

WPA on Campus

What About the TAs? Making the Wyoming Resolution a Reality for Graduate Students

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While much attention has been given to what the Wyoming Resolution and the subsequent CCCC statement on professional standards say about the use of part-time and temporary instructors to teach composition, there has not been much focus on the use of graduate students, a situation also ripe for potential abuses that may contribute to poor teaching. The two of us, one the chair of the English Department, the other director of Composition, would like to share our efforts to comply with the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards with regard to working conditions of teaching assistants. We hope that our efforts might help others struggling with similar agendas, particularly those who are being told that establishing a comprehensive training program for TAs (and thereby reducing their teaching load) can't be done. We know it can because we did it.

First, we will review what the Statement of Principles and Standards says about the use of graduate students to teach composition. The document states that the teaching experience of graduate students should be taken as an essential part of their training for future professional responsibilities. Institutions should provide adequate training and supervision; the special status of composition TAs (being fully in charge of the class) should be recognized and class size and course load adjusted accordingly; teaching loads should not interfere with graduate students' progress toward their degrees. Teaching assistantships should be awarded only to students who are superior writers themselves and who also have had experience or training in teaching composition (see "Statement" 332).

In a research institution like ours, the model for delivery of most lower-division instruction is the apprenticeship model; TAs across the institution teach 100- and 200-level courses as part of their training to become professionals in their field. Part of the challenge in maintaining the quality of instruction in freshman composition, then, is to make the TA program the best apprenticeship program possible, one that will help our graduate students realize their full potential as students and as teachers. How can this be accomplished?

We began by examining our TA training program. Although the program was in many respects an enlightened one (we did at least have a program), it needed improvement if we were serious about maintaining a high quality of instruction in composition. We already were doing some things that the Standards document suggested. Superior writing ability was one of the criteria for acceptance into our graduate programs, for example, and we had already used the argument of the special status of composition TAs to get them a three-course-per-year teaching load, but clearly we could do more. First, although we looked for teaching experience among our applicants for graduate study, there were always some (mostly in our MA programs) who came to us with no teaching experience. Second, although TAs attended a required practicum (Teaching Apprenticeship) and those new to teaching were encouraged to enroll in an additional graduate seminar (Theories of Composing and their Pedagogies), they took these courses *simultaneously* with their teaching during the first semester they were with us. Thus, as many as half of our new TAs in any given fall were inexperienced teachers trying to teach and to learn how to teach (and also learn how to be graduate students) all at once, something like trying to repair a train while it is going down the track at full speed. While the program was better than the sink-or-swim method that the two of us experienced as TAs, this was very far from ideal.

At the time we were examining our TAs' situation with an eye toward improvements, our campus, like many campuses, was discussing the quality of student writing and what could be done to improve it. The Faculty Senate, the university provost, and the Board of Regents had recently endorsed a comprehensive seven-part plan to improve the quality of undergraduates' writing across the campus. One component specifically called for continuing improvements to the quality of instruction in English 101, the required freshman writing course. Clearly, then, this was an opportune environment in which to ask for support for a new TA training program and for the addition of several new TA positions that would enable us to implement the program. The new positions would allow us to reduce new TAs' teaching load the first year from three to two courses, the extra course to be made up in an apprenticeship program that would result in the improvement of composition instruction.

First, the faculty of the English Department had to support the request, which it did unanimously when it became clear that the new TA positions would benefit all of us, not just the composition program, by supporting more graduate students. Then, we had to secure the endorsement of our dean. We started the process, inevitably, with a memorandum elaborating our argument, followed by an interview that served as a valuable dry-run for our major challenge, the provost himself. The chair,

the dean, and the head of the Senate's All-University Writing Committee (as it happened, a senior English professor) met with the provost to make our case. The provost asked for clarification about three key issues:

1. Would funding such a training program set a precedent for TAs across campus? In other words, why did English Department TAs require special training opportunities? (We argued that their role as instructors of record, rather than assistants to faculty, in a required general education foundations course distinguished them from other TAs. The provost, familiar with Ernest Boyer's declaration that writing proficiency is the foundation for success in the undergraduate experience [73 ff.], agreed.)

2. What good would our proposal do if it were implemented? (It would make our TAs better teachers of writing, thus improving student writing in general; moreover, it would enable us to recruit additional, high-quality graduate students from our existing pool of applicants, students we were now turning away for lack of such awards.)

3. How much would it cost? (We calculated that sum—\$50,000—by determining that we would need five new TA positions to make up the classes not taught by TA trainees the first semester.) The provost acted as any senior administrator worth his salt would; he took the matter under advisement. Two weeks later he approved it.

Here is the program we worked out.

1. Those graduate students with no teaching experience are paid a full TA stipend for the first year of appointment, but they do not teach in the classroom during the first semester. Instead, they tutor in our Writing Lab, enroll in a graduate seminar on rhetorical theory and practice, and are paired with an experienced mentor TA. They attend their mentor's composition class, observe and take notes in a teaching journal (to be used the next semester as a reference), and occasionally help the mentor teacher with conferences or with small-group work in the classroom. (Mentors are chosen carefully, and we specify exactly how the apprentice teachers can take part in instruction; mentors are not allowed, for example, to ask the apprentice teacher to take over the class for them or to put new TAs to work as graders.¹) Inexperienced teachers thus have an entire semester to study composition theory, watch an experienced teacher teach a complete class, read the selections their students will be reading, learn to conduct conferences, learn how to use our computer lab, reflect on how they will teach their class, and prepare their own syllabi based on that reflection. The second semester, they teach two sections of our introductory composition course; during this semester, they attend a weekly teaching practicum with the director of Composition to discuss the day-to-day issues that arise in their teaching.

2. Graduate students with previous teaching experience may choose to follow the same path as those with no experience—that is, no classes first semester and two the second. We give experienced teachers another option, however—teaching one class each semester in their first year—and most choose it. These TAs also tutor in our Writing Lab, and they are also paired with a mentor. Once they have observed a few of their mentors' classes, however, they are free to discontinue their observations if they (in consultation with the director of Composition) feel that they are ready to launch out on their own. Most continue to keep close contact with their mentors, even though they might not observe classes; some move around and observe several different classes, finding that watching different teaching styles helps them understand their own. Finally, these TAs attend the first-semester teaching practicum led by the director of Composition.

Although the program is only in its second year, we have enough evidence to suggest that it is preparing our apprentice TAs as we had hoped. Evaluations by new and mentor TAs are uniformly positive—indeed, enthusiastic—about its effects, and an examination of various other measures (student evaluations, the percentage of "W" grades in the classes of new TAs compared to those of experienced TAs, a comparison of the grades given by new and experienced TAs) suggests that students are better served under this new program. While it was devised with instructional improvement in mind, our apprenticeship program is based on a larger premise: that graduate students should be treated like junior colleagues who are given all the support and help the institution can muster in order to succeed at their chosen profession.² To that end, English departments should also (as we do) support graduate student travel to professional meetings, ensure that graduate students are represented on key committees (including faculty search committees), and pay TAs a reasonable amount for their work. Departments should also do whatever they can to prepare students for the job market: encourage them to present papers at conferences, advise them on submission of papers for publication, provide funding for research, give workshops on the job application process, conduct mock job interviews, and in general provide appropriate professional development opportunities as they would for faculty. A comprehensive apprenticeship program should start with TA training and continue until the graduate student has left us for a job outside our walls. Such a program not only prepares students to teach composition well; it prepares the professoriate of tomorrow. That is, after all, a central mission of the research university.

Notes

1. One of the surprises for us was learning that mentors found their work with new TAs rewarding rather than burdensome (as we had feared it might be). Most enjoyed having regular feedback on their own teaching and asked to participate again. Informal visiting of one another's classes and subsequent sharing of assignments have become part of the TA culture.

2. One reviewer of this piece asked if our university provides such rigorous and mandated support for junior colleagues. We can't speak for the entire institution, but our department certainly does. Each new faculty member is assigned a mentor who helps the junior colleague become acculturated to the department and involved in the profession. Specifically, the mentor advises about teaching (perhaps serving as one of the two peer reviewers each faculty member needs in the tenure and promotion file); about research, publishing and grant writing; and about putting together materials for annual review, tenure, and promotion. We also reduce the junior faculty members' teaching and committee loads the first few years to give them time for new preparations and for their research. Thus, the TA mentor system we set up in some sense mirrored a faculty system already in place.

Works Cited

Boyer, Ernest L. *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. New York: Harper, 1987.

"Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 329-36.

