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## Seeking Social Support among Female Graduate Teaching Assistants

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The use of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in higher education is becoming more common. Roach (1999) observed that from 1976 to 1995 the use of GTAs in higher education institutions increased by 35%. During this same time, GTAs comprised 25% of the total instructional/research personnel (p. 166). Similar trends have also been reflected in GTA training which has progressed from virtually few graduate teacher preparation programs (Mauksch, 1987; Wilkening, 1991) to comprehensive multi-sponsored future faculty preparation programs (called PFF programs) to enhance doctoral students' wholistic development (See <http://www.-natcom.org> for information on the Preparing Future Faculty [PFF] program). Yet, despite the growth in these GTA preparation programs, researchers have learned that the quality of these programs varies greatly among disciplines (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1991). Not only do GTAs encounter very different situations than non-teaching graduate students, their unique professional role as both graduate student and teacher (Anderson 1992), presents a unique challenge for GTAs as they learn to balance the demands of their academic, teaching, and personal lives.

Because teaching is but one of the many roles that GTAs assume, the academic and social parts of GTAs lives also serve as important components to success, fulfillment, and emotional well-being. However, questions arise about the information and support (from faculty, staff, and peer relationships) that GTAs, generally, and female GTAs, specifically, seek and receive to balance these many demands. Mentoring literature suggests that males are more frequently in mentoring relationship than females and that male and female mentors prefer same sex protégés (Kalbfleisch, 2000). Additionally, Kalbfleisch (1997) found that in conflict situations, the protégé will have more to lose if the relationship dissolves than will the mentor, particularly if the mentor and protégée are closely tied to the protégé's career success. Kalbfleisch (1997) also found that female protégés will make more attempts to repair their mentor relationships than male protégés. For female protégés generally (Kalbfleisch, 2002), and graduate teaching assistants, specifically then, it follows that they will have more difficulty than male GTAs in seeking and receiving support. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how female graduate teaching assistants develop social support and the influence that these relationships have on their academic, teaching, and social lives.

Such an investigation warrants attention for a variety of reasons. First, researchers have investigated the roles of GTAs as teachers (e.g., Buerkel-Rothruss & Gray, 1991; Carpenter, 1970; Gray & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1991; Hendrix, 2000; Mauksch, 1987; Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991; Nyquist & Wulff, 1992; Roach, 1999; Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979), organizational

newcomers (Myers, 1998) and as potential future faculty members (Eadie, 1996; <http://www.natcom.org>), offering insight into the various challenges that GTAs face. Additionally, several researchers have examined the role that social support plays in the graduate student experience (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Lawson & Fuehrer, 1989; Munir & Jackson, 1997; Nelson, Dell-Oliver, Koch & Buckler, 2001). Most studies examining social support in relation to the graduate student experience have focused on quantitatively measuring the relationship between perceived or actual social support and various factors including stress, psychological health, coping, academic success, departmental integration, potential attrition, and program satisfaction. While researchers have focused on a variety of graduate student populations, such as women graduate students (Munir & Jackson, 1997), African-American graduate students (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990), graduate students in clinical psychology (Nelson et al., 2001), M.B.A. programs (Baldwin et al., 1997), and first-year graduate students (Lawson & Fuehrer, 1989), few researchers have focused exclusively on the unique social support experiences and social networks of GTAs, generally, and female GTAs, specifically.

Second, the nature of social networks has important social significance for the female graduate student experience. By identifying the characteristics of these social networks, as well as what types of interaction take place within them, researchers could identify key elements that are important features of supportive relationships for female graduate students. These elements could be incorporated into graduate assistant training programs, as well as both formal and informal mentoring pro-

grams. Graduate program directors could adapt the elements identified as most critical to ensure a smooth transition into the teaching role. Identifying and understanding the nature of female graduate students' social networks have numerous implications for both graduate program directors and female graduate students themselves.

### **PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Peer relationships are one source of informal support that GTAs can utilize in coping with the dual demands of graduate study and teaching. Darling (1987) found that the most important interactions at the beginning of the semester for new GTAs were those involving fellow first-year GTAs. These interactions allowed GTAs to gain ideas about what to do in class and also how to handle particular challenges. Later in the semester, GTAs began to use interactions with experienced GTAs as resources for information and assistance. These informal everyday interactions with other GTAs "had more impact on their ongoing concerns, weekly curriculum, and handling of individual students than either the department orientation program or the formal weekly TA meeting" (Darling, 1987, p. 92). GTAs often utilize interaction with their peers to develop skills related to teaching. The relationships formed among GTAs and others provide a valuable way of looking at how GTAs cope with the stresses associated with their multiple responsibilities, as well as how they gain information about teaching.

Researchers have studied the importance of social networks, such as those peer relationships described above. Key assumptions of social networks are relationally driven through interdependence, transfer of resources, and patterns of interaction among people (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Scott (2000) found that social networks include the social relationships that individuals form with one another. Social network analysis doesn't focus solely on describing social relationships, but also focuses on the patterns and implications of these social relationships. While social networks can encompass several types of relationships, social support focuses primarily on those relationships that are viewed as emotionally or instrumentally supportive.

Social support has been described as the exchange that occurs within supportive relationships, including both tangible and intangible aid (Albrecht and Adelman, 1984). House (1981) identified four specific categories of social support: the expression of emotional support (i.e., esteem, affect, trust); the communication of appraisal support (i.e., affirmation, feedback); giving information (i.e., advice, suggestions); and providing instrumental support (i.e., money, labor, time). Hence, social support networks can be characterized by both "emotional caring" and "behaviors that enable the recipient to perceive an increased sense of mastery or personal control over his or her environment" (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 4).

Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, and Kinlaw (2000) discovered that in gender-balanced versus male-dominated graduate programs, it is the presence of female faculty in a department and not the gender of the student's mentor that was most important to students (p. 305-

306). Male faculty were viewed as equally supportive of their female students compared to female mentors. Female students with male mentors did not differ from other women in their career commitment, self-concept, and stress. When female faculty were noticeably few or absent in a program, however, female students experienced lower self-concept, less sensitivity to family issues, and lower career commitment (p. 306). When student-faculty relationships are established, questions of ethical conduct sometimes arise. Bowman and Hatley (1995) revealed that there is a lack of consensus regarding the dual-role controversy between faculty and student relationships in higher education. Their study investigated the complexities that engaging in more than one type of relationship (i.e., friendship in addition to professional role) that faculty-student relationships can encounter in higher education. For instance, universities have frequently adopted policies prohibiting sexual relationships between faculty members and the students enrolled in their classes or under their supervision. Yet, the nature of the graduate student experience creates an environment in which the friendships that faculty and students have as mentor-mentee blurs the line between/among the multiple roles. No clear distinctions and prescriptions can be drawn from existing literature that systematically guides the ethical balance in mentoring relationships and the qualities of excellent and supportive mentors.

The informal social relationships that GTAs develop and rely on to balance the demands and stress of graduate school and teaching cannot be undervalued. At an intuitive level, department chairs/heads, graduate directors, and basic course directors are aware of the influ-

ences peer and other social support and social networks have for providing information as well as misinformation within departments. Such topics can range from graduate school and departmental policies to teaching assignments and deadlines. The importance of informal social support and social networks are acknowledged, usually, when problems or conflicts arise. Yet, the tension that exists between GTA informal social support and formal departmental policies and structures is an important consideration for programmatic planning. If the formal program of GTA training is not effectively doing what it purports to do for GTA social support and teaching information, the question becomes how do departments and programs better utilize the informal social support and social networks to meet the needs of both GTAs and the programs and departments in which they are a part. Additionally, most of the research conducted regarding social support used by GTAs has been quantitative in nature, and has looked primarily at the relationships between social support and various factors, such as stress, academic success and satisfaction. Little is still known regarding female GTAs' use of informal social networks to fulfill their academic, teaching, and social needs. Given the particular conundrum in which female graduate teaching assistants find themselves and recognizing that seeking and obtaining social support is a vital need during the graduate program experience, two research questions are posed:

RQ1: How do female graduate teaching assistants develop social relationships?

RQ2: What influence do these relationships have on female graduate teaching assis-



tants' academic, teaching, and social lives?

## METHOD

### *Participant Characteristics*

The participants in this study were female GTAs in a master's degree graduate program, who taught one or more sections of introductory courses, in the Communication Studies department at a large southern university. Participants described the department as consisting primarily of female commuting students, who had full-time jobs, and attended graduate school part-time at night. The study used a convenient sample of participants by contacting the graduate coordinator of the Communication Studies department to obtain a list of GTAs. This department was selected because it is similar to the researchers' home department by being a master's degree program that utilizes GTAs in teaching introductory level courses. These similarities lend insight for analysis without the ethical concerns that would occur from studying individuals in one's own department.

A pilot interview was conducted to help refine the research design. A former female GTA in the department in which the research study was conducted was interviewed. The purpose of this interview was to determine the appropriateness of the interview questions and to refine them, if necessary. The results of this interview were useful in refining the interview questions, but were not included in the data. After the pilot study was completed, the interview questions were divided into specific categories of student, faculty, and staff relationships rather than general questions regarding all

three types of relationships. Additional questions were added to the interview protocol regarding shared physical space and formal versus informal interactions. Questions that directly asked how relationships were initiated and maintained were eliminated.

The research procedures included a demographic survey for general information about the female participants, and an interview guide which sought to gain information about the social relationships formed among GTAs, faculty, and administrative staff. The interview guide probed the perceptions of the female GTAs about the role these relationships played in their academic, teaching, and social lives. The tape-recorded interviews lasted from one to two hours and produced 57 single-spaced pages of transcripts.

All seven current female GTAs from the department were contacted and interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 28, and had been GTAs from one to four semesters. Four participants planned on pursuing a doctoral degree. Throughout this study, pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Four female GTAs taught the introductory public speaking course underneath a faculty supervisor. The basic course consisted of one large lecture class, which was taught by the faculty member, and two smaller lab classes each week. Each teaching assistant was responsible for teaching one lab section. GTAs assumed a variety of responsibilities for the lab class which included designing lesson plans, writing and grading quizzes, grading exams, evaluating written and oral assignments, designing class activities and updating the course website. Three female GTAs were not specifically assigned to teach a basic course section, but served as

substitute instructors and support staff for the course. Female teaching assistants also held office hours together. Five participants reported having no regular staff meetings, while one participant reported having one staff meeting a semester and another reported having one staff meeting each month.

A qualitative constant comparative method was used to analyze the personal interviews (See Lindlof, 1995; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The process of using the constant comparative method has been systematically described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Responses to each question were compared and analyzed to identify emerging trends. Each participant's interview was also analyzed to identify consistencies and inconsistencies in the data. This analysis enables the identification of themes and parallels in the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

## **RESULTS**

The findings of this study offer a detailed description of the relationships that female GTAs develop during their graduate school experience. In regards to Research Question one, the findings of this study show that female GTAs form social relationships with a variety of people within their department, although the quality and characteristics of these relationships vary greatly. In general, participants reported developing closer, more personal relationships with other graduate students, and more specifically other female GTAs. Participants also formed meaningful relationships with faculty, but these relationships were described as more

formal. Overall, the participants described their relationships with administrative staff in the department as very casual, superficial relationships. These relationships played a significant role in the participants' academic lives. The difference in the quality of these relationships was also evident when the participants spoke about the influence these relationships had on their academic lives.

Regarding Research Question two, participants described these relationships as influencing many aspects of their academic lives, including their own graduate studies, their undergraduate teaching, and their future academic plans. In general, their relationships with other graduate students, again specifically female GTAs, influenced many areas of their academic lives, including their graduate coursework, thesis work, undergraduate teaching, post-graduate plans, and even aspects of their personal lives. Participants' relationships with faculty also influenced their graduate coursework and post-graduate plans, but most participants described their relationships with faculty as having little influence on their teaching. Participants described their relationships with staff as the least influential, with only minimal influence on their academic lives, usually in the form of administrative assistance. The results of this study will be discussed in three areas: relationships with graduate students, relationships with faculty, and relationships with administrative staff.

### ***Relationships among Graduate Students***

*Closest and most personal.* Participants described their relationships with other graduate students as the

closest and most personal of any of the relationships. They described these relationships in more detail with unique characteristics, as if they were talking about close friendships. Five of the seven participants stated they developed closer relationships almost exclusively with other female GTAs. The two remaining participants also stated that they developed close, personal relationships with female GTAs, but they also described developing close relationships with graduate students who were not teaching assistants. Beth said, "I guess I should say the most developed relationships that I have with students are with the other TAs...some of my best friends now are the other TAs in the department." Liz, who was not originally a graduate teaching assistant, said, "I became close friends with those who were TAs, even before I became a TA myself, and I was lucky, and I always, as long as I was a TA, I always had at least three other friends, my close, good friends, that also worked as a TA." These relationships with other teaching assistants were viewed by participants as closer than those with other graduate students.

*Shared identity.* The shared identity of being a graduate teaching assistant seemed to be an important starting point for the development of closer relationships. Four of the participants felt that they shared more commonalities with other female GTAs, which was one reason that they viewed these relationships as closer. They felt that their shared experiences as GTAs helped foster relationship and provided them with common ground even before they met each other. Jen described it as, "I feel like there's kind of an automatic camaraderie between us. And I am more aware of the amount of work and the type of work that they juggle."

The GTA shared identity provided a starting point for these relationships, while shared experiences in teaching helped to build them.

An important factor that helped to encourage the development of the GTA relationships was shared office space. Participants described their shared office as a large room with separate desks for each teaching assistant. The participants also shared office hours. These two factors provided both a time and place that encouraged communication between the teaching assistants. Five of the participants believed that a shared office space contributed to the communication and relationship development between themselves and other teaching assistants. Jen described the situation as, "We had to share an office, and it was a smaller office...and so we were forced, well not forced, but it was kind of natural to talk to one another, to be courteous and be friendly, and say hi when someone enters the office, so I think that definitely played a role in how we communicated." This shared environment encouraged conversation which in turn fostered the development of relationships.

Two characteristics differentiated the relationships that female GTAs developed with other graduate students from those with faculty or staff. The first characteristic is involvement in activities outside the academic area. Six of the participants described interaction outside of school as a key characteristic of their close relationships with other graduate students and GTAs. For example, Jen said, "We would also do things together outside of school, many times after class we would have dinner together, or we would have a break and hang out at a restaurant and just talk. I see that as very different as I don't do those things with other graduate students."

Rarely, if ever, did female GTAs participate in outside activities with faculty and never with administrative staff.

The second characteristic that distinguished graduate student relationships was that participants described these relationships as enduring relationships. Two participants said they expected these relationships to continue after graduate school; another participant said she still maintained a relationship with someone who had graduated; and two participants confirmed that they had maintained these relationships. Laura felt that the relationships she established with other graduate students would last beyond graduation. She said,

I feel that at least half of the people I consider to be my close friends now will be close friends in five years. I feel like the information that we share with each other, the ups and downs, the roller coasters of life, things beyond school and work, personal relationships that are developed, activities that we do together, form a really lasting bond.

Participants expected these relationships to last after graduation, and in many cases they did. Rachel, who was still in graduate school, but was friends with someone who had graduated, said, "One of them, actually, I'm still very good friends with her and, she recently moved away, but we still talk, we still keep in touch. I mean, I just saw her recently." While participants discussed this as an important element that distinguished their closer relationships with graduate students from those that were merely superficial relationships, they did not discuss anticipating future interaction in their relationships with faculty or staff.

*Substantial and consistent support.* Relationships with other graduate students provided the broadest range of support for participants. Other graduate students were mentioned as being important sources of support in all three categories of support that emerged: academic lives, teaching, and personal lives. They were the only type of relationship that provided substantial and consistent support in all three categories. All of the participants described receiving some type of academic support from other graduate students on the topics of understanding an assignment, support during thesis work, completing doctoral applications, and serving as motivation to complete the program. Other graduate students were viewed as an important asset to participants in terms of their own academic careers.

These relationships not only served as motivation for specific projects, but also for the graduate school process as a whole. Sympathy was another element found in these relationships. Steph said, “You have people to sympathize with you, and support you, when you’re having difficulty or if you don’t understand something, you always have people that you feel that you can go to ask questions.” Although the specific topic of support varied, all participants reported receiving some type of academic support from other graduate students. The most common area in which they received support was in their academic coursework.

Five of the participants stressed that they relied primarily on other female GTAs for support regarding their teaching; one relied on another graduate student who had teaching experience but not as a primary source; and one stated that other teaching assistants had a minor influence on her teaching. When other



teaching assistants were mentioned, they were viewed as the primary source of support for teaching. The two participants that didn't mention GTAs as their primary source of support also didn't discuss faculty or staff having a large impact on their teaching. One of these, Laura, said, "I really didn't have much support, but I just sort of went for it and I think I did okay."

All seven of the participants described having personal conversations with other graduate students that centered on family or significant others, personal problems, and seeking advice. They also vented their teaching frustrations, which they described as an important part of these relationships. The female GTAs' relationships had such an influence on their teaching that three participants described the relationships they formed with other teaching assistants as an informal mentor system that was essential to their success as teaching assistants. As a new teaching assistant, these relationships were an important source of information for activities and discussions that are a key part of classroom interaction. Even after gaining some experience as a teaching assistant, participants utilized these relationships as an ongoing source of information about classroom activities. Steph said, "...with the TAs, we spend time together before we teach our classes, and we probably e-mail and talk to each other every day, going over different assignments that we're going to do, and scheduling, and things that we need to remember to do for each other...So we're in pretty close contact all the time." These relationships were not only important for beginning teaching assistants learning the ropes, but also served as a continual source of support for more experienced teaching assistants.

Teaching skills were another area in which participants relied on other teaching assistants for guidance. Participants specifically discussed grading as a skill, grading confidence, and handling problematic situations with students with other GTAs. Beth said, “I got a lot of advice from the former TAs, the ongoing TAs, about how to—where do I start, what’s an A, what’s a B? How good does somebody have to be to get an A?” Liz also discussed getting advice from other teaching assistants about first-time experiences encountered in the grading process. She said, “And also, a lot of situations, you know, you had experienced for the first time. This student didn’t show up or this student did a presentation and did this and this wrong. How harsh would you grade them?” Amanda said, “It’s important for them to help me understand the assignment that we’ve got to grade, how to grade, how to assign grades, how to be confident in the grades that you give the students and not feel attacked when they have questions about the, things like that, I learned all those skills from people who’d done it before.”

Even before starting their jobs, participants relied on GTAs to help them work through the administrative and human resource tasks involved with their position. Beth said, “Before my first semester started, during orientation, I was able to ask them questions about kind of like the benefit part, how do I sign up for health insurance, when do we get our paychecks. I could ask them administrative questions like that and they’d know the answers.”

With relationships with other teaching assistants serving as a primary source for both instrumental and emotional support for participants, it is not surprising

that three participants described these relationships as an informal mentor system. Amanda described this mentor system:

They were very much a source of information for me and usually there would be a group of TAs that were a year ahead of me. And then of course when I was graduating there was one a year behind me. So we would kind of I guess mentor one another to some extent, both as how to be TAs and how to make it through graduate school...When I was the senior TA, I guess you could say, and this is not a formal title at all—I say that, but there is some formality to that, it's just kind of understood that you'll help the other people get on their feet. And because you have office hours at the same time, when questions arise, like, "How do I deal with this situation?" you're the person there that's been through this before. I guess I hesitated there because, no, there's not like a formal mentoring relationship, there's no formal title to any of this stuff.

These informal mentor relationships were an important element in participants' success in graduate school, in terms of both being a student and a teacher. Although this mentor system was not formally established, these relationships played a key role in helping participants acclimate to their new position as teaching assistants.

Overall, five participants viewed their relationships with other female GTAs as their primary source for information and support related to their teaching. These relationships played a vital role in their success as teaching assistants. Beth summarized her relationships and their influence on her teaching when she said, "I

think they helped make my teaching better, helped make my interactions with the students better, that I was teaching or instructing. And therefore, they helped make me a more successful TA.”

As noted earlier, participants viewed their relationships with other graduate students as essential for their success in graduate school. However, five participants noted some drawbacks to these relationships. Drawbacks included the concern that high disclosures in the competitive environment of graduate school could be used against them. Participants discussed sharing very personal information, including problems, with other students. Although they viewed these discussions in the framework of a supportive relationship, the risk of high level self-disclosures was acknowledged. The inability to focus on task while working together, and being viewed as part of the teaching assistant group, rather than as individuals, were two other drawbacks mentioned by the participants.

### ***Relationships with Faculty***

*Personable, not personal.* All participants reported forming good relationships with faculty members, although not as close as the relationships they formed with other graduate students. Although they did describe these relationships in detail, they described them as more collegial, rather than as friendships. One participant, Amanda, said she was disappointed with her faculty relationships overall, but she did describe forming a close relationship with two faculty members, the graduate director and her thesis chair. Another student, Steph, said she felt the faculty didn't make enough ef-

fort in forming relationships with students, but said overall she had good relationships with faculty. The other participants reported forming close relationships with only a few faculty members, usually those they worked with more intensely. Of those faculty, six participants mentioned their thesis chair, five participants mentioned the graduate director, two participants mentioned a faculty member they worked with for a class, one participant mentioned a thesis committee member, and one participant mentioned a journal editor that she worked for as supportive faculty relationships.

Faculty were seen as an important source of support in terms of participants' graduate work and career development; all of the participants reported receiving support from faculty related to their own academic careers. Four participants discussed receiving support about their teaching from faculty members. Of those four, three said that they only occasionally sought faculty advice about their teaching, and when they did it concerned a broader issue, rather than specific suggestions. Two participants said that they received very little information about their teaching from faculty, and one participant said that she received no support from faculty regarding her teaching.

Participants varied in terms of receiving support related to their personal lives. Four participants described receiving personal support from faculty, and three of these participants discussed receiving this support primarily from the graduate director. Three participants stated that they shared personal information on a surface level only with faculty.

Overall, six participants felt that they formed good relationships with the faculty in their department. All of

these participants felt they were able to get to know and form positive relationships with faculty members. Steph said, "I have a really good relationship with all the faculty I've come in contact with."

*GTA Identity.* Compared to their relationships with graduate students, participants' relationships with faculty began in a similar way, with the graduate teaching assistant position playing a key role in the ability to form relationships with faculty. Three participants discussed how their role as a GTA enhanced their visibility to faculty and their ability to develop relationships with them. While these participants felt their GTA position helped them develop relationships with faculty, the GTA role was mentioned by more participants as an important factor in developing relationships with graduate students.

Unlike their relationships with graduate students, participants' relationships with faculty rarely involved interaction outside the university. The shared identity of being a GTA helped foster relationships between participants and graduate students, and three participants felt their GTA position also helped them develop relationships with faculty by enhancing their visibility to faculty members, and also increased opportunities.

*Academic career and scholarly support.* Participants viewed faculty as an important source of support for their academic careers, but much less important when it came to teaching or personal issues. All seven participants described receiving support from faculty regarding their academic careers. The specific areas in which they received support varied. Participants also stressed how invaluable their faculty relationships were in terms of their academic careers. All seven participants re-

ported receiving support for their graduate coursework and thesis work; four participants reported receiving support during the doctoral application process; four participants reported faculty influencing their understanding of communication and communication scholarship; four participants reported receiving advice from faculty about their future; three participants reported that their relationships with faculty provided them with leeway in meeting deadlines; and two participants said that faculty provided them with research opportunities.

While all participants discussed personal disclosure as an important element in the relationships with other graduate students, they were divided on the amount of personal support they received from faculty. Four participants reported engaging in in-depth personal conversations with faculty, while three participants said that they engaged in only surface level personal conversations with faculty.

Faculty influenced participants' understanding of theory and methods, and helped shape their communication philosophy. Amanda said of her thesis chair, "He probably has influenced my own understanding of communication academics more than anyone, just because I've spent the most time with him. And as a result, it's reflected in my philosophies and my teaching." Research and achievement by faculty members helped participants see what was involved in being a communication scholar, and provided them with a role model. Participants also relied primarily on faculty for advice about their future, including contacts and potential jobs or career paths. Participants developed a sense of understanding and trust with faculty members, which created a sense of having leeway in meeting deadlines. This

area of support was unique to their relationships with faculty members. The two drawbacks of forming close relationships with faculty were the feeling of obligation to those faculty members and jealousy from other graduate students.

Overall, participants had good relationships with faculty, although they only formed close relationships with a few faculty members. These faculty members were usually those with whom they worked with more in-depth. The graduate director was one of the primary faculty members that participants formed a close relationship with. Participants considered faculty an important source of support in terms of their academic careers, but less important in terms of teaching issues. Faculty were viewed by some participants as providing support on a personal level, while others described little or no personal conversations with faculty. One participant was disappointed in the overall quality of her faculty relationships, and some participants also discussed several drawbacks to these relationships.

### ***Relationships with Staff***

*Getting things done.* Overall, participants did not describe forming close relationships with administrative staff members. Participants' discussions of these relationships were very brief, and only one participant described in any detail her relationships with staff. Six participants reported having good relationships with staff, but not personal relationships. There was only one participant who reported developing a closer relationship with staff members. All of the participants described their interaction with the staff as revolving pri-



marily around administrative issues related to their own coursework or their teaching position, and six participants engaged only in surface level personal conversations. Five participants felt that their relationships with staff made their life easier in terms of handling administrative tasks, but didn't feel that these relationships really enriched their lives.

## DISCUSSION

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, the results clearly indicate that female GTAs form close, personal friendships with other students, particularly other female GTAs. These relationships extend beyond the academic realm in both breadth and length and are the primary source of support for participants throughout their graduate school experience. Although these relationships begin with the shared job of graduate teaching assistant, throughout the development of the relationship the task of teaching becomes secondary to the friendship itself. Participants expect these friendships to endure even after the GTA position ends and they have completed their respective master's degrees. This finding is somewhat surprising in that the female GTAs were in a master's only graduate program. The expectation that these relationships would endure beyond the master's program is surprising for two reasons. One, the expectations and goals of master's only GTAs may differ from those of doctoral GTAs. The disparate goals of students in master's only graduate programs are frequently more obvious than in doctoral granting graduate programs. Graduate students in

master's programs may have continuing advanced education in their future plans, but many students view the master's degree as their terminal degree for enhancing their respective credentials and/or professional development and enrichment. The finding that these female GTAs expected to have enduring relationships among their current GTA friends is unexpected because their career paths after completing their master's degrees were not the same. The presumption is not that enduring relationships require the same or similar career commitment and paths. Instead, the finding suggests that a richness in the relationships has transcended the graduate program's experience and that there is enough interest and commonality in what the female GTAs have discovered about each other to expect the relationships to endure beyond the limited nature of the graduate school experience. This finding differs from the relationships that GTAs had with faculty and administrative staff. Four female GTAs received faculty support during their doctoral application process and four female GTAs received advice about their future plans yet the female GTAs did not report anticipating continuing relationships with faculty.

As reported, participants formed close relationships with faculty members, yet these relationships are markedly different from student relationships. Their relationships with faculty members are more formal and less personal. The female GTAs form close relationships with only a few faculty, and the male graduate program advisor was the primary faculty member to reach out to students and establish relationships with them in this particular study. Although faculty relationships differ from student relationships, both male and female fac-

ulty offer important support in certain areas that graduate students cannot provide. The value of having both male and female faculty present in a department reflects the findings of Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, & Kinlaw (2000) that the presence of female faculty in an academic department is more important to most students than the gender of their respective mentor.

Participants' relationships with students and faculty supplement each other in terms of the support they provide. Both students and faculty provide support in areas that are unique to them. For example, participants rely on faculty for support in the areas of jobs and career directions, areas in which they obviously have more knowledge and resources. However, participants rely on students to fill in areas in which faculty are lacking, such as explaining a concept in a different way to enhance understanding.

A second conclusion is that participants form closer relationships with those they consider most like them, or identify with most clearly. The shared identity of being a graduate teaching assistant provides a strong foundation for developing relationships. It is not surprising that participants develop the closest relationships with those who are most similar to them. The specific label of graduate teaching assistant draws participants to those who share that label. The label of graduate student, while also a shared identity, seems to be of lesser importance to participants. While participants share a present identity with students, they share a future identity with faculty, as many of the participants plan on teaching. Participants have only casual relationships with staff members, those with whom they feel they have the least in common. The perception of a

shared identity or the anticipation of a shared identity seems to influence the development of personal relationships.

A final conclusion is that the teaching assistant role is important to participants in identifying themselves as connected to the department and as more serious students. Participants believe that this role allows them a stronger connection to those in the department, including faculty and staff, and also encourages relationship development between them and others in the department. They emphasize the importance of this role in student, faculty and staff relationships. Identification as a teaching assistant is an important element in both establishing and developing relationships within the department.

Two implications of this study are 1) that relationships between female GTAs and other students are crucial to their success in both graduate school and teaching, and 2) that female GTAs are primarily obtaining information and skills related to teaching from their peers, who may have limited teaching experience themselves. Basic course directors, graduate directors, and administrators should not undervalue fostering the GTA relationships. They will happen. Likewise, it is important for faculty members to be open to developing relationships with GTAs, as these relationships are also invaluable to graduate students' success in graduate school. Although relationship development and maintenance may take time, an asset that is extremely rare for over-worked faculty and students, the time invested in these relationships is well worth the effort.

The results suggest that GTAs utilize their relationships with experienced and novice teaching assistants

for information related to teaching. Knowing this, faculty, department chairs, graduate directors, and basic course directors can utilize this informal network to provide teaching information for GTAs. The GTA “bullpen” may be a place where faculty and administrators may want to regularly show up to initiate informal conversations about teaching and academic responsibilities. Starting “where the audience is” is key to initiating and maintaining the social support that GTAs need. Informal conversations in the GTAs’ territory may be the best way for faculty and administrators to express interest in and concern for the multiple demands of GTAs.

### ***Practical Implications***

Several practical implications for faculty and administrators who manage graduate and basic course programs include several steps to encourage relationship development among GTAs and to attend to the corporate needs of the university. First, at a more conceptual level, the graduate program must express a clear vision for the purpose and function of using GTAs. How will the department use GTAs in the teaching setting? How will GTAs be viewed as teaching faculty? How will they be trained? What are the expectations, goals, and outcomes for GTAs as part of their preparation for becoming future faculty or are GTAs viewed as a transient population with no real sense of teaching longevity? Turman (2001) suggests that for GTAs to be successful they must “learn to play the game.” Yet, “the game” may differ in master’s only graduate programs from doctoral programs. Departments and programs must clarify for themselves and the GTAs what “the game” is by articu-

lating the purpose, goals, and expectations for GTA success.

Once this goal has been achieved the practical steps for GTA training and supervision can be considered. For instance, what will be the nature of GTA training and supervision? How long with the training last? What objectives will the training have? Who trains the GTAs? These and additional questions can be programmatically answered when a clearer mission has been established. What are the particular social support needs of the GTAs? Are there particular needs that female GTAs have? Are there particular needs that male GTAs have? How can the department and program be sensitive to the potentially gendered nature of the GTA and graduate student experience?

The following practical suggestions can be considered for encouraging relationships development among GTAs and between GTAs and faculty. First, when setting up office spaces for GTAs, consider placing all beginning teaching assistants in a shared office space in order to encourage relationship development. Second, during orientation and training, promote outside social activities in order to help beginning relationships flourish. Outside social activities should be planned throughout the year for both teaching assistants as well as other graduate students in order to help develop social relationships among all graduate students, not just teaching assistants.

Third, help GTAs to develop their teaching skills and abilities. Acknowledge that an informal mentoring system between experienced and new teaching assistants can develop. Departments and/or programs might consider developing a formal mentoring system in which

experienced teaching assistants are trained and then paired with a new teaching assistant. This would ensure that the information passed among teaching assistants is consistent and more likely to be accurate. Fourth, develop an environment where GTAs are comfortable seeking advice about teaching from faculty. This could include asking certain faculty members to serve as mentors for GTAs, as well as encouraging GTAs to utilize faculty members for information about teaching. As mentioned above, faculty and administrators can make themselves available for informal conversations with GTAs by visiting the GTA “bullpen” on occasion.

Establishing regular staff meetings for GTAs is recommended. Staff meetings can serve as a forum for discussing questions that arise regarding content or student behavior. They could also serve as a place for GTAs to express their questions about teaching, as well as get advice about how to handle problem situations. Staff meetings can function as one type of ongoing training for GTAs throughout the academic year.

These suggestions to implement broad programs for graduate teaching assistant training and socialization can be helpful to faculty, department chairs, graduate directors, and basic course directors. Additionally, these findings can assist these same faculty personnel in helping GTAs better function in their daily tasks associated with teaching. Taken holistically, when graduate programs can articulate the specific vision and mission of their use of GTAs, the social support needs for the important GTA resource and talent can be more systematically and successfully achieved.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides important insights into how female GTAs form relationships with those in their department, there is a limitation to the study. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth perspective on a specific graduate program. The study provides a detailed picture about the relationships female GTAs formed within the specific culture of the participants; however, it is difficult to apply these results to other populations. Because the study intended to study exclusively the female GTA experience, male GTAs were not included. Thus, the study was unable to examine any gender differences that may exist for male GTAs.

This limitation could be addressed in future research on this topic. Replicating the study across different departments and at different institutions could help determine if these relationship patterns are shared by a broader range of GTAs. Investigating an all male GTA program or a combination male and female GTA program could determine whether or not gender differences exist in how teaching assistants form and maintain relationships. Another direction is to examine how graduate students who are not teaching assistants form relationships and how these relationships compare with those formed by teaching assistants. One potential question is, "If teaching assistants reported forming closer relationships with other teaching assistants, would graduate students form closer relationships with other graduate students who were not teaching assistants?" Insight could be gained into determining whether graduate students who are not teaching assistants form similar relationships, or if they are discon-



nected from the department because they don't share the identity of teaching assistant.

Future research could examine how GTAs' expectations about graduate school influence their satisfaction with their relationships. Two participants reported being dissatisfied with their faculty relationships, but they did not say if these relationships failed to meet their expectations. Examining the expectations graduate students have about their relationships, and if meeting these expectations influences their satisfaction with the relationship would be another possible research question. Finally, a longitudinal study following GTAs from the beginning of their graduate school career until graduation could offer a more complete picture of relationship development as it progresses, and could obtain participants' perceptions throughout the developmental process. While most longitudinal studies are not easily completed because of the length of time involved, this type of study would be very feasible, given the shorter time span of graduate school.

This study revealed some important conclusions about how female GTAs form relationships within their department and the role that these relationships play in their graduate school experience. Since the primary source of teacher preparation and skill building was found to occur among the GTAs themselves, recommendations for enhancing the specific teaching assistant training programs were offered.

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