matters of developing departmental TA training programs, and to Karron Lewis, Associate Director Instructional Consultation & Research Division of Instructional Innovation & Assessment (DIIA), at UT-Austin.

3. Identify faculty (and experienced TAs?) who are interested in participating in TA training AND what/how they would like to contribute.

- Survey departmental faculty for reactions to a general description of program goals and possible activities. Provide lists of program activities and give faculty the chance to choose to participate in specific ways or to reshape program aspects.
- Some faculty might desire to function as teaching mentors (See the CCTP's Mentored Teaching Experience for an example of how that might occur. <http://grad.msu.edu/teaching.htm>)
- Others may decide that they have an effective approach to teaching certain classes/topics and so should present once a semester.
- Some faculty would rather function as consultants.

You may also canvass departmental faculty and TAs to

- Find out what Faculty already know about TA professional development *beyond* the traditional advisor/director – student relationship.
- Find out what Faculty want to know about training graduate students.

4. Decide what your goals are for a TA training program. Your Program's "shape" will emerge according to the priorities you set for your TAs. Deciding what your priorities are also helps to set up training sessions for facilitators.

- A training program should link directly with TAs responsibilities. What are they?
- What skills, generally, should your TAs have?
- What skills are necessary to teach certain courses?
- If existing programs are too broad to meet new contract policies, consider shorter, topic and course-specific orientations run by faculty and if possible, a faculty member accompanied by an experienced TA in the course.
- How can we link the people who have those skills with the ones who need them?

Other goals might include

- Improved professional development for TAs making them more competitive on the job market.
- Improving Undergraduate Education.
- Easing new TAs into their first teaching experiences.
- Re-energizing senior faculty through their involvement in non-traditional professional relationship with departmental TAs.
- Creating a "base" of experienced faculty and TAs from which you can create a future program (and resources) dependent on colleague-to-colleague training

5. How long do you want your program to last and in what form? Will TAs and faculty have a chance to interact in a variety of ways?

- Consider offering pre-course orientations before students begin teaching.
- Schedule TAs for regular "check-ins" (weekly?) with faculty for on-time mentoring and to discuss class progress, handle exigencies, etc...
- Shared reading/discussion of a book? Articles?
- Fall semester/Yearlong Workshop Series?
- Guest Speakers?

- 6. Ideas for a Training Workshop (I have done this in an afternoon session that included a working lunch.)**
 1. Assemble resource material – preferably materials that you would also make available to new TAs
 2. Discuss TA Program Form and Structure.
 3. Review with participants results of Survey Responses (If possible)
 4. Offer a presentation on methods of effective professional development. Effective teaching, discussion, issues for future faculty, etc.
 5. Discuss a book/articles assigned previously (One of the best ways to get people thinking about teaching and learning issues. I have used Parker Palmer's work, for instance, to spur discussion among faculty mentors. I recommend buying a copy of a work that covers a wide range of teaching and learning issues and/or TA professional development issues for each of the workshop participants). Or,
 6. Hold an interactive session on teaching and learning issues. (Both of these approaches foster community-building among your departmental faculty, a key component of building a lasting program)
 7. Question and Answers.

- 7. Get started with a workable plan; assess formatively and summatively for its usefulness; adapt accordingly.** New programs cannot be perfect. Existing programs need constant updating. Make sure to involve participants in the revision process.

- 8. TA participation in orientation/professional development programs will count as assistantship work. TAs can count training time toward their total number of semester hours. Assistantship appointments span August 15 – December 30; and January 1 – May 15.**

- 9. Consider rewarding faculty participants.**