Being a Teaching Assistant at Stanford: Results of CTL's TA Survey

In 1994 the Center for Teaching and Learning received a two-year President’s Fund grant to expand teaching assistant training. In order to identify the most effective ways to use those funds, CTL conducted a survey of the teaching assistants themselves. In a four-page survey mailed to some 700 TAs in November, CTL asked Stanford TAs to describe their duties, assess their preparation for teaching, identify the best and worst aspects of TA life, and suggest ways in which training programs and support systems might be improved. By the end of this past fall quarter, over 350 surveys (51%) had been returned to CTL.

This article summarizes responses to the TA survey. Taken as a whole, this information provides a snapshot of the current situation at Stanford in relation to TA training and will help CTL establish guiding principles for action and set broad programmatic goals.

Responses for each department are also available and CTL intends to share this information with departments over the next quarter to help review existing programs and develop new initiatives.

Who Are the TAs?

The TAs who responded to the survey represent 48 Schools, departments, and academic programs; 76% are studying for the Ph.D. degree, 19% for the M.S. degree; 25% are international students, and for 26% English is not their first language.

Forty percent of TAs who responded are teaching for the first time. Of experienced TAs, 55% had previously taught from one to three quarters, and an additional 36% had taught from four to six quarters. Fully 60% of the experienced TAs had teaching experience before coming to Stanford as a graduate student, either as an undergraduate TA, as a K-12 teacher, or in some other context. Asked whether they plan future careers in academia, 55% responded Yes, 11% answered No, and 34% were Undecided.

Are TAs Ready to Teach?

TAs were asked to describe their teaching duties:

- Holding office hours 89%
- Grading 88%
- Leading discussions 64%
- Leading reviews 54%
- Lecturing 48%

When asked to rate how well prepared they feel for their various responsibilities, TAs responded with a high degree of confidence as regards grading and holding office hours. They feel somewhat less prepared—but still basically confident—regarding leading discussions and reviews. TAs feel least confident when it comes to lecturing, but even here they generally felt prepared.

Asked to assess their function in a course, 76% of the TAs report that they teach or work with a single faculty member, and 12% work with a team of faculty. Only 18 respondents (4%) are fully responsible for the courses they teach. Of the TAs who teach in courses with other TAs (69% of the whole), 56% work with one or two others, and another 25% work with from three to five others.
We asked the TAs to indicate what kinds of preparation they had received prior to teaching.

Meetings with professor(s) 74%
CTL’s Teaching at Stanford handbook 47%
Meetings with experienced TA(s) 47%
CTL orientation 46%
Departmental orientation 42%
Background readings on their own 36%
Departmental handouts 30%
Departmental pedagogy course 26%
CTL’s Speaking of Teaching newsletter 16%

How Can CTL and Departments Help?

We asked TAs to indicate which categories of information they were most interested in learning about to develop their teaching skills:

Motivating students 48%
Organizing your own course 47%
Structuring a lecture 45%
Discussion leading 41%
Handling problem students 39%
Designing tests and exams 37%
Public speaking 35%
Strategies for the first class 35%
Grading 35%
Structuring a class session 33%
Structuring reviews 30%
Collaborative learning 29%
Commenting on student writing 28%
Use of technology in teaching 28%
Multicultural issues 23%
Gender issues 22%
The honor code 16%

And how would TAs like to receive the information?

Teaching handbook 55%
Frequent short workshops 37%
Teaching newsletter 31%
One-on-one discussions with professors 27%
Lecture series on teaching 27%
Informal sessions with other TAs 26%
Pedagogy course 26%
Computer-assisted multimedia modules 20%

What are the greatest rewards TAs receive from teaching?

Financial support 93%
Learning to communicate knowledge 81%
Learning more about the field 77%
Learning how to teach 77%
Documenting evidence of teaching skills 69%
Working with professors 66%
Confidence in public speaking 62%

In general, TAs feel that the TA experience is positive, with 66% rating it “well worth it” and another 28% saying it is at least “OK.” A strong 89% feel they are appreciated by their students either always (22%) or often (67%). And 78% feel appreciated by their course professor, always (39%) or at least often (39%).

The final three questions on the Survey were open-ended. We asked about the best and worst aspects of TAing, and for specific suggestions for improving TA training.

What Is the Best Thing About TAing?

A clear majority (57%) responded with some version of “working with students.” The TAs speak of their “positive interactions” with undergraduates as wonderful examples of “intellectual communication” that are sometimes “inspiring.” Several of the TAs mention “seeing growth” in their students and the joy they feel “when their faces light up.” Closely related, 17% of TAs say “teaching” is the best thing. Several speak of their “love of the teaching experience itself” and the “intellectual energy” and “creativity” they experience in “giving back” to undergraduates. Still others note their pride in being part of a “long tradition” and of the valuable “on-the-job experience” they are receiving.

Next, respondents enjoy “learning the field,” “understanding the material better,” learning the material “for real,” and getting to know the field “backward and forward.” One TA comments, “You only know something well after you have explained it to someone else.” Other responses include “it’s fun” (5%), “it pays the bills” (5%), and “self-esteem” (5%). TAs speak of their “sense of accomplishment” and the “new confidence” they feel as a result of “handling responsibilities” and “earning respect.”

What Is the Worst Thing About TAing?

TAs are not particularly happy with grading responsibilities; 34% mention grading—along with routine administrative duties—as “grunt work” that they find tiresome and uncreative. Next, they say there is “not enough time” to perform effectively. Some TAs say they feel “enslaved” and “hopelessly overwhelmed.” The demands on their time...
Some TAs (14%) are unhappy with “difficult students,” especially students dissatisfied with their grades and those who are bored and unmotivated. TAs mention “whiny” students who are “obnoxious grade-grubbers” and sometimes even “confrontational.”

Closely aligned with these responses are another 5% that speak of “teaching failures,” or situations where TAs feel frustrated in dealing with “shy,” “unresponsive,” or “hard to motivate students.”

Lastly, 10% of TAs note a “frustration with the professor,” complaining about “limited input” regarding the organization of the course.

**What Would You Change About the TA Experience?**

Over one-quarter of the TAs surveyed want “more skills training,” specifically training in “public speaking,” “grading procedures,” and “how to run labs and discussion sections.” They are interested in help from both CTL and their departments, and several specifically ask for more information on “pedagogy resources.” Related to this, the second most common response is either “more general training”—workshops where TAs can discuss their progress on an on-going basis—or “more contact with the professor.” TAs also want “more TA interaction”; several call for “supervisory mentor TAs” and for “peer workshops” and “peer evaluation programs.”

TAs also want “more graders,” “smaller classes,” and “more TAs per student.” Other responses include “more opportunities to lecture,” “more information regarding CTL resources,” “teaching handbooks and grading guides,” “on-going guidance and support,” “more office space,” and “more midterm evaluations.”

**Conclusions**

While TAs by and large feel that TAing is worthwhile, and while generally they feel prepared to teach, they also want more ongoing support. And despite the fact that many TAs have teaching experience before arriving at Stanford, each year many TAs will be teaching for the first time, and will require training through CTL and their departments.

CTL will begin offering regular workshops on the topics TAs expressed interest in, especially workshops on grading, motivating students, lecturing, and discussion leading. CTL will also share the results of the TA survey with departments, and will hold an on-campus faculty and TA conference on May 5, 1995, to examine current training programs and, we hope, help departments strengthen the efforts already in place.

We also invite TAs and faculty to respond to us directly about the survey results and to offer suggestions or ideas not yet raised or addressed.
1995 Spring Quarter
Faculty Seminar Series on
Teaching and Technology

Mondays, 12 noon to 1 p.m.
Sweet Hall, Room 019 (The Presentation Palace)

April 10
Professor Fred Kemp, Texas Tech University
Associate Professor of English and
Director of Composition and Computer-Based Writing
“Dislodging the Paradigm, at Last: The Internet, Networks,
and Dialogism in Writing Instruction”

April 17
Joe Clark, Video Discovery
Chairman and CEO
“The Science Sleuths CD-ROMs and the Latest Videodisc
Programs on Oceanography and Geology”

April 24
Professor Alice Bach, Stanford University
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
“An Example of the Pedagogical Benefits of Academic
Technical-Support Organizations”

May 1
Professor James Noblitt, UNC at Chapel Hill
Research Professor of Romance Languages
Academic Chair, Institute for Academic Technology
“Cognitive Aspects of Listening Comprehension:
Information Technology and Language Learning”

May 8
Robert Kozma, SRI International
Director of the Center for Technology and Learning
“The Role of Computers in Supporting Learning and
Teaching in Higher Education”

May 15
Jacqueline Brown, Princeton University
Director of Information Services, Computing, and Information
Technology
“High-End Graphics on the World-Wide-Web”

May 22
Robert Cavalier, Carnegie Mellon University
Senior Researcher, Center for the Advancement of Applied
Ethics
“Redesigning the Classroom”

Lessons from The Feminist Classroom
Frances A. Maher

Friday, April 21
12 noon-1 p.m.
Hartley Conference Room,
Mitchell Earth Sciences Building

In conjunction with Feminist Studies and the
Women’s Center Advisory Board, CTL is co-
sponsoring the visit of Frances Maher, who will
discuss her recent book, coauthored with Mary
Kay Thompson Tetreault, The Feminist Classroom:
an Inside Look at How Professors and Students Are
Transforming Higher Education for a Diverse
Society. Professor Maher will also lead a seminar
discussion from 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on “Frames of
Positionality: Constructing Classroom Dialogues
About Gender and Race,” at Serra House.

Help for New Faculty
Interested in Technology

Are you a new faculty member at Stanford and wondering
how to get your computer connected to the Internet or how
to open an e-mail account? Confused about whom to
contact regarding your World-Wide-Web problem?
Interested in using technology to improve your teaching?
There are many resources on campus to help you with
these problems—if you know where to call. If you’re not
sure, then call the Instructional Technology Specialist at
CTL; he can help you in all these areas and more.

The Center for Teaching and Learning has recently hired
Jon Dick as an Instructional Technology Specialist (ITS)
to support faculty during their first year of teaching. Jon
(or JD) is helping new faculty orient themselves quickly to
the technological environment at Stanford. He can help
you learn about the available computer resources on
campus and whom to call in times of need. He can help
you purchase and set up your computer, help you open an
e-mail account and learn to use it effectively, and demon-
strate many of the exciting new technologies available for
instruction and research. As much as possible, JD will
provide individualized and customized training and
solutions, emphasizing “off-the-shelf” software, proven
instructional technologies, and networking among faculty
with similar interests. For more information, contact:
Jon Dick at the Center for Teaching and Learning,
723-8676, jdick@leland.