

FINAL

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Guidelines for Utilization of Undergraduate TAs in Arts & Sciences Courses

The Curriculum Committee was tasked with gathering information on the use of undergraduates as teaching assistants (hereafter UTAs) in undergraduate courses in Arts & Sciences, and to recommend a policy that standardizes those procedures and avoids potential conflicts of interest. The committee solicited input on this matter from several departments across Arts & Sciences, inquiring in particular how UTAs were utilized and how they were compensated. In addition, we sought and received information from the Schools of Engineering and Business as to their utilization of UTAs. What follows below is a summary of our findings and of our recommendations.

I. Uses of UTAs

The Committee learned that the involvement of UTAs varies widely across Arts & Sciences, with some Departments using none and others using them extensively. UTAs have been utilized as graders of homeworks, oral and written classroom assignments, and written examinations in many forms. UTAs are also used as overseers of laboratory exercises and graders of laboratory assignments. In most cases, some sort of instruction has been given to UTAs in which their responsibilities and obligations are well-defined. Some Departments have UTAs sign a confidentiality form that further defines their responsibilities. In most cases, a backup system has existed whereby the grading done by a UTA was spot-checked by either a graduate teaching assistant or by the professor in charge of the course. One important issue recognized by nearly everyone was possible problems posed by peer pressure when UTAs are grading work of classmates.

II. Issues That Involve Grading

1. Grading of Oral Participation and/or Presentations

This is a sensitive area because the material that is being graded cannot be assessed by a second instructor. Therefore, the Committee recommends that grades awarded by UTAs for oral presentations or class participation count for no more than 5% of the grade that a student receives in a given course.

2. Grading of Written Work

In general, this is a less-problematic area because the material that is being graded can be assessed by a second instructor. This area can be divided roughly into three basic grading situations:

- (a) Qualitative assessment of free-standing written work (for example, an essay or term paper). The Committee recommends that UTAs not grade essays or term papers that require a qualitative judgment;
- (b) Qualitative-quantitative assessment of more-limited written work (for example, paragraph-long written answers to exam questions). The Committee recommends that in such situations grading by UTAs be carefully guided by detailed instructions from the professor in charge of the course. It might be desirable for the professor to select a couple of essays at random, have the UTAs grade them, and then discuss the outcome with the UTA so as to provide some guidance;
- (c) Quantitative assessment of exams (for example, multiple-choice exams). The Committee regards this area, in general, not to be problematic and no further recommendations are made for this item;
- (d) For all written assignments graded by UTAs, the Committee recommends one of the two following safeguards:
 - A robust, well-advertized, and clearly articulated appeals process be instituted for students who believe they have been graded unfairly (any grade changes must be made by the professor in charge of the course)
 - A system of moderation whereby the professor is required to review and approve (or correct) the initial grading performed by the UTA

3. Entering and Accessing of Grades

No UTA should have the authority to enter a binding grade for his or her peers. All UTAs should have access only to that part of a student's performance that they are responsible for grading.

III. Compensation

In general, UTAs should be compensated for their work either financially or by a pass-fail grade in a course at the 200-level (up to 3 units, depending on the amount of work involved). Academic credit for such a course should be excluded from the major. The level of financial compensation (payment) should be left up to the individual Department. No UTA should receive both payment and academic credit.

IV. Structure of Employment

1. The selection of UTAs ought to be rigorous, open, and fair.
2. Whenever possible, UTAs should have completed successfully the course for which they are the TA (or possess similar experience).
3. Whenever possible, UTAs should be a year ahead of the students whose work they are grading (i.e., juniors grading sophomores, or seniors grading sophomores).
4. Whenever possible, UTAs should attend lectures in the courses for which they are the TA in order that she or he be familiar with and up-to-date with actual course content.

5. The use of UTAs must be acknowledged in the course syllabus, and their duties outlined accordingly.
6. UTAs involved in a “personal relationship” with students whose work they are grading must acknowledge this fact and recuse themselves accordingly.
7. UTAs must be informed about the ethical responsibilities of their work and be made aware of the value of confidentiality, respect, tact, and fairness in interactions with their peers. Such instruction should take place in formalized training sessions.

V. Enforcement, Training, and Implementation

1. As part of its orientation for Graduate TAs, the College — in consultation with the Teaching Center — should develop a plan of orientation for UTAs to take place no later than the first week of each semester.
2. General goals for UTAs should be provided by an orientation within the home Department, whereas detailed expectations should be enumerated by the professor in charge of the course.
3. Training and other considerations for UTAs in Arts & Sciences should be commensurate with existing guidelines established by the Schools of Business and Engineering, and the Sam Fox School.
4. Professors in charge of courses should monitor and closely supervise the work of their UTAs on a continuing basis, and consult with their UTAs regularly.
5. UTAs should be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.
6. Course evaluation forms should provide a means of assessing the performance of UTAs.

Endorsed by the A&S Curriculum Committee and presented to the faculty of Arts & Sciences at their meeting of April 20, 2012.