

# The impact of teaching assistantships

July 26 2016, by Emma Whittington

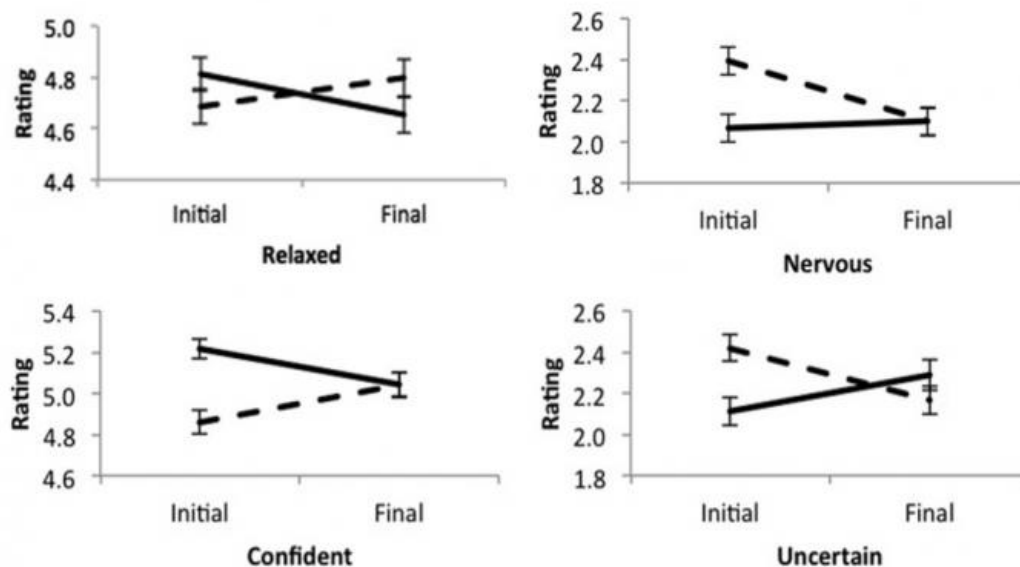


Figure 1. Descriptors identified in Kendall and Schussler (2013) as changing significantly in mean student ratings over a semester for GTAs (dashed line) and faculty (solid line). Credit: Modified from Kendall & Schussler, 2013, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 license.

[Graduate teaching assistants](#) (GTAs) are graduate students employed by a university or college to undertake certain teaching responsibilities. These responsibilities may include grading assignments, leading

discussion or recitation sessions, or teaching laboratory classes for introductory undergraduate courses. Due to this broad range of responsibilities, GTAs hold a unique position that melds student, researcher, and teacher roles. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are [125,100 GTAs](#) currently employed in the United States, a testimonial to the importance of the GTA workforce in higher education. In 2005, [a survey of 65 institutes](#) of higher education in the United States found that 91% of undergraduate biology laboratory sections were taught by GTAs in research institutes. Clearly, undergraduate education is now dependent on GTAs. Considering this, I ask, how do teaching assistantships impact graduate assistants and their undergraduate students?

## **My Experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant**

I have been a GTA in my department for three years and expect to continue as a GTA until graduation. Facing a classroom of [students](#) as a newly appointed GTA can be nerve-wracking. I know that I am responsible for teaching my students content covered on exams, and I commonly worry that I am not explaining things well, or giving my students the teaching they deserve. However, these worries have also helped me hone invaluable transferable skills – chiefly, public speaking. GTAs frequently give impromptu lectures and presentations, often without a great deal of preparation or practice. Giving frequent lectures makes presenting a normal activity, rather than something to be feared. In addition, the majority of graduate students in my department are GTAs, so we are comrades in arms, and teaching is a frequent topic of conversation.

## **The Effects of GTAs on Undergraduate Learning**

GTAs can aid undergraduate learning in a number of ways. First,

because GTAs often teach smaller subgroups of students taking larger courses, they [increase the amount of face time students have](#) with instructors. Furthermore, GTAs are described as being more available and [likely to respond to email](#). Second, since students perceive GTAs as ranking between a student and a professor, GTAs are [less intimidating](#) and more approachable than professors. As a result, students are [more likely to ask questions](#). Third, surveys suggest that GTAs are more innovative in the classroom, and are more likely to experiment with [new teaching styles that enrich student learning](#).

The negative aspects of GTAs, as perceived by undergraduate students, can be divided into a few primary concerns. One concern relates to GTAs' lack of in depth knowledge compared to course professors. GTAs may have a more superficial understanding of course material, particularly if they are teaching a course that does not relate well to their own research. On a similar note, undergraduates note that a [lack of communication between the GTA and course professor](#) can be problematic. Good communication between GTAs and their professorial counterparts is essential to ensure that what the GTA teaches aligns with what the professor expects students to learn. Allowing some GTA input into the course content and structure could ameliorate this problem.

As I mentioned earlier, being a GTA can be nerve-wracking at times. Unsurprisingly, undergraduates consistently perceive GTAs as [nervous and hesitant](#). However, a [survey comparing undergraduate perception of GTAs and professors over time](#) found that GTAs are increasingly associated with descriptors such as "relaxed" and "confident" as the semester progresses. Accordingly, they are less likely to be associated with the terms "nervous" and "uncertain." This finding suggests that any lack of confidence comes from a GTA's lack of experience/training rather than ability.

## Graduate Student Development through Teaching

## Assistantships

For graduate students, the most practical benefit to being a GTA is financial. GTAs may not need part-time employment or rely on grant funding to support themselves. Beyond material benefits, GTAs consistently describe teaching assistantships as an [opportunity to acquire skills and work experience](#). If graduate students are professorial apprentices, then teaching experience and training is vital to proper graduate student development. Graduate students also identify a [range of transferable skills](#) gained through teaching assistantships, including applying knowledge in alternative contexts, public speaking and confidence, and dealing with difficult questions or situations.

Although teaching improves personal development, it also comes with challenges. The majority of GTAs surveyed identified time pressures as a concern, as teaching requires a considerable time commitment. Time allocated to teaching takes away from time that could be dedicated to research. In situations where GTAs feel pressure to obtain data and graduate, this lost time is sorely felt. A second concern identified by GTAs is a [lack of control or input in course content and structure](#). This lack of input can make GTAs feel underappreciated or used by their department. One way to increase GTA input lies in providing them with adequate training and recognition. The majority of GTAs are equipped with only a few days of training that may focus more on university policies and rules than on teaching strategies. Training GTAs so that they feel like actual teachers would benefit both GTAs and students. Overall, GTAs feel positively towards [teaching](#) assistantships, although many would like more training, and greater control over what, and how, they teach.

## Conclusions

GTAs are instrumental to institutes of [higher education](#). Furthermore, as GTAs are often in contact with freshman and introductory classes, they may [impact student retention](#). In my opinion, the benefits of GTAs far outweigh any costs or concerns. Furthermore, many of the concerns surrounding GTAs could be easily addressed through increased training, communication with course professors, and a greater degree of GTA involvement in course structure. Considering how critical GTAs are to undergraduate learning, it is shocking that comprehensive training is not provided at all universities. Addressing these concerns will improve the undergraduate experience, the quality of service provided by universities, and graduate student development. In short, these changes would ensure both universities and students thrive.

**More information:** Kendall, K.D., & Schussler, E.E. (2012). Does Instructor Type Matter? Undergraduate Perception of Graduate Teaching Assistants and Professors. *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, 11, 187-199.

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