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TAs Entering the Academy: Special Concerns

By Melinda Messineo

TA Responsibilities

Getting Started: It is exciting to be entering a new period of one's life, but as with all change there is a degree of stress over the unknown. In this time of transition, new graduate students often find themselves asking "What am I supposed to do as a teaching or graduate assistant? What is my place in the university? What is expected of me? How will I get my coursework done?" These are excellent questions and you should feel comfortable asking for as much clarification as you need to feel secure with the new roles you are being asked to fulfill. Below are some tasks that teaching assistants are asked to do. You will want to meet with the faculty member(s) you are assigned to for clarification of what your specific assignment will include.

What will I do as a TA?

- Grade exams/assignments
- Lead discussion groups
- Assist in course instruction
- Assist in Laboratory instruction
- Take roll
- Design & present lectures
- Hold office hours
- Run review sessions
- Assist with administrative course related tasks
- Other teaching related tasks

In addition to these specific tasks, you will find that as a teaching assistant you will take on a wide variety of social roles. Below is a list of some of the roles you may be asked to fulfill. As you will see, it is a complex and diverse set of expectations.

- Teacher
- Colleague
- Role Model
- Mediator
- Advisor
- Employee
- Apprentice
- Friend
- Authority Figure

- Administrative assistant
- Student

Incompatibility Between Roles: The examples above illustrate the many roles you may take on as a teaching assistant here at Ball State University. What you may also notice is that many of these roles are incompatible. For example, how can you be both a friend and an authority figure to students? This incompatibility of roles may be one of the most challenging dilemmas that you will face. Each teaching assistant will have to judge the level of friendship he/she will want to establish with undergraduate students. You may find that you feel closer to your students than you do to faculty members because of the similarity in experiences, age, and interests. Although this closeness can work in your favor, it may also serve as a means to undermine your efforts as an authority figure. It is important to never let this comfort with students cross the line and become a demonstration of favoritism toward them. It is not uncommon to want to help people we like or feel connected to, but it is crucial that you maintain a consistent approach. One technique that may help is to work toward being friendly but not necessarily strive to be a friend. You will want to be positive and approachable, but you will need to establish some social distance as a way to help maintain your authority or legitimacy in the classroom. Similarly, some individuals may need to be more accessible and friendly in order to create a positive rapport and an environment of support and trust. Seeking help from teaching assistants reveals a bit of vulnerability on the part of students so there needs to be a balance between authority and approachability.

Responsibilities of a TA: Given the variety of roles you will be asked to perform, you may be unclear about your specific duties. The details of your specific appointment will vary between departments and even between faculty members in the same department. Here are a few guidelines to serve as a starting point:

Teaching Assistant Responsibilities

TAs are responsible for:

Working an average of 20 hours per week or the appropriate percentage given your appointment.

The conduct of the discussion session, laboratory, or class sessions under the active direction and supervision of a faculty member.

Administrative tasks appropriate to the conduct of the course or appropriate academic endeavor.

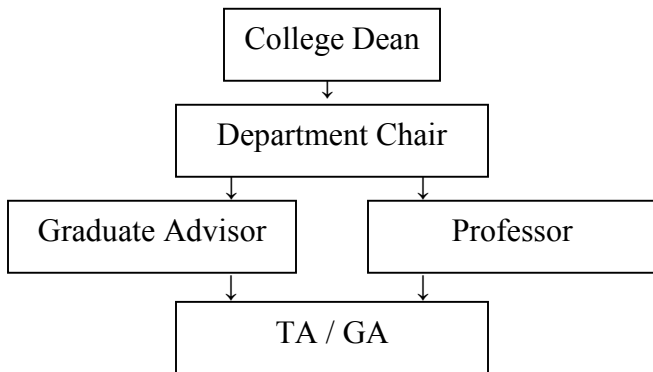
TAs are NOT responsible for:

The instructional content of the course (unless this is a condition of your appointment).

Unless they are teaching an entire students' course, determination of the student's end of term grades (you may do the grading but the final grade is ultimately the responsibility of the instructor in charge.)

Administrative tasks not related to the conduct of the course or appropriate academic endeavor.

Chain of command: When you enter a new organizational environment it is helpful to get a sense of where you fit in the overall structure. Your placement in the structure defines to whom you are most immediately responsible and on whom you might call if you need assistance. Below is a graphic of a general departmental hierarchy. You will want to check with your department's graduate advisor or your faculty mentor for details specific to your department.



As you can see, there are many levels in a department, so you can imagine the expansiveness of

the overall university structure. Your primary focus should be on maintaining communication with the professor in charge of the course and with your

graduate advisor. If you have questions or concerns, you will want to contact these individuals first. It is also important to establish a positive relationship with the graduate secretary/administrative coordinator in your department. This individual can help you navigate the institution and assist in your various duties. As with all people you work with, this is an individual you will want to treat with great care and respect.

It can be a challenge to have your academic advisor also be your boss. Many students will find that they are taking courses from the faculty member with whom they are also serving as teaching assistants. This can be positive experience because you have lots of contact with your professor and he/she will be able to speak to your strengths and inform you as opportunities become available. However, the position of being student and employee can be an awkward one so it is important to keep up with your course and teaching assistant work and stay in regular communication.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. *How many hours am I required to work as a teaching assistant?*

Most assignments are 10 or 20 hours per week. Check with your department graduate advisor for more details. They should be able to provide you with a written position description. If they cannot, contact the Graduate School.

2. *I know nothing about grading and teaching. Where do I start?*

This manual is an excellent place to start. Other TAs are an excellent resource as well. Your professor will also have useful tips to help you prepare.

3. *I am feeling overwhelmed by all of these expectations! What can I do?*

Seek help from those around you. Keep in touch with your extended support network. Seek assistance from the Counseling Services (www.bsu.edu/counselingcenter) unit here on campus for support and helpful information on time and stress management.

What would you do?

Below are some scenarios that some teaching assistants have encountered. Consider these dilemmas and identify the possible mentors and resources you could turn to in order to find possible solutions. You might start by seeking support among other graduate students within and outside your department. You could also consult with your faculty mentor as well as the Graduate School. The Counseling Center in Lucina Hall is also an excellent resource. The important thing to keep in mind is that there are resources on campus to help you.

- *Just last year I was student at Ball State sitting next to many of the students whose assignments I am now grading. How can I negotiate this situation?*
- *The students have asked me to approach the professor about the difficulty of the exams. How should I respond?*

Working with a Faculty Supervisor

What to Expect: One of the most beneficial aspects of being a teaching assistant is the opportunity for professional socialization. Not only is a TAship a

financial resource, but it also provides opportunities for you to learn more about the field you may someday enter. This can be a time of profound development and growth, especially if the faculty member you are working with makes the experience an extensive one. What can often diminish the potential of this relationship, however, is the lack of clear communication and understanding between faculty member and teaching assistant. Some of this is tied to the fact that the parties involved are at very different places in their lives and have different expectations about the position.

Understanding Your Supervising Professor's

Perspective: When I was an undergraduate, I had little idea of what it was that professors did all day. I knew they taught classes and held office hours and I had a vague sense that they did research, but beyond this information, their daily tasks were completely unknown to me. I remember wondering where professors were when they were not in their offices and what could possibly keep them so busy that they would only hold a couple office hours a week. While in graduate school, I became more aware of what being a professor entails, but it was not until my first year on the job that I fully grasped what it meant to be part of the academy. My first undergraduate impressions of what professors did were narrow and incomplete. Teaching and office hours represent only one part of what is known as the academic tripartite. The other two parts are research and service. In the early years of professors' careers, they spend a great deal of time getting their research agenda underway and developing their courses. As they progress through their career, professors add additional service responsibilities. What does "service" refer to? These are typically activities that facilitate the working of the department, the college, the university and the broader academic community. In many cases, just one area of the tripartite could constitute a full time job. That faculty do all three is a testament to the challenge of pursuing an academic life. The rewards

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are immense, but what is required is often misunderstood by those not in the academy.

With the challenges of the tripartite in mind, it is important to note where your professor is in his or

her career. This may give you a better appreciation of the types of tasks you are being asked to do. For example, sometimes teaching assistants are frustrated by the fact that they seem to do “busy work” like grading and taking roll. In reality, this assistance is vital to the administration of the course and really helps faculty accomplish the various things that are required to run a class. Your work is extremely valuable to the classroom experience and is considered a resource for faculty. If you would like to take on more tasks, you might offer to provide more assistance and make yourself available to taking on more responsibility. Keep in mind, however, the need to be sensitive to the professor’s preferences.

Questions to Ask at your First Meeting: In the interest of fostering effective communication from the start, I offer the following list of questions to ask your department and/or professor.

Questions to Ask:

Administrative

- Which staff member processes employment papers?
- How are TA office assignments administered?
- How do TAs obtain appropriate keys, a mailbox, etc.?

Classroom safety

- What is the TA’s responsibility in the case of an emergency?
- What are the department’s safety policies?

Supplies & Assistance

- What teaching supplies are available for TA use?
- Where/how can TAs get these supplies?
- Can TAs use the department’s photocopy machine? If so, under what circumstances?
- Does the department offer support for preparing course materials?

Work Related

- How many hours of work per week are required?
- Is attendance at lecture required?
- Are TAs required to offer office hours and if so how many?
- How are paychecks distributed?
- Who should a TAs contact with questions about taxes?

Troubleshooting

- Who is the liaison if a TA has personal or professional problems?
- What are the department’s grievance procedures?
- What is the department’s policy toward academic dishonesty? Student attendance? Confidentiality of student records?
- www.bsu.edu/SA/dean/stucode

Professor in Charge

- How often will we meet?
- What are your expectations of me as a teaching assistant?
- What role do you see me taking in the course?
- Are there ways that I might expand my professional development through this assignment while still meeting your needs?
- How will my performance be assessed?

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. *Should I ever question the authority of the professor in charge?*

Professors are not infallible. Making your professor aware of an error, especially one that could have consequences, is important; however, the key is in knowing how to approach the situation. If possible, do it in private and always give the professor the benefit of the doubt. Having a foundation of positive communication with the professor will make this more manageable. If you find that you disagree with your professor on philosophical grounds, it may be appropriate to discuss the issue with him/her in a conversational as opposed to a defensive tone. Lastly, if you feel your professor is violating university policy and you feel uncomfortable discussing the issue with him/her

directly you may want to contact the graduate advisor or department chair.

2. *What do I do if I feel the professor is asking me to do work that is not related to my appointment?* Again, you should have received a position description that outlines your assigned duties. Consult this document first. Then, if needed, seek clarification from the professor on how the given task meets the expectations of the appointment. The link between the task and your duties may not be immediately obvious to you, but may be appropriate. If you feel the request is inappropriate, discuss your concerns with the professor. If you seek further assistance, contact the graduate advisor, then the chair, and then the university ombudsperson.
3. *What should I do if I have problems with other teaching assistants in the course?*
First, you will want to discuss your concerns with the other teaching assistant if possible. Seek an environment where you feel safe and that would not put the other TA on the defensive. If you do not feel you can address the TA directly, contact the professor in charge of the course; if clarification is still needed, contact then the graduate advisor, and/or the department chair.

What would you do?

Below are some scenarios that some teaching assistants have encountered. How might you respond if faced with these dilemmas? On which campus resources could you draw?

- *My professor has invited me to work with her on a research project on a topic I find extremely interesting but not related to my research. What should I do?*
- *I would like to lead a class session, but the professor I work with has a policy of not letting graduate students teach. What should I do?*
- *My professor rarely has work for me to do. I appreciate having the time, but will this be a problem in the long run?*

Time Management

Four Areas that Compete for Graduate Students'

Time: As a graduate student employed as a teaching assistant, you will find that in addition to your

personal needs, you also participate in the tripartite areas of academia. As a result, you will have to juggle numerous tasks often with little time and little warning. Below is a list of tasks that occupy the life of a graduate student. They are presented in four areas: research, teaching, service and personal. Look at the list and see which items fit your life. Which items would you remove or need to add?

Research/Professional

- Data collection/analysis
- Communication with mentor/advisor/networking
- Course work/Library research
- Reading to keep current
- Departmental activities
- Intellectual self-reflection

Teaching

- Attending lectures and preparing for class
- Grading and recording grades
- Meeting with instructor in charge
- Holding office hours and administrative tasks
- Reflecting on and develop teaching skills

Service

- Work within the department
- Membership & service in professional organizations
- Campus & community service

Personal

- Daily routine, exercise, and chores
- Health, car, home, maintenance
- Cultivating relationships w/ significant others
- Social life, personal and spiritual development

Learning to Prioritize: Given the driven, high achieving nature of graduate students, they often want to give everything equal priority. But that approach simply is not realistic. Instead students have to learn to prioritize. This may be a challenging task because in the past you have been able to do everything needed. You need to develop prioritizing skills.

Step 1: Prioritize the four major areas according to their importance to you.

Ask yourself - What kind of personal and professional life do I want?

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Step 2: Now that you have set your priorities, look at the things you need to accomplish and estimate the time necessary to accomplish your highest priorities.

Ask yourself – In what activities am I currently investing my time that are not a high priority for me? Avoid being distracted by things that may seem urgent but do not advance you to your long term goals.

Step 3: After estimating the time you need to accomplish your highest priorities, you will have an idea of the amount of time left for other things.

Ask yourself - What activities should I be investing more time in?

It is not uncommon for students to underestimate the amount of time they are spending on various tasks. The most reliable way to determine your actual time usage is to keep a time diary. Use the worksheet below to help you determine where your time is actually going. Be honest and accurate as possible. While you are studying, keep track of how much time is lost to snacking, e-mail, or media. It is easy to lose time, focus and efficiency in these seemingly harmless activities. Although this exercise may seem like a tedious task, the results will help you work toward greater efficiency and improved work and personal life satisfaction. After a few weeks of modifying your behavior, keep another diary to check your progress.

Keeping a time Diary Worksheet - Enlarge this worksheet by 50%

Name	Week						
	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
6-7am							
7-8							
8-9							
9-10							
10-11							
11-12pm							
12-1							
1-2							
2-3							
3-4							
4-5							
5-6							
6-7							
7-8							
8-9							
9-10							
10-11							
11-12am							

Time Use Summary

Sleep	Active Leisure	Chores	Class time	Service
Exercise	Passive Leisure	TA Work	Meetings	Other Work
Daily care	Time with others	Studying	Research	Additional

Time Management Tips:

Use time more efficiently

- Break tasks into manageable blocks
- Create a plan with realistic short and long terms goals and follow it

Become self aware

- create a distraction-free study and work environment
- be aware when you lose efficiency on a task and switch to a new task
- make clear distinctions between work and leisure time

- be sure to get enough sleep, exercise regularly, and eat nutritiously

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. *How can I be more efficient in grading?*
Be concise in your written comments and use a point breakdown and criteria guide known as a “rubric” when possible. Ask students to come see you if the explanation of needed changes is too long to write efficiently. If the assignment errors are common, prepare a comment sheet for distribution. Grade exams and assignments in “chunks” instead of one long haul. The breaks will help you remain fresh and consistent.
2. *I can't seem to find enough time to read all my course materials and keep up with the class I am TAing for. What should I do?*
You may benefit from learning to speed read or scan. Some material you can read more quickly than others. Use headings summaries, abstracts and findings sections to your advantage. Talk with your professor for guidance on discerning the key points and using your time efficiently. You may not believe this now, but you will never have as much time to explore the literature as you do in graduate school. Take advantage of this and read as much as you can in as great of depth as possible as you develop your scanning skills.
3. *I feel like my relationships are suffering because of school. What can I do?*
It is important to take care of personal relationships. Problems with work will effect your home life and vice versa, so for the health of both you must give attention to both. Make clear distinctions between work and leisure time. Plan specific times to be together and make it a priority to keep those “dates.” Be sure to share your experiences with others in your life. Academia is a blank box for many people who are unfamiliar with its demands. Do not assume others know or understand what you are going through. Give them information so they can be supportive. For extended support networks, set up regular e-mail or phone call times. If possible, do not schedule your day so full that you cannot accommodate occasional emergencies.

What would you do?

- *I have a big assignment due the same day that my professor needs exam grades turned in. What can I do?*
- *I feel guilty when I am not working so my leisure time ends up being an emotional drain. What can I do?*
- *I find that I no longer feel like I have enough time to exercise. What should I do?*
- *I am wondering if I want to face the rigors of academic life. How do I know if this is the right career for me?*

Professional Development

Getting the most out of your TA experience: As mentioned earlier, your Teaching Assistant experience provides you with an excellent opportunity for professional development. You will find that your teaching experience gives you an edge in the marketplace regardless of where you find yourself after graduation. What you get from the experience, however, depends a great deal on the effort you put into it. Be open to as many teaching tasks as possible. Sit in on lectures even if you are not required to attend. Attend the lectures of other professors as well and familiarize yourself with other teaching styles. You might think that you have already seen a great deal of teaching through your

academic career, but the perspective is different when you already know the material and are instead looking for the pedagogical value of the technique as opposed to the content. Accept opportunities to teach when they are presented. Ask for copies of lectures and seek feedback from the instructor and your colleagues. If possible, have your teaching videotaped so you can observe yourself in action. Take time to develop your skills and seek feedback from others.

Tips on becoming an academic: It is never too early to start preparing yourself for a career in academia. From the courses you choose to the research you participate in, you will make choices that will affect your future occupational trajectories. It is important to choose material that you are interested in because it is hard enough to stay motivated when doing a project you love, let alone one you are not interested in. This being said, you must also challenge yourself to extend your pursuits beyond your comfort zone. You may

not need that extra methods class to graduate, but you may need the research method skills in that class to publish. Keep long- and short-term goals in mind. You will never again have quite this type of opportunity to learn and explore. Take advantage of it to the fullest. Also, be aware of the uniqueness of the mentoring relationships you find yourself in. The letters of recommendation they write for you can make or break your applications for resources and future employment. Nurture these relationships with respect and sincerity.

An Introduction to the Curriculum Vita: One of the first things you can do to start preparing yourself for a professional career is to create your Curriculum Vita. The purpose is two fold. First, you will already have it started when you need it near the end of your career, and second, you will have a sense of what is expected of you that will help guide your behavior and appropriate activities. Ask your professors or advanced students to see copies of their curriculum vitas (CVs). Note that these look different than regular résumés. The Career Center (www.bsu.edu/careers) can provide additional feedback on how to present your academic record in the most positive light.

Other Areas of Development:

Teaching portfolio. As a teaching assistant, you are in the unique position to begin work on your teaching portfolio. This is a self-reflective document that demonstrates your growth and philosophy as an instructor. The Office of Teaching and Learning Advancement can help you assemble your portfolio (www.bsu.edu/tla)

Professional associations and conferences. As soon as possible, join the professional organizations in your field and attend conferences. There is no better way to familiarize yourself with the discipline as a whole, network with other professionals, and develop your skills as an academic. Eventually you will want to present your own research and papers at conferences. Many conferences have sessions specifically for student papers. Some departments have resources to help graduate students offset conference expenses. Contact the Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs for further information (www.bsu.edu/OARSP). You might also share

expenses with other graduate students and support each other in your professional development.

Getting published. It may seem too early to think about publishing, but the field of academia is becoming more and more competitive. At one time it was unique to have a doctoral student publish in graduate school, yet now it is expected. Keep this goal in mind as you approach your coursework. Think of class assignments as potential means of research finding dissemination. Most disciplines have outlets for teaching related work as well. The important thing is to present your best work possible and find the appropriate outlet. You may want to establish a writing group with other graduate students to help you in your efforts to publish. The more experience you have in graduate school, the better prepared you will be in the job market.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. *How do I find out about conferences in my discipline?*
Ask professors and students about conference and associations you might join. Typically there are local, regional, and national chapters and conferences. Attending some at each level will give you a good feel of the discipline.
2. *What if I don't get published in graduate school?*
Many people who have not published are able to find jobs. However, the more publications you have the more marketable you will be. If you are not able to publish, you will want to have some work under review. The need to publish is less great at the master's degree level.
3. *Would my time be better spent doing research instead of being a teaching assistant?*
Being a teaching assistant provides you valuable experience that will set you apart from other candidates. What is most important is to have balance in teaching, research, and service.

What would you do?

1. *I have a chance to go to Florida over Spring Break but it is also the weekend of the regional professional association conference. I know it is important to attend the conference, but this may be my last Spring Break ever. What should I do?*
2. *My professor is helping me rework my masters thesis for publication. How will we decide authorship?*

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3. *No one in my department does research in my area of interest. What should I do?*

Tips for International TA's

The Test of English as a Foreign Language: If you are a non-native speaker of English applying for admission to the Graduate School, you must submit the results of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) taken no more than 18 months before the date of admission. Please contact the Center for International Programs for complete details. There is a score cut off of 550 on the TOEFL, but you may also take language classes to raise your proficiency. When you reach the required level you may be a TA and are eligible for other assistantships. International graduate students with assistantships are normally not allowed to accept additional employment. For more information on language and immigration issues,

contact The Center for International Programs at www.bsu.edu/international.

Anticipating and Responding to Cultural

Differences: As with all students who take on the role of teaching assistant, you may find that the students with whom you come into contact have differing degrees of contact with individuals from other countries. As a result, it is difficult to anticipate exactly how they will respond to you in the classroom. Some students may have not had the same academic preparation as you. They may not act like you did in school as an undergraduate and they may have different expectations. Students may appear to be more casual, and informal in their attire and interactions. They may make direct eye contact and be willing to challenge superiors. Your best approach is to be open to the variation and seek feedback on successful strategies.

You may also find that students have stereotypical preconceptions of you. These could take the form of feeling superior to you, or feeling you are exotic and intriguing because of your cultural background. Similarly, you may have some stereotypical preconceptions about them. Regardless of their nature, opinions about you and your students' backgrounds are irrelevant in the classroom. Differences are a resource that can be drawn upon but they should not be viewed as a barrier to success. Your job is to teach the material in the course and help

them reach their academic goals. Your ability to elude secondary agendas will help students do the same. You and your students have a unique opportunity to learn from one another.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. *How do American students differ from other students?*
The degree to which students in the U.S. differ from your own experience will depend on your country of origin, your major, and the types of courses you find yourself TAing for. Discuss your experiences with other TAs for feedback.
2. *What will my students expect of me?*
Students have varying expectations but they generally expect teaching assistants to be effective instructors who are accessible and fair. They often seek teaching assistants who are encouraging, sympathetic, well prepared, and willing to serve as an advocate on their behalf. They also want to feel confident in your skills as an instructor.
3. *Should I expect language to be a barrier?*
Again, students have varying degrees of comfort with individuals for whom English is a second language. If you are concerned about your English proficiency try the following strategies:
 - Acknowledge your differences from your students during the first class and share some of your personal experiences with them.
 - Keep a sense of humor about these differences and help students recognize similarities.
 - Speak slowly and ask your students to do the same.
 - Do not hesitate to write problematic words down to help clarify your intent.
 - Ask students to repeat their questions and then state the questions back to them to confirm that you understand what they are asking. (You can ask students to do the same.)
4. *What if I have trouble understanding the material I am trying to teach?*
This is a challenge for all teaching assistants. Seek support from the professor in charge and other teaching assistants. Be sure that you have access to the books and materials that students will be using so you can read ahead and prepare.

What would you do?

1. *People I have met with told me that I will learn more if I seek out people different than me, but sometimes at the end of the day I am tired and would just prefer to stay with other students from my home country. What should I do?*
2. *I find that some students have stereotypical views of me and my culture. How should I respond?*
3. *I find that I have stereotypical views of students at times. How can I avoid this?*

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to familiarize graduate students with the role of teaching and research assistant at Ball State University. This is an exciting new period of your development as a professional, and with this newness comes some uncertainty. The university recognizes the many challenges you will face and is committed to helping you make a successful transition.

Below is a summary of the main chapter points:

1. You will be asked to take on a variety of roles as a teaching or research assistant at Ball State University. Be sure to seek clarification on roles and duties whenever needed.
2. You may at times face uncertainty or incompatibility between these roles. We encourage graduate students to seek support through this process from fellow graduates students, faculty and departmental mentors, counseling services and the graduate school.
3. Working with your faculty supervisor is a time for academic growth and professional development. The best way to nurture this relationship is through open communication, empathy, and self-reflection.
4. As a graduate student you will find that you will need advanced skills in time management. You will find your time split between research/academic pursuits, teaching, service, and personal needs. It is important to not neglect your personal needs and supportive relationships as these are necessary for your success.
5. It is never too early to start working on your professional development. Start working on your curriculum vita, your teaching portfolio, and publication record as soon as possible. Join professional organizations and attend conferences early in your career. You will want to make

choices that allow you to get the most out of your TA experience.

6. International TAs may be concerned about anticipating and responding to cultural differences. The students with whom you come into contact have had differing degrees of contact with individuals from other countries. As a result, it is difficult to anticipate exactly how they will respond to you in the classroom. You will want to remain flexible in your approach and open about your own expectations and experiences. Seek feedback on successful strategies from fellow students to help with the transition.