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# Collaborating with Departmental TA Coordinators: The Next Step?

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The first round in the battle to prepare graduate teaching assistants (TAs) for teaching has been won. At campuses throughout the nation, administrators are finally acknowledging that a large proportion of undergraduate instruction is being delivered by TAs who have little prior preparation for their role of teacher. What's more, funds and support for TA training programs are becoming available in places where these needs were never acknowledged before.

Many institutions have established new programs for TA development. These programs typically consist of a campuswide TA orientation, usually held just before the academic year and lasting from less than a day to two weeks. The components of these programs often include: a general orientation to the TA role and to policies and practices of the university; a tour – often a whirlwind tour – of the world of pedagogy (designing a course syllabus, preparing lectures, leading discussions, testing and grading, using audiovisual aids); a chance to do some microteaching or receive some teaching feedback; and an introduction to university services that may help instructors as they teach. International TAs often receive separate or additional training in language, the culture of the American classroom, and pedagogy.

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The programs are generally well received. Evaluations usually show that the teaching assistants feel more knowledgeable and less anxious about their roles. Faculty and administrators feel that they have addressed the issue. Good materials have been developed. The climate for support of TA preparation on the campus has improved.

Centralized orientation programs serve very important purposes they build *esprit de corps* and raise the level of awareness about pedagogical issues. In addition, they are efficient and draw on the talents of those who have a more extensive background in pedagogical training than is normally available in university departments.

However, it is the thesis here that it is unwise to place exclusive or even extensive attention on TA orientation programs as vehicles for TA development. Faculty developers who have a sense of how one grows as a teacher and educational researchers familiar with the term "weak treatment" would readily concede that such orientation programs are unlikely to have a significant long-term impact on the teaching performance of TAs. They are only a beginning, a small part of what it takes to help TAs develop as teachers. This paper will discuss the disadvantages of sole reliance on a centralized TA orientation program, and propose that establishing collaborative relationships with departmental TA coordinators is a more fruitful approach, particularly on large campuses.

## **The Disadvantages of Sole Reliance on a TA Orientation Program**

There are three main disadvantages to relying solely on a centralized orientation program as a vehicle for TA development. First, recent literature on teacher development and on the development of professionals emphasizes that most growth occurs "on the job" (Feiman-Nemser, 1983). The growth in popularity of field experiences, induction year programs, and mentoring in teacher education testify to this belief. While theory, frameworks, and orientation can be helpful in advance, the major opportunities for the development of teachers arise when they are engaged in teaching. The puzzles that prompt examination of one's prior beliefs and actions and that call for experimentation and evaluation of teaching practices are embedded in action. Programs that are isolated in time and context from these occasions for growth do not supply the challenge and support needed at the specific time and in the specific context where growth is most likely to occur. TAs need assistance throughout the academic year when and where they are teaching.

Secondly, there are pitfalls involved in investing major resources in a

centralized orientation. As many faculty developers are noting, departments and administrators tend to think that the existence of a successful orientation relieves them of further responsibility and effort. Furthermore, centralized programs may result in failure of the departments to take ownership in the efforts, possible lack of fit between the centralized program and departmental efforts and needs, potential lack of continuity, difficulties in reaching TAs and getting their participation, possible lack of credibility, and difficulties in institutionalizing such efforts (Smock and Menges, 1985; Loehrer, 1987).

Finally, centralized orientations must be "generic." Even though many centralized orientations involve faculty presenters from various disciplines, the orientations do in fact rest by necessity on a generic approach since participants from many unrelated disciplines receive common pedagogical training. For example, TAs in performance areas, such as music, theater or physical education, often complain that sessions on student assessment address only written tests. Students who will assist in an architectural studio find themselves placed in sessions on lab/studio instruction where the major focus is on procedures, equipment, and safety rather than aesthetic critique. It is difficult for a campuswide orientation to provide for such discipline-specific differences.

## The Next Step

Clearly, the second wave in TA development will entail continuing initial orientation activities but moving beyond these to approaches that will complement the centralized orientation program and extend its impact throughout the academic year. The logical step seems to be for faculty developers to develop partnerships with the people who are responsible for and proximate to TAs as they teach—the departmental TA coordinators.

Working with TA coordinators in departments is an approach that holds promise in several respects: it addresses the need to locate developmental support and challenge within the context of actual teaching activity where most growth can occur; it places ownership for TA development jointly in departments and in a centralized faculty development office; it combines the general pedagogical expertise of a faculty developer with the discipline-specific knowledge of a departmental supervisor; and it increases the number of people working on TA development.

Departmental TA coordinators can bring to this collaboration such strengths as discipline-based knowledge, experience with the particulars of the courses that the TAs are teaching, a supervisory role, and proximity

and continual access to TAs. The main strengths that the faculty developer can contribute to the relationship are a) understanding of teaching skills and knowledge and b) experience and expertise in developing these skills and knowledge bases in practicing or prospective teachers in higher education. The faculty developer can not only help provide substantive knowledge of teaching, but can advise the coordinator on effective ways of helping TAs to develop this knowledge.

There are several practical contributions that faculty developers can make in collaborations with TA coordinators:

*Create awareness and collegial support for the departmental TA coordinator role as faculty developer.* Immersed in their responsibilities for assigning TAs to classes, handling complaints, and coordinating courses, TA coordinators often fail to attend to the potential role they can play as mentors and developers of future college teachers. Through sharing literature and ideas on faculty development and inviting groups of departmental TA coordinators to gather and trade insights on effective practices, faculty developers can work toward creating a collegiality and enthusiasm for this role that may revitalize themselves as well as the department coordinator.

*Share pedagogical knowledge.* Like the TAs they oversee, most TA coordinators began teaching without prior preparation and without support as they learned to teach. They often quite openly claim that they do not know how to advise TAs about teaching and that the process of teacher development is quite mysterious to them. Many do not have resource materials on teaching and are unfamiliar with sources and techniques in the field of college teaching. They do, however, possess invaluable experiential knowledge and knowledge of their disciplines that can complement the skills and knowledge of developers in collaborative arrangements. The faculty developer can work to increase the pedagogical knowledge base of department coordinators and collaboratively, the team can make applications to teaching in particular disciplines.

*Help with program design and implementation.* Faculty developers can draw on their experience to assist TA coordinators to design a program that is appropriate for their TAs by contributing needs assessment techniques, program models, and program evaluation methods. In addition, faculty developers are often in a good position to serve as resource people for specific seminars or workshops that may be a part of the program design, or to recommend resource people.

*Supply print and audiovisual resources.* Most faculty developers have an extensive knowledge of literature on college teaching and a collection of readings and handouts that are ideal for specific needs. They also know about videotapes, films, and other audiovisual resources that can help in

teacher development. Sharing this knowledge and material with TA coordinators is an ideal way in which faculty developers can assist.

*Help provide teaching feedback.* An essential part of most faculty developers' work is the provision of opportunities for feedback on teaching, opportunities that are central to teacher growth. Developers can familiarize TA coordinators with the range of feedback options available, from written student evaluations to class interviews to classroom observation and videotaping. They might supply coordinators with a variety of print instruments that can be used in classroom observation or teaching evaluation. They might also, depending on their resources, offer to provide videotaping services or facilitators for class interviews.

## The Problems

In order to work toward establishing collaborative networks between faculty developers and departmental TA coordinators, several problems must be anticipated. The first is frequent lack of departmental coordination. In some departments, responsibilities for TA supervision have never been assigned or have been loosely delegated among several people, who may or may not be aware that they have TA supervisory responsibilities. There are often tiers of coordinators: a department TA coordinator, course coordinators, and faculty who teach particular sections of large courses. When this situation exists, it is extremely difficult for a faculty developer to locate the appropriate people for establishing a collaborative arrangement. At some campuses, this problem is addressed by an administrative requirement that each department annually identify the name of its chief TA coordinator.

Even when a coordinator is clearly specified, a second problem—low status of the coordinator—often arises. Increasingly, responsibilities for undergraduate instruction and TA coordination are being assigned to the “new faculty member on the block,” the veteran faculty member known as a teaching workhorse, or others of low status. The “paraprofessionalization” of these courses and responsibilities also seems to be becoming a phenomenon—non-tenure track faculty, senior TAs, or administrative assistants with or without disciplinary expertise are in charge in an increasing number of settings. While these people may be very competent and may be able to devote more time and energy to the tasks than experienced faculty, their status makes it difficult for them to command resources and influence departmental and university policies. The faculty developer who wishes to collaborate with the TA coordinator

finds that little leverage for change in the department is available when the status of the coordinator is low.

Time is an additional problem. For TA coordinators who are full-time faculty, and often for TA coordinators without faculty status, time is rarely available to address responsibilities for TA coordination adequately. The pressing management responsibilities of large course instruction often prevent them from devoting time to TA development or taking a mentoring interest in the growth of TAs as teachers. In places where there are large numbers of TAs, departmental TA coordinators sometimes receive a reduction in course load (typically release from one course), but are often responsible for the coordination of as many as 30 or 50 TAs in exchange for this release. The pressures to pursue research and publication and to serve on university committees or perform other service obligations are intense, leaving little time available to give TA coordination the attention it deserves. Consequently, coordinators are often more than willing to delegate TA training to centralized faculty developers. Faculty developers, faced with their own time constraints, may find it easier to repeat a standard workshop or distribute general materials than to establish collaboration with a beleaguered TA coordinator.

An organizational problem on most campuses is lack of accountability for TA development. Although external pressures appear to be growing, departments have not before now had strong expectations held before them for preparing teaching assistants well. Rather than developing and supporting strong mechanisms for continuing TA development, most departments have focused on a narrow interpretation of coordination tasks, such as making sure TAs report to class, hand in grades on time, and the like. Rarely have university administrators asked for more than business as usual and the occasional extinguishing of brush fires involving TAs. Some universities are beginning to require that departments submit TA development plans or a record of activities, but faculty developers seeking the energy and commitment that they themselves bring to the work of faculty development will often be frustrated by the low commitment of most departments, due in part to an absence of pressure for accountability.

Distrust of faculty development is often the deeper problem involved. As Hans Mauksch points out in several of his works (1980, 1987), many faculty development efforts are thwarted by deep-seated beliefs about teaching that argue against the potential effectiveness of development activities. Among these are the feelings that teachers are born, not made; that teaching techniques are mere "gimmickry" compared with content knowledge; that attention to one's teaching will not be rewarded and may even be suspect; that teaching is private and should not be discussed or

interfered with; and that effective teaching cannot be defined and evaluated. The faculty developer seeking to work collaboratively with departmental TA coordinators often has to confront these beliefs and convince the coordinators that their efforts can influence the teaching growth of the TAs under their coordination.

## **Making It Work**

Although the potential problems are formidable and perhaps overwhelming at first, the advantages of working with TA coordinators and the attendant promise of more extensive and long-term impact outweigh these problems. Collaboration of this type is not entirely novel. Many departments at universities throughout the country already offer strong programs that involve weekly seminars, extensive clinical experiences, and frequent opportunities for feedback and consultation. Often, these programs are independent of the faculty development office, but sometimes they are linked. The University of Washington's program, as described by Nyquist and Wulff (1987), is based on a decentralized model that emphasizes collaboration between departmental coordinators and the faculty development office, and several other large universities combine the offering of a centralized orientation with continued service to specific departments through the academic year. The next step, then, is to extend and strengthen faculty developer-TA coordinator collaboration on campuses where it exists and to introduce it as a second phase on campuses where a centralized orientation is the only extensive effort underway presently.

A key priority in establishing collaborative networks is gaining administrative support for the effort. At several institutions, central administrators are asking departments to report annually on their efforts to prepare TAs for their teaching roles. This requirement could be more powerful if a faculty or TA committee were appointed to review the accuracy of the claims, judge the adequacy of the effort, and make recommendations for changes in the programs. Departments with exemplary programs could receive awards or additional resources and be urged to share their approach at meetings convened for department TA coordinators. This administrative pressure would have to be sustained with parallel efforts at the department level. Department chairs and head TA coordinators would have to create a climate of support and mechanisms for accountability where TA development is involved. Reporting successful efforts at other campuses to key administrators (the "keeping up with the Joneses" tactic) and enlisting the support of the graduate student as-



sociation are two strategies that faculty developers can employ to get administrative support.

Extending the inroads begun by centralized orientation programs to provide ongoing developmental support as TAs progress through their initial teaching experiences is indeed an ambitious effort. Those who are exhausted from their recently won campaigns to get support for an orientation program may even find the suggestion frustrating. There is an advantage, however, in maintaining existing momentum and pressing on to achieve a crucial goal the goal of providing all TAs with adequate support at the beginning of their work as teachers in higher education.

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