

Report of the Teaching Assistant Training Requirement Task Force

June 3, 2013

The TA Training Task Force met on multiple occasions during the Spring Semester of 2013. The group was given the following charge:

1. Review
 - a) Past history of mandate,
 - b) Current efforts,
 - c) Historical evaluation and attendance data for Teaching Assistant Training and Evaluation Program (TATEP),
 - d) Report from CTE (Cherrstrom),
 - e) Approved alternative training.
2. Review a few TA training programs at peer institutions
3. Determine current TA training needs
4. Provide recommendations for TA training: mandate or optional, scope of training, levels, etc.

The members of the TA force were:

Scott Miller (Chair), Dwight Look College of Engineering
Richard Anderson, Department of Economics, College of Liberal Arts
Sarah Bednarz, College of Geosciences
Wendy Boswell, Mays Business School
Craig Coates, Department of Entomology, Interdisciplinary Programs representative
Debra Fowler, Center for Teaching Excellence
Ira Greenbaum, Department of Biology
Jan Hughes, College of Education
John Lenihan, Department of History
Rae Lynn McFarlin, Department of Chemistry, Graduate Student Council representative
Ra'sheedah Richardson, Center for Teaching Excellence
David Reed, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Review of current practices

The committee reviewed the CTE report by Cathy Cherrstrom which included surveys from department heads throughout TAMU as well as surveys of a number of peer institutions. The committee did not feel it was necessary to commission a new survey because this report was conducted in 2011 and represents recent conditions.

Departmental TA training practices within the University

Reviewing the data from the department head survey, it is clear that TA training practices vary broadly across the university. While some departments have very rigorous department level training programs, others have none at all and rely exclusively on the training provided by the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE).

TA training practices at Peer Institutions

The Cherrstrom report collected surveys from 18 “peer” universities including: Georgia Tech, Michigan State, Ohio State, Penn. State, Purdue, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, USC, Texas, Wisconsin, Berkeley, UC Davis, UCLA, UCSD, and UT Dallas. The surveys collected information on: New TA orientations, Teaching Certificate Programs, Teaching Awards & Financial Support, Learning Experiences Beyond Orientation, Communication & Communities, Evaluation & Feedback, Resources. Some practices of interest included:

- *Additional training for international TAs* – Several universities have extended training for international TAs including, Ga. Tech., Mich. St., and Berkeley. One university (Mich. St.) enrolled its international TAs in an online program designed to improve pronunciation.
- *Online Modules* – A number of universities have created online training modules for some of the basic policies (e.g., university policies and procedures, FERPA rules, etc.)
- *Graduate TA Handbook* – A detailed handbook for TAs is commonly provided to all graduate TAs at many universities.
- *Mandatory Departmental TA Training* – One university (Berkeley) had mandatory discipline specific TA training. This consisted of a semester long course required of all new TAs offered by the TAs department. Among other things, the course included evaluation of teaching through video and mentor feedback.

University Level TA Training

The committee reviewed the content of the currently mandated university level TA training which is provided through the Center for Teaching Excellence. It was felt that CTE is doing an excellent job with this program and they should continue to provide this service. However, the attendance at this program is not close to 100% as would be expected given that this training is mandatory for all new TAs. While the committee felt it was OK for some departments to receive waivers from the mandatory TA training if they provide substantially similar training at the department level, most departments do not do this and hence we should be seeing much higher attendance numbers in the CTE training program.

History of the TA Training Mandate

The Teaching Assistant Training and Evaluation Program (TATEP) has been in existence (and a mandatory requirement for all new TAs) since 1991. A committee (chaired by William Smith) was charged with reviewing this program in 1996 and issued several recommendations including a re-issue of the mandate, a charge for college deans to be responsible for insuring compliance with the mandate, a call for departmental programs to be formally evaluated, and new departmental programs be initiated where lacking. Unfortunately, it does not appear that any of the recommendations of the Smith committee were implemented.

Committee Recommendations

- 1) *University Wide TA Training* - The committee felt that the current TA training program offered by CTE is effective, should be continued, and should continue to be mandatory for all new TAs. This training should continue to focus on aspects of being a TA that are common across all disciplines. Discipline specific TA training should be done at the department/college level. As is currently the policy, TAs from certain departments can be waived from this requirement if the department can adequately document that it offers an equivalent training through its department level TA training program. CTE should grant such departmental waivers for a three year period based on submission of a syllabus of its training program and copies of training materials.
- 2) *Discipline Specific TA Training* – The committee felt that discipline specific training for new TAs should be provided at the college/department level or perhaps even at the level of specific courses. The nature of this training is going to vary widely across the different disciplines, so the committee did not feel that it would be productive to specify the nature of this training.
- 3) *Reporting of TA Training Compliance* – In order to provide evidence of compliance with the above mandates, each department/program should provide a yearly report to their GOC Deans which should include:
 - a. A list of all new TAs indicating whether or not each individual has attended the University TA training and the departmental TA training.
 - b. A one-page description of the nature of the departmental TA training program. This document should address the objectives of the program and how those objectives are assessed and should include how international TAs are trained. One of the objectives should be that TAs should have adequate communication skills.

The GOC Deans will collect reports from all of their departments/programs and provide a college level report of compliance to the Office of Graduate Studies.

- 4) *Best Practices* – In order to encourage excellence in the TA training programs, the CTE should periodically publish a list of best practices that can be distributed to each of the programs as well as a list of resources available for departmental TA training.