



**Policy Guidelines  
for Departments  
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 will assist in, these 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, which can be a "gateway" into the rewards and challenges of a future academic career.

However, the utilization of undergraduate places added responsibilities on the department. For graduate students, teaching is considered part of the preparation required for an academic career; in contrast, teaching is not usually considered part of the undergraduate experience. Carnegie Mellon undergraduates generally have less academic experience—and less life experience—than graduate students. Also, the undergraduate faces a much more rigid academic program that is geared toward providing a broad background of discipline-specific basics in a limited amount of time. This fact makes undergraduates more vulnerable than graduates when a teaching assignment is not tightly specified and guided by the course instructor. Because of these issues, the department has an obligation to provide central oversight and to administer guidelines for the use of undergraduate teaching assistants.

## Guiding Principles for Policy

### Faculty Responsibilities

The following statements are strongly recommended for implementation in departmental policy or guidelines, and must have departmental backing in order to be effective. However, in terms of implementation, they are largely the responsibility of the faculty who use undergraduate teaching assistants. Most of these issues are more fully explained in the document "Obligations and Expectations for Faculty Using Undergraduate Teaching Assistants," available from the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence. The department personnel responsible for undergraduate TA/grader policy should read this document, as should all faculty who intend to use undergraduates as teachers or graders.

- 1. Faculty should have some knowledge of the students beyond their class performance.** Some excellent students may not possess the capacity for developing the broader range of skills necessary to conduct a class. The course instructor should interview the prospective student; perhaps even have them give a "mock" classroom presentation or other relevant activity to ensure that the student is capable of performing the task.
- 2. Faculty must work with the students ahead of time to identify peer conflicts.** Undergraduate TAs are part of the same social structure as the students they are

teaching, a fact that can create tremendous social pressures and ethical conflicts for the students. The course instructor should review the class roster with the undergraduate TA well in advance of the start of the semester to identify students who may present a conflict situation. Ideally, these students can be moved to another section. If this is not possible, the course instructor or head TA should grade these students.

**3. Faculty must work with the students ahead of time to identify schedule conflicts.** It is likely that the peak teaching and grading loads on undergraduate teaching assistants will coincide with peak loads in the courses they are taking. Undergraduates have only limited flexibility to adjust their schedules to smooth out the work load. Undergraduate TAs should obtain their course schedules and syllabi as far in advance of the start of the course as possible. Course instructors should work with the students to compare the teaching schedule with other courses to determine areas of difficulty, and attempt to resolve the issues prior to the start of class.

**4. Faculty should ensure that the undergraduate TA receives the appropriate training.** The course instructor must provide course-specific training for the undergraduate TA. They may do some of this themselves, and may also refer the novice to the head TA, or to other undergraduates who have taught the course in the past.

**5. Faculty must never require undergraduates to prepare course material without oversight.** This includes material for lectures or recitations, test questions, homework questions, answer keys or other related material. Talented students may request these tasks, but the end result must always be supervised. Grading guidelines, partial credit, regrading policies and other such issues must be determined by the course instructor.

**6. Faculty must establish reliable lines of communication.** At a minimum, the course instructor should hold weekly meetings with the undergraduate TAs. Additionally, course instructors should make themselves available in whatever way they and the undergraduates agree on, to ensure that they can provide guidance at the times when the undergraduate TA is most likely to need it.

**7. Faculty must monitor student performance.** In addition to weekly meetings, the course instructor should attempt to effectively monitor undergraduate teaching and grading performance. This can be done by periodically attending classes or other sessions led by the undergraduate TA, and by sampling work evaluated by the graders.

**8. Faculty must adjust their expectations.** Because an undergraduate TA will not have the depth of underlying knowledge

or life experience that graduate TAs have, course instructors must realize this, and prepare material in much more detail and depth than they would for graduate TAs. Faculty sometimes lose sight of this fact, and essentially force their undergraduate TA to learn material as if they are students. This places further time pressures on the undergraduates, and creates unneeded frustration and pressure.

### **Additional Departmental Policy Matters**

While the department can provide behavioral guidelines as a matter of policy, it must also provide some degree of centralized structure, oversight and support for undergraduate TAs.

*The department should name a faculty member to be responsible for undergraduate TA affairs.* This faculty member would have the responsibility of ensuring that course instructors are following the undergraduate TA guidelines. This person will probably be responsible for administering all of the departmental guidelines in this section, or at least effecting their implementation. Because of this responsibility, the designate must have the full cooperation and backing of the department head, and the respect and cooperation of the faculty.

The departments that are the most successful in their use of undergraduate TAs have a faculty member who is very familiar with *all* of the undergraduate students through

courses and advising. This is an ideal that will not be possible for every department to meet, but it is a worthwhile goal.

### ***The department should review courses for the appropriateness of undergraduate TAs.***

The best courses for undergraduate TAs have the following characteristics:

- The courses themselves are well-established, and the material is well-developed and tested.
- The domain knowledge is well-established and fairly narrow in scope.
- There is little new development of course materials required and, of this development, none of it is required of the TAs.

***The department must establish and maintain regular communication with its undergraduate TA community.*** The department should also hold at least two meetings per semester with the undergraduate TAs and graders. The department should also foster a “community atmosphere” among all of its undergraduate teachers and graders. This will help the undergraduates learn from each other, and provide some community brainstorming to solve problems. It is also important to emphasize the honor and rewards of being an undergraduate TA and grader. The department should foster an attitude such that members of this community consider their participation to be more than just “a job.”

***The department should obtain and evaluate feedback from the TAs and graders on the quality of their teaching or grading experience for the semester.*** Some feedback is especially important in the first few weeks of the semester, as this is the best time to avert potential major difficulties. Furthermore, departments should obtain feedback on the TAs' overall experience at the end of the semester. This feedback can be used to improve problem areas to the benefit of all parties involved. The Eberly Center can assist with methods for conducting surveys, and elicitation and evaluation of feedback.

***The department should provide a "neutral third party" for dispute resolution.*** This person should be a respected faculty member, whom the undergraduate TA or grader can approach in confidence and confidentiality, without fear of reprisal (and could be the same person who is responsible for undergraduate TA affairs, mentioned on page 3). Undergraduates need a source of empowerment when they are involved in disputes. They often feel helpless and fearful that the faculty member with whom they have a dispute can negatively influence their remaining student career. Departments must provide a mechanism to diffuse these fears and concerns, and correct the difficulties before they further affect the undergraduate TA and/or the class.

***The department should consider undergraduate TA training and evaluation.*** It is not always practical or efficient to

leave all TA training to the course instructor. Early group training and evaluation can instill many common values, as well as help build a sense of community and mutual reliance. Again, the Eberly Center can provide some suggestions, materials and help.

***The department should provide office space and resources for the use of undergraduates.*** Unlike graduate students, undergraduates don't have office space in academic buildings. Nevertheless, they need to hold office hours and meet with students in private settings, just as graduate TAs do. Students are more likely to seek help from their TA if they can do so in a private setting with appropriate resources (such as a chalk or whiteboard.)

***The department should monitor the overall use of undergraduate teaching and grading resources.*** The pool of talented undergraduate teachers and graders is somewhat limited. The pool of knowledgeable and sufficiently motivated students drops off greatly after the most talented students have been utilized. Great care must be taken to ensure that only the most capable students are utilized (and also, to ensure that this limited pool of talent is not *over-utilized*.)

## **Additional Help**

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

## **Also Available**

*Obligations and Expectations  
for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants*

*Obligations and Expectations for Faculty  
Using Undergraduate Teaching Assistants*

Contact the Eberly Center, (412) 268-2896,  
for copies.

## **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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