

**Obligations and  
Expectations for Faculty  
Using Undergraduate  
Teaching Assistants**

Carnegie Mellon



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## Introduction

Undergraduates are increasingly being used in teaching and grading capacities in courses at Carnegie Mellon. As they have usually been students in the courses they teach, the undergraduates bring first-hand knowledge of the course from the students' perspective, as well as a degree of energy and enthusiasm. They also learn from the experience, and it can be a "gateway" into the rewards and challenges of a future academic career.

Undergraduate TAs are different in many ways from graduate student TAs—in age, experience and the fact that the students they are helping teach are peers. Because of these differences, faculty members must treat undergraduate TAs differently. For instance, undergraduates need more "up front" help to identify potential conflicts and solve problems. They should also have more preparation for the classroom experience (if they will be involved in recitations, labs or studios), and receive more consistent and conscientious guidance and feedback throughout the semester.

## Choosing an Undergraduate TA

You will probably consider an undergraduate for a teaching or grading position based on his or her performance in a class for which you intend to have them teach or grade. The student will undoubtedly have good grades, and will probably have a good record of class participation. These are excellent initial

qualifications, but they do not guarantee success as a teaching assistant. If you recall your first teaching assignments, you probably had to discover an entire range of communication, presentation and social skills that went far beyond knowledge of the material. An undergraduate who has never taught before has had virtually no chance to develop these highly specialized classroom skills. Admittedly, the model for TAs has frequently been "learn as you go along." The problem is that, first of all, this model does not serve the students in the class well, even for graduate student TAs. Secondly, undergraduates generally lack the maturity and life experience of graduate TAs, and will probably need more help and feedback to develop these skills.

It is possible that your first choice based on academic talent may be a less-than-ideal choice in terms of the other skill sets needed. Therefore, it is important to have personal knowledge of the undergraduates you are considering as TAs. You will need to spend some time with them to get some sense of their broader skill sets, and to be confident that these can be developed to meet classroom needs.

## Prior to the Start of the Semester: Identifying Conflicts

There are at least two potential conflicts faced by undergraduate TAs. One conflict is social in nature and can be identified early on. The second is academic and

scheduling oriented, and may be difficult to quantify until the semester gets underway.

### **Social Concerns**

Unlike graduate students, undergraduates are part of the same social structure as the students they teach and grade. They will almost certainly know students in their class, and may even have personal relationships with some of them. Suddenly, they are placed in a privileged situation, with some degree of “power” over their peers. We expect the undergraduate TA to be neutral in teaching or grading, but we must understand that this is a very difficult ideal for anyone to meet. Following are some tips for averting such challenges:

- You and the student should work together to identify potential conflicts of interest. Before the start of the semester, review the list of students with the undergraduate TA. Faculty cannot simply assume there will be no problems; likewise, undergraduate TAs may not be aware of these difficulties or their potential severity. The undergraduate TAs have interacted with the “potential conflict” students prior to the class, and may continue to do so for many semesters afterward. In our survey of undergraduates involved in teaching, a significant number of the students identified problems of this nature.
- Ideally, students who present a potential conflict can be moved into another section. If this is not possible, you or a graduate TA should grade the coursework


of the student(s) in question. This is useful both to ensure objectivity and to provide the undergraduate with a social “escape mechanism” to allow objective detachment from their social peers.

### **Time and Schedule Pressures**

Undergraduates face a more rigid academic schedule than most graduate students. Most of their other courses have fairly strict timetables for homeworks, presentations and exams, and these tend to occur at largely the same times in the semester as peak teaching and grading loads. You should request that students attempt to identify due dates for major assignments and projects in other courses as early as possible—hopefully far enough in advance of the start of the semester to facilitate planning or allow for minor adjustments. Also, try to build in some flexibility should your undergraduate TAs suddenly find themselves in over their heads. Undergraduates tend to underestimate the time requirements associated with teaching or grading. Keep in mind, as well, that the exemplary students usually chosen for teaching or grading assignments tend to over-commit to both academic and non-academic tasks—a time strain that can be exacerbated when graduating students are job hunting in their last semester.

### **Helping Undergraduate TAs Become Effective Teachers**

We have discussed the fact that teaching requires more than academic excellence. An undergraduate who has not taught before will not have had any chance to develop any



teaching expertise. Skills that are automatic to you will require conscious preparation on their part. You can assist your undergraduate TAs in acclimating to their new role with some of the following.

- Help your undergraduate TA learn to say “I don’t know.” Undergraduate TAs are often less able to improvise and respond effectively to broad questions. They may also be more likely to pretend to know something (e.g., an answer to a difficult question) because of perceived authority issues. As a result, they need explicit help in recognizing when their knowledge or explanations are insufficient and how to respond (i.e., when to say “I don’t know, but I’ll find out...”).
- Provide help for your undergraduate students beyond that given to graduate TAs. This involves closely monitoring their activities, and trying to get feedback on their in-class performance. You may do some personal monitoring of student teaching yourself, or allow the senior TA to assist you. You can also direct the novice to other undergraduates who have taught the course in the past. Videotaping TAs in class is also useful because it allows them to see for themselves their strengths, weaknesses and mannerisms as teachers.
- Consider requiring TAs to participate in microteaching sessions as part of Eberly Center, departmental or course TA training. This is done in a special session before the semester begins and replicates

as much as possible a real classroom situation. This approach has been used with great success in several departments. Finally, the Eberly Center has created a series of evaluation instruments for TAs in a variety of roles (e.g., labs, recitations, grading) to encourage ongoing reflection and improvement.

- Institute regular and reliable communication paths with your undergraduate TAs. Hold (at least) weekly meetings, and ensure that the TAs can talk with you whenever they have problems. It is also important for you to receive formal feedback from the undergraduates about their teaching experience.
- Provide clear, explicit grading guidelines to undergraduates involved in grading and evaluation. Without clear guidance, undergraduate TAs tend to be tougher graders than faculty.
- Be explicit about the tone, behaviors and attitudes you expect of your undergraduate TAs. They need to clearly understand your expectations about course policies (e.g., regrades), standards of conduct (e.g., not foreshadowing exam questions), standards of behavior (e.g., appropriate dress when teaching), emphasis (e.g., particular problem types, big vs. small picture questions) and many other important issues.

## What Undergraduate TAs Should Expect, and What They Should *Not* Do

Undergraduate TAs have a right to expect a basic course structure that facilitates effective performance on their part. Some elements of this framework are as follows:

- Undergraduates cannot be expected to have the knowledge or experience of graduate students who teach. You will have to work with them more, and at a more fundamental level.
- Create an environment in which undergraduate TAs feel comfortable about approaching you with course-related problems, needs and concerns. At no time should an undergraduate be made to feel intimidated, “stupid” or to have their concerns and questions ignored or trivialized. It is important to remember that these undergraduates are *not* students in the course; rather, they are working as a partner with you to convey knowledge, insight, ideas and feedback to others. Undoubtedly, the undergraduate TAs will have to work at learning material in order to be effective, but they should not have to generate the knowledge alone.
- Undergraduates should *never* be required to make up questions or solutions for homeworks or exams without oversight. If they express a desire to participate in these activities, you or a graduate TA should review any materials they create, prior to subsequent dissemination.

- You should be explicit about the material that undergraduates are to present. Undergraduates should *never* be expected to create course material or to decide content of the course without oversight. Again, if students express a desire to create course material, you should review their work and modify it as necessary prior to presentation.
- It is the course instructor’s job to address concerns that affect the entire class, such as continuously disruptive students, problems with the overall course material or timing, class concerns with course material or policy, and other “big issues.” Undergraduate students and graders are not responsible in any way for solutions to these problems, although they may help in their formulation, and may be involved in implementation.

## When Things Go Wrong

Most undergraduates find teaching and grading to be a rewarding experience, and bring a high level of dedication and pride to the task. Nevertheless, problems, conflicts and personality clashes between TAs and course instructors do occasionally arise. You need a course of action to follow in order to resolve things as quickly as possible and with a minimum of disruption to the class. Hopefully, the undergraduates can work with you to resolve issues. You may wish to designate another faculty member, at least in your personal planning, as a “designated third party” for students to discuss problems with if you cannot resolve

the issue with them. Ideally, your department should designate a faculty member specifically to deal with these issues.

Undergraduates frequently feel intimidated and fearful when faced with a conflict that they cannot resolve. A designated path can help create a mechanism to deal with concerns in a timely manner. This ultimately benefits everyone, most importantly the students taking the course.

### **Additional Help**

The Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence can provide help with undergraduate TA issues, and offers seminars and evaluations to help both undergraduate and graduate TAs improve their skills. The center can also help with evaluation and feedback tools.

### **Also Available**

*Obligations and Expectations for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants*

[http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/UGTA\\_TAs.pdf](http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/UGTA_TAs.pdf)

*Policy Guidelines for Departments Using Undergraduate Teaching Assistants*

[http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/UGTA\\_Depts.pdf](http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/UGTA_Depts.pdf)

### **Non-Native Speakers of English**

There is one area in which undergraduates and graduates involved in teaching are exactly alike: If they are non-native speakers of English, they must pass the required ITA Test, administered by the university's Intercultural Communication Center, prior to teaching. This is a matter of law. If you are planning to use a non-native speaker of English, regardless of citizenship, you should identify him or her to your department as soon as possible so that the student can be tested. The ITA Test is offered in November and April, and the student must be tested prior to the semester in which he or she is expected to teach or grade. You can contact the ICC for more information.

*The Eberly Center wishes to thank all of the undergraduate teaching assistants—and the faculty who work with them—for sharing their best practices for this series of booklets. We are also grateful to Mark Kieler and Brian Zikmund-Fisher, who collected data and interviewed members of the Carnegie Mellon community in preparation for these publications.*



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