

**To:** Dean Danny Anderson

**From:** Policies, Procedures and Awards (PPA) Subcommittee of the Committee on Graduate Studies

**Subject:** Recommendations for Best Practices and Learner Outcomes for Graduate Research Assistants

**Date:** February 12, 2013

### **Dean's Charge**

In 2011, Dean Danny Anderson charged the Committee on Graduate Studies with recommending a series of best practices and learner outcomes for graduate teaching and research experiences. Through identifying ways to support learner outcomes, graduate programs could be better informed about best practices for graduate student training. For Graduate Research Assistants, Dean Anderson charged to Committee to focus specifically on identifying best practices for GRA research supervision.

### **Background**

In the 2011-2012 academic year, the PPA subcommittee decided to address the charge by focusing on graduate teaching and graduate research separately, given that the goals and challenges of GTAs are mostly distinct from those of GRAs. The 2011-2012 PPA subcommittee gathered information in the form of surveys regarding GTA experiences, but did not have time to make any recommendations before the end of the academic year. The 2012-2013 PPA subcommittee synthesized the results of the surveys and provided a document summarizing the subcommittee's recommendations on best practices of Graduate Teaching Assistants. This document was presented to the Dean in October 2012.

This present document focuses on the second part of the charge: recommendations for best practices of GRA supervision. In the fall semester of 2012, the PPA subcommittee identified departments within the college that supported graduate research assistants. The subcommittee then requested that the chairs of these departments identify faculty members that they viewed as particularly effective GRA supervisors. An email was sent to all twenty-four of these faculty members, inviting them to meet with the subcommittee to discuss their practices of GRA supervision and provide recommendations to the subcommittee. One responded with comments by email and seven faculty met with the subcommittee in person on December 6, 2012.

Below are the topics that we used in our discussions with GRA supervisors:

1. Describe how you utilize GRAs to support your research.
2. Describe your supervisory practice.
3. Describe any challenges you face in supervising GRAs.
4. What practices do you believe best advance the GRAs progress to degree and professional development?

5. Do you use any resources, guidelines, or models that inform your supervisory practice?

### **Committee recommendations for best practices for supervision of graduate research assistants**

The most prominent theme that emerged from the discussion with College faculty that serve as supervisors of graduate research assistants is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supervising GRAs. The subcommittee found that in general, practices are highly specific to the research field, the supervisor, and the student. However, some general themes emerged from our discussions with GRA supervisors. From these general themes, the committee has come up with several recommendations outlined below.

- **The GRA supervisor should provide written guidelines outlining expectations of the graduate research assistant prior to the onset of the GRA appointment.** Expectations that should be communicated to the GRA include, but are not limited to, scope of work, expected outcomes, and time commitment. GRA supervisors varied on how they communicated these expectations, from written contracts to informal discussions, but all agreed that effective communication of expectations was essential to successful GRA supervision. These guidelines of expectations can be in accord with those provided by funding agencies and/or national organizations (e.g., regarding authorship).
- **Graduate research assistantships should include development of research skills that directly benefit students' dissertation research.**
- **It is recommended that departments follow up with the graduate student to insure that the student is benefitting from the GRA appointment.** GRA outcomes can be included as part of the student's annual evaluation.
- **Graduate research assistantships should include opportunities for cross-disciplinary research and/or professional development.** According to the GRA supervisors, funded research projects often provide opportunities for cross-disciplinary training for GRAs. In addition, funded research often provides opportunities for travel to professional meetings and collaborations with outside investigators. These opportunities can enhance the GRA's experience and better prepare them for an independent research career.
- **Graduate research assistants should be given enough responsibility to work independently and in collaboration with the supervisor.** GRA supervisors pointed out that valuable professional experience can be gained for the GRA if they are allowed to function as collaborators with the supervisor and/or the larger collaborative funded project. This research can be directly related to the dissertation or an extension of the research. Regardless, any significant contributions to the research should result in co-authorship or other appropriate acknowledgements of the GRAs contribution.
- **Within the limitations of the funded research objectives, GRA supervisors should be flexible and adjust the expected work to the skills and career goals of the particular**

**student.** Student training is most effective when it is aligned with their career goals, which may or may not include a career in academia.

- **Inexperienced GRA supervisors could benefit from mentorship from someone in their particular research area to guide them on how to best supervise GRAs.** Experienced and effective GRA supervisors can be put into positions of mentoring early career faculty on best practices in their own particular field. This could be included as part of a formal mentoring program for early career faculty.

**To:** Dean Danny Anderson

**From:** Policies, Procedures and Awards (PPA) Subcommittee of the Graduate Studies Committee

**Subject:** Recommendations for Best Practices and Learner Outcomes for Graduate Teaching Assistants

**Date:** September 27, 2012

### **Dean's Charge**

In 2011 Dean Danny Anderson charged the Committee on Graduate Studies with recommending a series of best practices and learner outcomes for graduate teaching and research experiences. Through identifying ways to support learner outcomes, graduate programs could be better informed about best practices for graduate student training. In addition, recommendations on best practices could help guide the graduate teaching assistant evaluation process.

### **Background**

In the 2011-2012 academic year, the PPA subcommittee decided to begin addressing the charge by focusing on graduate teaching and graduate research separately, given that the goals and challenges of GTAs are mostly distinct from those of GRAs. The 2011-2012 PPA subcommittee decided that input from CLAS Graduate Teaching Assistants and Directors of Graduate Studies would be useful to inform the committee of areas that needed improvement and to illuminate existing practices that were particularly useful in the graduate teaching experience. Thus, the PPA subcommittee began work on this charge by developing and administering a survey to all Graduate Teaching Assistants and Directors of Graduate Studies in the College. This survey had 267 GTA respondents and 28 DGS respondents and centered on questions regarding GTA experiences.

In addition to the survey, the 2012-2013 PPA subcommittee members pursued additional avenues of research including: reviewing existing University and College guidelines, assembling a list of departmental pedagogical GTA courses, and identifying and evaluating resources from other universities/institutions regarding graduate teaching. The 2011-2012 PPA subcommittee used all of this information to (a) provide recommendations for the College for what they can do to enhance GTA learner outcomes and (b) provide a list of best practices for departments to support their Graduate Teaching Assistants.

### **Recommendations for the College**

From the survey administered by the PPA subcommittee, we found that some GTA respondents perceive a large amount of variation in the level of responsibility and time spent for 50% GTA appointments, both within and between departments. Some student respondents perceive that the time required to fulfill their teaching responsibilities exceeds the amount of hours outlined by the Memorandum of Agreement for Graduate Teaching Assistants (e.g., 20

hours a week). This PPA subcommittee recommends that the College evaluate the norms provided by the departments on the equivalency of their 50% appointments to evaluate whether or not teaching assignments are appropriate for their level of experience and percentage of GTA appointment. By ensuring that GTAs are only appointed teaching responsibilities that match their level of experience (i.e. supervised, structured labs, discussion sections for beginning GTAs, with less structured sections and lecture courses are reserved for advanced GTAs), graduate teaching assistants can be assured that they are given teaching responsibilities that are appropriate for their level of experience and that they experience a wide range of teaching responsibilities throughout their graduate career. By carefully monitoring the time required for each teaching responsibility and adjusting according to his/her percentage of appointment, the College can assure a 50% GTA is not required, on average, to exceed 20 hours/week on his/her teaching responsibilities, and the College will help graduate students better manage their teaching- with their progress to degree.

In reviewing graduate teaching materials provided by peer institutions and associations on the web<sup>1</sup>, the PPA subcommittee found that having a centralized place for all relevant information specific to Graduate Teaching Assistants in the College could be a valuable resource. This information would serve as a resource that they could refer to throughout their graduate teaching career. The PPA subcommittee also recommends that the College provide a comprehensive handbook or web-based guide to all Graduate Teaching Assistants in the College. The PPA committee's suggestions for relevant handbook information includes: general information about eligibility for appointment, benefits, paperwork, roles and responsibilities of a GTA, planning a course, dealing with student problems, pedagogy, utilizing technology, and assessments. This information could be focused on both general issues with teaching, as well as those aspects that are specific to the College and University.

Finally, the PPA subcommittee recommends that the College consult with the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) regarding strategies to encourage departments to adopt the recommended best practices outlined below. This may include the possibility of exemption from Graduate Studies' mandatory GTA training in cases where departments have developed their own CTE-approved training.

## **Recommendations for Departments on Best Practices for Graduate Teaching Assistants**

After evaluating the surveys, existing university guidelines, and resources from peer institutions, the PPA subcommittee distilled a series of best practice recommendations that will provide support for GTA learner outcomes. These best practices are given below.

- 1. Provide department-specific teaching instruction/mentorship for all new GTAs to compliment the CTE required training. Ideally, the course should be integrated into their curriculum and facilitate the development of pedagogical skills and time management.*

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<sup>1</sup> [Arizona State University Resource Guide for Teaching Assistants](#), [Michigan State University TA Handbook](#), Council of Graduate Schools and the Association of American Colleges and Universities Preparing Future Faculty in [Sciences and Mathematics](#) and [Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

Examples within the College that can serve as a model for effective mentoring programs of GTAs and/or pedagogical courses are:

The Department of English, KU

<http://www.english.ku.edu/pdf/2012-2013%20Handbook.pdf>

The English Department requires its new GTAs to take English 801 and 802, Practicum in the College Teaching of English I and II. Even those with prior teaching experience are required to at least audit the course sequence. This course is taught simultaneously with their GTA assignments so that they can discuss and work on teaching responsibilities during their course.

Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, KU

<http://wgss.ku.edu/courses/index.shtml>

As in English, the course is taught simultaneously with GTA assignment, where each GTA is paired with a faculty mentor to discuss issues as they come up. Students learn how to present knowledge and stimulate learning in the classroom, as well as such practical skills as leading discussion sections, preparing and presenting class sessions, developing syllabi, devising fair grading and helpful advising, and solving pedagogical problems like maintaining civility in the classroom and coping with academic misconduct. Must be repeated twice for a total of 1 credit hour while actively teaching.

The Department of Mathematics, KU

<http://www.math.ku.edu/academics/graduate/teaching.html>

The department holds a general orientation, a four-hour teaching training workshop, and calculator workshops before classes start. During the first semester, new mathematics GTAs take a seminar on teaching.

The Department of Linguistics, KU

Two faculty members, one of whom is the instructor for the lecture class, serve as supervisors for all GTAs in Introductory Linguistics. They meet with all GTAs weekly. For other courses with GTAs, the faculty member teaching the course meets with their GTAs weekly.

- 2. Provide additional training/mentoring for GTAs who are teaching lecture or online courses.*

We recommend that GTAs be assigned a faculty mentor who provides guidance and closely supervises them when they are solely responsible for teaching lecture or online courses that do not have a faculty member as instructor of record.

- 3. Closely monitor teaching assignments so that GTA teaching responsibilities are appropriate for the percentage of appointment according to the Memorandum of Agreement.*

This can best be accomplished by soliciting feedback from GTAs in the form of a survey at the end of the semester about their GTA experiences, which would include an assessment of hours spent fulfilling teaching responsibilities. In addition, assignments should be adjusted for those that take extra time required for large lecture courses, developing a course, teaching online courses for the first time, etc.

4. *Adhere to the Out-of-Field GTA appointments policy to ensure that the teaching assignments include mentoring and pedagogical components.*

Out-of-field GTA appointments appear to be frequent because many departments in the College do not have enough GTA positions whereas other departments have more GTA positions than graduate students. All efforts should be made to closely match out-of-field appointments to the graduate student's area of expertise and range of career options.

5. *Add a GTA section to department handbooks or provide GTA handbooks specific to the department.*

GTAs should have a handbook or online resource that outlines the department-specific expectations of GTAs and provides information about whom they should go to for guidance on specific issues that may come up and outline the supervisory structure within the host department. This handbook should also provide a comprehensive guide to outside sources for help with teaching that are available on campus.

Example: Department of History, KU

[http://www.history.ku.edu/graduate/pdfs/Grad\\_Handbook.pdf](http://www.history.ku.edu/graduate/pdfs/Grad_Handbook.pdf)

History's Graduate Student Handbook has a detailed section (pgs. 14-16) outlining GTA responsibilities, opportunities for training and mentoring within and outside the department, and information on how to acquire the departmental "Commendation in Teaching Preparedness."

6. *Departments should investigate peer-specific examples of similar departments at other campuses to get examples of GTA mentorship and should work towards developing a comprehensive GTA mentoring program within the department.*

Recognizing that GTA training is often field-specific, we encourage departments to explore existing GTA mentoring programs at peer institutions.

7. *Encourage peer mentoring of GTAs by providing opportunities and incentives to meet as a group (e.g., through their GSO or informal regular meetings).*

GTAs often get the best advice from fellow GTAs. Departments can encourage these interactions by providing more opportunities for collaboration and discussion (e.g., paid-for GTA pizza lunches).