POLICY ON TEACHING ASSISTANT EVALUATION AND TRAINING
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

“If a group has had enough of a history to develop a culture, that culture will pervade everything.” (Schein, 1985, p.33)

General Policy Statement

Graduate Teaching Assistants at the University of Northern Iowa will carefully be selected and trained within their own subject matter disciplines and according to informed instructional strategies and pedagogical standards.

The training of graduate teaching assistants should be grounded in the unique culture of the institution, reflect the diversity inherent in that culture, be flexible, and be open to the changes. Schein (1985, p. 9) suggests that culture refers to:

A Pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott (1991, p. 114) suggest that:

It will be useful to think of culture as a system of basic assumptions represented in symbols and meanings that are considered valid and that influence decisions about day-to-day operations of the institution.

(For a complete discussion of the culture of the institution and how that affects the development of a TA training program, see Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott, 1991.)

This document addresses the following areas of concern: Proficiency in Oral Communication, Pre-Service Training and Orientation, Ongoing Instructional Support, Teaching Performance Evaluation/Course Evaluation, Enrollment in Courses of Teaching Methodology, Remediation, and Follow-up and Feedback. A bibliography for instructors and a bibliography for TA’s is also included.

Proficiency in Oral Communication

The graduate teaching assistant must be proficient in oral communication in order to be effective in the classroom. They will be held to the same policy on oral competency which exists for faculty. It is, therefore, important that screening of the prospective teaching assistant’s communication competence be undertaken before that TA begins work with students in the laboratory or classroom. (In the use of instruction in a foreign language, the TA must still be capable of effectively communicating both in the foreign language and in English.) The United States is increasingly becoming more culturally diverse. Indications are that greater numbers of
students do not have English as their first language. Given these facts, it becomes ever more important that the University of Northern Iowa assure that TA’s are proficient in oral communication.

**Pre-Service Training and Orientation**

Pre-service training is that training which occurs prior to beginning the actual teaching or research activities within the department. Departmental pre-service and orientation session(s) should include the following topics:

1. Overview of departmental and college structure with emphasis on the role of teaching assistants in the instructional mission.
2. Statement of course goals and methodologies to attain those goals as outlined by the department and articulated by each department’s supervisor of teaching assistants.
3. Distribution of a written policy outlining instructional and any associated administrative responsibilities of teaching assistants.
4. Distribution and familiarization with textbooks, other instructional materials, and course syllabi.
5. Guidance in preparing lesson plans and class presentations together with opportunities to practice these skills in micro-teaching sessions prior to beginning instructional duties.
6. Statement on how teaching assistant’s performance will be evaluated and delineation of specific criteria which will be accessed.

**Ongoing Instructional Support**

1. Frequent, regular (weekly) meetings of teaching assistants with departmental supervisor in which specific implementations of syllabi are discussed.
2. Classroom observation of teaching assistants by departmental supervisor followed by one-on-one interview with each assistant to assess his/her instructional performance, at least once each semester; more often if the situation warrants additional observations and conferences.
3. If a teaching assistant’s performance is determined to be in need of remediation, the supervisor will make specific recommendations for improvement. These may include any of the following: (a) remedial work in the subject area, (b) attendance and observation of courses taught by the supervisor and other members of the teaching staff, (c) submission and approval of detailed lesson plans to supervisor prior to each subsequent meeting of teaching assistant with students, (d) assigning a mentor from among the teaching staff to work closely with the teaching assistant.
4. Written evaluations of the teaching assistant’s performance by the supervisor.
5. Use of a student evaluation instrument in all sections of courses taught in whole or in part by teaching assistants.

**Teaching Performance Evaluation/Course Evaluation**

To monitor the teaching assistant’s progress in the classroom, departmental supervisors should rely on a combination of direct observation and regular systematic assessments of
teaching performance. The purpose of this assessment is to heighten teaching effectiveness and to improve undergraduate education.

Graduate teaching assistants should be evaluated at least once each semester with the help of assessment instruments that measure these areas of teaching: preparation and planning for the course, instructional practices and teaching materials, effective classroom management, and instructor’s knowledge of subject matter.

Enrollment in Courses of Teaching Methodology

Graduate teaching assistants need to be introduced to all facets of effective teaching processes. To this end, they should enroll in a course specifically designed to familiarize TA’s with current teaching approaches, educational policies and procedures, guidelines for grading, access to resources, and training opportunities. The course should emphasize the theories and practices of classroom teaching in the specific field in which TA’s are asked to teach.

Remediation

Pro-seminars in the subject matter or weekly meetings will be held to provide instructional support for TA’s. Such seminars will provide basic information about the course and department, and include pedagogically sound teaching strategies. Micro-teaching opportunities in these situations are encouraged so that the TA will have a chance to experiment with teaching strategies or subject matter concepts without the stress of immediate student evaluation.

TA’s will be evaluated through a variety of methods. The same formal course/instructor evaluation methods (by students) utilized by the University will be employed for TA’s each semester. In addition, Ta’s will be observed by the departmental TA supervisor at least once each term, by the middle of the term. Additional observations may be made if deemed necessary by the lead micro-teaching sessions in weekly meetings or elsewhere. It the TA’s teaching performance is deemed unacceptable in any way, the TA and departmental supervisor will create a plan by which remediation may occur. TA’s may be videotaped, and the tape played back with the departmental supervisor and TA observing and commenting upon the teaching incident.

Follow-up and Feedback

Once a plan has been devised by departmental supervisor and the TA, regular meetings to determine the effect of the remediation will be held. At this time, the TA may try out new teaching strategies, discuss her/his concerns, or visit with the supervisor. The supervisor may take this opportunity to discuss with the TA what s/he has observed in the TA’s classroom, and in the materials and lesson plans turned in to the supervisor. In all classes, the TA and supervisor will determine the progress made. Written evaluations will also be discussed. A copy of the written evaluation will go to the TA and one will be placed in the supervisor’s file of the TA.

All teaching assistants shall be encouraged to contact their supervisor regarding any questions about the course, the teaching, or issues of concern. All supervisors are encouraged to
maintain frequent communication with TA’s. Weekly meetings and individual conferences are encouraged.

REFERENCES


REFERENCES ON TEACHING ASSISTANT TRAINING  
[FOR INSTRUCTORS]


BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS


Policy Statement Prepared by Evaluation Committee for Graduate Students:
Melissa L. Beall, Communication and Theatre Arts, Chair
Reinhold K. Bubser, Modern Languages
Connie L. Scarborough, Modern Languages

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