

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Introduction

On October 2, 1996, the Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching Assistants convened to begin discussions in response to the charge spelled out in the Spring 1993 Final Report on the New Curriculum. This committee included Professor David Armstrong (Physics), Professor Waldemer Eger (Modern Languages), Professor Mark Fowler (Dean of Undergraduate Studies), Professor Franz Gross (Dean of Graduate Studies), Deonna Johnson (Physics graduate student), Professor Richard Lowry (American Studies), Todd Pfannestiel (History graduate student), Christopher Scalia (English undergraduate student), Professor Alan Wallach (Art and Art History), and Professor Larry Wiseman (Biology). Professor John Selby (History) chaired the committee.

In the ensuing month, the committee met several times to discuss relevant issues and devise a series of recommendations concerning the training and supervision of teaching assistants at The College of William and Mary. Following are the committee's observations and recommendations.

Charge of the Committee

The ad hoc committee's charge, as spelled out in the Final Report on the New Curriculum, included the formulation of policies and procedures regarding the training and supervision of teaching assistants at the College. Specifically, the report outlined the following general principles to guide the committee:

(1) William and Mary has built its state and national reputation upon its commitment to undergraduates, as evidenced by its reliance on regular, full-time faculty to perform the teaching mission. Undergraduates expect to be taught by professors, not by graduate students. To preserve the distinctiveness of the College, we recommend that departments not employ M.A. candidates as instructors on their own. Teaching assistantships should be reserved for doctoral candidates in the second year of graduate school and beyond. In addition, we urge departments to rely chiefly upon regular faculty for introductory courses and to provide other teaching opportunities--for example, upper-level seminars on specific fields of expertise--for advanced doctoral students. Even as it prepares a modest number of graduate students for teaching careers, William and Mary need not--and should not--follow the example of many large public and private universities.

(2) In preparing graduate students for the college classroom William and Mary should develop a formal plan for their training and support. With such support, young graduate students, excited about their subjects, close in age to undergraduates, and prepared for

teaching, may bring to the classroom a special enthusiasm and freshness.

Formal Response to the Charge

The ad hoc committee agrees that William and Mary should not follow the example of many large universities where many of the lower-level courses are taught by teaching assistants. However, the College does have a small but significant number of graduate students in the Arts and Sciences. While many doctoral candidates will not go into teaching and therefore do not require such preparation, a number will; thus, the university has "the responsibility to prepare doctoral students for teaching."

When the committee did look at the role of these assistants in a university where "undergraduates expect to be taught by professors, not by graduate students," it made two observations:

(1) William and Mary occasionally hires new faculty members who have not completed all the requirements for the Ph.D. degree when they arrive. This means that some of our students are taught by "professors" who are in essence still graduate students somewhere else.

(2) Some of our departments use adjunct lecturers who may not have the qualifications to become regular professors. In Modern Languages, for example, a minimum of an M.A. is generally expected for adjunct lecturers.

If William and Mary used some of its own doctoral candidates as Teaching Assistants, they would be as qualified as some regular faculty members, and they could easily be better qualified than some of our adjunct lecturers. In light of these facts, the committee does not recommend that our assistants teach only "upper-level seminars on specific fields of expertise." We give three reasons for that:

(1) Upon entering the job market, having taught a survey course will be a significant advantage for our doctoral students, since most new professors will have to teach such courses in their first year.

(2) Our assistants will be as qualified to teach survey courses as some of our adjuncts or new professors, or more so if the graduate schools of the latter did not give them a chance to teach a course.

(3) Enrollments in upper-level seminars taught by our assistants most likely would be low because the new assistants would compete against courses taught by regular professors with whom concentrators have become familiar during their years of study.

Undergraduate Concerns

At the request of the ad hoc committee, the undergraduate representative on the committee undertook an informal survey of undergraduates at William and Mary. His

sampling included students from all classes--freshmen to fifth-year seniors--as well as majors in all three areas. All who were surveyed previously had a TA, usually in a science course. None had taken a course taught by a graduate student as the instructor of record, nor did many know that graduate students taught courses at William and Mary. Some admitted that, as entering freshmen, they did not realize that the College utilized TAs. The primary concerns of those surveyed included:

(1) Many students were apprehensive about TAs grading their work. Some found the grading to be inconsistent from one TA to the next. Others noted that TAs were inexperienced graders who often made mistakes or were too harsh. Many suggested that one way to avoid such problems would be for instructors of record to establish more rigid grading guidelines for their TAs to follow.

(2) With regard to advanced graduate students serving as instructors of record, opinions were mixed. Some felt that youthful instructors were advantageous, in that they could more easily relate to undergraduate students' questions and concerns. However, other students said they would have more confidence in a professor on the basis of experience alone.

(3) Specifically with regard to advanced graduate students serving as instructors of record, most students surveyed felt that graduate instructors should be restricted to entry-level courses. Once undergraduates enroll in an upper-level course in the major field, most would prefer that a college professor with greater teaching skills and general knowledge direct the course.

Specific Recommendations

Following a series of intensive discussions, as well as a survey conducted by Dean Fowler of all undergraduate programs concerning their use of teaching assistants, the ad hoc committee devised the following specific recommendations regarding TAs. These recommendations are divided into three categories: plans for collegewide TA orientation and training; guidelines for the training and use of graduate and undergraduate students as TAs; and guidelines for the training and use of advanced graduate students as instructors of record.

(1) Collegewide TA Orientation and Training.

The ad hoc committee felt that it was important to make a distinction between TA orientation and TA training. Orientation, as organized by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies in the past few years, is a 2 hour session in which TAs are introduced to the Dean of the Undergraduate Program, are told about the Counseling Center and other services which the College provides to help students, are introduced to the Honor Code and issues of sexual harassment, and participate in a short group discussion of problems and fears which teachers often face while teaching. The ad hoc committee believes that this program must be attended by all first-year TAs (both graduate and undergraduate), but that it is in no way a substitute for the training and mentoring which is the most vital

part of TA training.

The ad hoc committee believes that TA training begins after the TA orientation ends. We propose is that the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies should provide up to one day of training for all TAs beyond the initial 2 hour orientation period. Such training should include instruction on grading assignments and directing lab or drill sections. However, while this limited training session might be sufficient for students whose sole responsibility is to grade or teach labs, students who lecture or run review sessions should receive additional training and mentoring through a program run by the students' departments, and tailored to the needs of each discipline. These latter programs are the major focus of this report, and should be submitted for approval by the Educational Policy Committee and the Committee on Graduate Studies.

(2) The Training and Use of Graduate and Undergraduate Students as Teaching Assistants.

A survey of various departments and programs at William and Mary revealed a wide range of responsibilities given to students who have been labeled "teaching assistants." The ad hoc committee has grouped these different job descriptions into five general categories, based upon the level of instructional responsibilities in each category, with different recommendations for each category. These categories are:

(a) Non-instructional assistants.

These positions are not of an instructional nature, and are not associated with particular undergraduate courses. Examples include the Computer Science graduate students employed as computer/network "techies," students paid to work in the chemistry library, students paid to maintain the slides library for Art and Archaeology courses and to operate the projector. We would not classify such students as "teaching assistants," and do not consider these positions to be within the purview of this committee.

(b) Graders.

These positions have as a primary responsibility the grading of objective-answer materials (for example in physics, chemistry, economics, government, etc.). There may also be a small component of contact with undergraduate students (e.g. physics graders are required to have office hours to allow students to get assistance on problems they had done incorrectly).

These positions are held by graduate students or by upper-level undergraduates.

Recommendations: Graders should attend the collegewide orientation and training sessions, organized by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, to introduce them to appropriate College guidelines and regulations. The instructor of record has the responsibility of supervising the TA by meeting with the TA at the start of the course to discuss expectations and procedures, by periodically checking graded material to ensure

that the TA is being conscientious and fair in grading, and by providing some assessment to the TA on the quality of his/her work.

(c) Lab TAs.

Laboratory teaching assistants are used in many of the teaching laboratories on campus (chemistry, biology, geology, computer science, mathematics, sociology, psychology, physics, etc.). Responsibilities generally include assisting students in performing experiments or working exercises, grading lab reports, enforcing safety regulations, etc. In some cases the TAs may be expected to give short lectures at the beginning of the lab or to run tutoring sessions. These TAs are supervised by a faculty member or laboratory coordinator, who is the instructor of record. These positions involve a greater level of contact with the students than grading.

These positions are generally held by graduate students or by upper-level undergraduates.

Recommendations: Same as for graders (see above), with two additions: i) the faculty supervisors, if they do not also regularly attend the labs, should make periodic visits to the lab and give the TA feedback on his/her performance, and ii) the TA should be provided with teaching evaluations from the students. The supervisor should discuss these evaluations with the TA. Both of these steps should be viewed as part of the mentoring process, to help develop the TA's teaching ability.

(d) Drill Leader.

Here the TA runs an individual session, often to review materials previously presented by the instructor in the lecture portion of the course. Several departments use TAs in this manner, particularly the Modern Languages program. However, unlike the TA who directs review sessions and discussions as described in the next category, drill leaders are not responsible for formally grading any assignments in the course.

Although such positions are generally held by graduate students, given the restriction on grading it is not uncommon to have qualified, upper-level undergraduates lead drill sessions.

Recommendations: Same as for Lab TAs (see above).

(e) Communication Consultant.

Here the TA is trained specifically to work as a writing or oral communication consultant in conjunction with the Writing Resources Center and the Oral Communication Studios located on campus. The TA will have direct contact with undergraduate students seeking assistance in improving their communication skills.

These positions are generally held by upper-level undergraduate students.

Recommendations: In addition to attending the collegewide orientation session organized by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, communication consultants are required to attend the specific training sessions arranged by the directors of the Writing Resources Center and the Oral Communication Studios. In the case of the former, this includes a one-credit course taken during the spring semester before the student becomes a writing consultant; in the latter, intensive training sessions are conducted prior to the beginning of each academic year.

(f) Discussion Section Leader.

Here the TA runs a regularly-scheduled individual session (these classes are known by such terms as review session, recitation session, problem session, etc.). Such arrangements have been used by several departments (religion, history, economics, etc.). Grading of materials such as quizzes may be a component of the job as well. The instructor of record is not the TA, but is the faculty member delivering the formal lectures associated with the discussion section. The position of discussion leader involves a large instructional component, and a great deal of contact with undergraduate students.

These positions are normally held by graduate students, and we do not believe that it would be appropriate for undergraduates to be given this level of responsibility.

Recommendations: Same as for Lab TAs (see above), with the addition that we recommend that departments/programs offer supplemental training in leading discussions.

(3) The Training and Use of Advanced Graduate Students as Instructors of Record.

The ad hoc committee has established the following as a set of recommendations concerning the use of graduate student teaching interns as instructors for undergraduate courses. These recommendations are modeled on the longstanding, successful teaching intern program utilized by the Department of History at William and Mary. Each department/program which trains graduate students to serve as instructors of record in undergraduate courses at The College of William and Mary should be required to submit a set of written guidelines re: training and supervision of such students to the Committee on Graduate Studies for its approval.

(a) Definition.

A "teaching intern" shall be defined as a graduate student of The College of William and Mary who is the instructor of record for a particular course. Although he/she will receive direct supervision from regular faculty within the department, the teaching intern is normally responsible for designing the syllabus, selecting the readings, delivering the lectures, preparing/ evaluating all written or oral assignments, and determining the final grade.

(b) Qualifications.

Teaching internships should be reserved for graduate students at the ABD (post-comprehensive exam) level. This is not to say that all ABD graduate students should be allowed to teach their own courses; rather, teaching internships should be reserved for those ABD students who have distinguished themselves in their classwork and comprehensive exams, and have shown themselves capable of teaching their own courses.

(c) Eligible Courses.

The individual departments/programs should determine in which courses--introductory and/or advanced--they will allow their teaching interns to serve as instructors.

(d) Department Orientation.

Each department or program which decides to employ graduate ABD students as teaching interns should arrange a department-level orientation--beyond the collegewide orientation conducted by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies--to introduce the interns to applicable department regulations, the department handbook, etc.

(e) Workshops.

It is highly recommended that individual departments/programs should arrange workshops on issues relevant to teaching within their discipline (leading discussion, preparing syllabi, evaluating coursework, etc.). Such workshops be organized for teaching assistants, in order that they may receive exposure to these ideas before beginning their teaching internships. Thus, the workshops will serve a dual purpose: first, as an educational experience for teaching assistants; and, second, as practical preparation for those graduate students who will eventually become teaching interns.

(f) Supervision.

Close supervision being the key to a successful teaching intern program, each department will be expected to arrange a system of supervision consistent with the following guidelines:

- The graduate director should oversee the administration of the teaching intern program, including the department-level orientation, reviewing the proposed course syllabi, etc.
- The individual teaching intern's graduate advisor should also play an integral role in the internship, particularly in reviewing the syllabus and visiting the classroom.
- Each teaching intern should have a classroom visit at least twice during the semester by one of the following three persons: the graduate director, the department/program chair, and/or the graduate advisor. If the teaching intern wishes, he/she may schedule more than two classroom visits, including visits by

- persons other than those listed above. Faculty members should be as accommodating as possible in scheduling these visits.
- Following each classroom visit, the faculty member should write a brief evaluation of the teaching intern's performance to be placed in the intern's graduate file with a copy given to the intern. Such reports are advantageous, not only in terms of their immediate feedback, but also during the preparation of job dossiers. In addition, the intern should schedule a brief visit with the visiting faculty member to discuss the intern's strengths and weaknesses.

(g) Exit Interviews.

Each department should conduct exit interviews of the graduate teaching interns when their courses are complete. At this interview, the graduate director should discuss the student evaluations of the teaching intern, as well as request comments from him/her regarding the entire internship process.

Conclusions

The ad hoc committee firmly believes that teaching assistants and teaching interns, as we have defined them, are an integral part of the College's academic community. While our commitment to the undergraduates at William and Mary cannot, and should not, be diminished in any fashion, the College also cannot afford to overlook its commitment to the training and supervision of graduate and undergraduate students who aspire to become college or university professors. It is, after all, a mutually beneficial relationship for all concerned: undergraduate students--as the 1993 Final Report on the New Curriculum suggested--receive assistance, and in some cases instruction, from young graduate students and upper-level undergraduates who are enthusiastic and fresh, as well as close in age to the students in the course; teaching assistants and teaching interns receive vital advice, training, and supervision, as they prepare for careers in academe; and full-time professors at the College receive important classroom assistance.

Final Recommendations

The ad hoc committee offers the following concluding recommendations regarding the training and use of teaching assistants and teaching interns at William and Mary:

- (1) Departments and programs training graduate students as teaching interns should submit formal plans for their training and supervision for the approval of the Educational Policy Committee and the Committee on Graduate Studies. Normally, such plans should incorporate the recommendations listed under section three above (re: the training and use of advanced graduate students as instructors of record), but alternative approaches will be considered when supported with appropriate rationales.
- (2) Departments and programs training students (graduate and undergraduate) as teaching assistants (as defined above) should report their implementation of the recommendations concerning training and supervision procedures to the Educational Policy Committee and

the Committee on Graduate Studies. Alternative approaches will be considered when supported with appropriate rationales.

(3) Logically, ABD adjuncts (hired from other colleges and universities) having little or no teaching experience should receive the same mentoring and supervision while teaching William and Mary undergraduates as do our own ABD instructors. Although we are not responsible for their career preparation, our responsibility to the William and Mary students is the same whether they are taught by adjunct or our own ABDs. In the event that ABD adjuncts from other institutions lack the necessary teaching experience, departments and programs should make sure that they receive appropriate mentoring and supervision during their first year here.

Submitted February 21, 1997 David Armstrong Waldemer Eger Mark Fowler Franz
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