McCormick Graduate Teaching Committee Recommendations for Department TA Guidelines

The McCormick Graduate Teaching Committee (MGTC) is committed to improve the experience of teaching assistants and create a unified system of guidelines and resources for teaching assistants across the McCormick School of Engineering.

In 2022 MGTC set an objective of improving the TA experience across departments. As part of this aim, MGTC is developing a set of guidelines for departments. These guidelines are intended to assist departments in supporting their TAs, improving the TA experience, and boosting TA-faculty relationships. These recommendations were developed following a review of all McCormick department practices associated with TAs, and synthesizing these practices into a form which may be easily met by all departments, regardless of staffing or financial resources. Some departments already meet or exceed these recommendations, and we urge faculty to consider further adaptation of these guidelines as appropriate for their program needs.

Regardless of program, MGTC recommends that departments adopt the following practices:

1. Include the provided document of expectations and resources as part of the PhD handbook, or as a separate document for new graduate students.
2. Require faculty and TAs to fill out a contract at the start of each quarter to facilitate TA-faculty and TA-student relationships. An example of such a contract is provided.
3. Grant a TA award each quarter or each year to one TA in the department, ideally with an associated cash prize, regardless of course taught. Recommendations for managing such an award are provided.

Links to document sections:

- Example TA requirements, expectations, and resources in department handbooks
- Template for TA contract
- Guidelines for TA award
Example TA requirements, expectations, and resources in department handbooks

The following is an example of the recommended sections of a teaching assistant handbook for departments. This may be provided as an appendix to the PhD handbook, or as a distinct document for students. It should be reviewed by departments during orientation, and students may be reminded of its contents at the start of each quarter, in conjunction with the recommended teaching assistant contract.

1. Teaching Assistant Responsibilities (outline department requirements for TAs)
   a. TA Requirements
      
      *For example, depending on department requirements...* All students in the PhD program must complete at least one quarter as a teaching assistant (TA). The program considers teaching experience to be an essential part of a student’s graduate education, it is a requirement set by The Graduate School and by [the dept.].
   
   b. Time Commitment
      
      A typical time commitment of a TA is [e.g. 20] hours per week, depending on the course and instructor, and is not intended to entirely supplant research activities for the quarter.
   
   c. TA Assignments
      
      Student input is welcomed prior to when TA positions are assigned and will be taken into consideration when assignments are made, but the priority is to assign students to TA positions where they will be the most successful and most beneficial for the needs of the department. If you are interested in being a TA for a specific course with a specific professor, you should discuss this with the professor ahead of time, notifying them of your interest. The professor may relay that preference to the department chair or faculty member responsible for creating the TA schedule prior to TA selections.
   
   d. Course Responsibilities
      
      The precise description of the responsibilities of a TA varies with the course being taught and is always at the discretion of the faculty. Responsibilities typically include a combination of leading discussion sections, grading assignments and exams, and holding office hours. It may optionally include some opportunities to prepare and present a few lectures and create new assignments at the discretion of the faculty supervisor.
   
   e. Title IX
      
      As a TA, you are a “responsible employee,” meaning that you are required to report all allegations of discrimination and sexual misconduct (including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, and sexual harassment) to the Title IX coordinator in Northwestern’s Office of Equity. The Title IX FAQ offers suggestions of how to talk about your reporting obligation as a responsible employee before an incident is disclosed to you and resources of how to report.
      
      You can find resources about Title IX and reporting sexual misconduct here:
      
      [https://www.northwestern.edu/sexual-misconduct/title-IX/faqs.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/sexual-misconduct/title-IX/faqs.html)
      [https://www.northwestern.edu/sexual-misconduct/docs/ReportingResponsibilities 092418.pdf](https://www.northwestern.edu/sexual-misconduct/docs/ReportingResponsibilities 092418.pdf)
2. **Diversity and Inclusion** *(outline expectations of teaching assistant encounters with students)*

   a. **Student Learning**

      As a TA you will encounter different types of learners, and you can cater to different student’s learning goals and needs. A student’s learning style may even change between classes, depending on their level of interest or skill level associated with a given class. Table 1 below lists the three types of student learners—surface, strategic, and deep—and how these learners work through a class as well as what they need from a TA for support through that process.

      ![Table 1: Adapted from the Teaching Assistant and Graders Handbook from the Dept. of Engineering Sciences and Applied Mathematics (2020)]

      | Intention          | Surface                                      | Strategic                                  | Deep                                     |
      |--------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
      |                    | Cope with course requirements                | Achieve high grades                        | Understand for oneself                   |
      | Process            | Memorize facts and procedures;              | Put consistent effort into studying;      | Relate ideas to previous knowledge;      |
      |                    | Study with little reflection;               | Manage time well;                         | Look for patterns and underlying principles; |
      |                    | Treat courses as unrelated bits of knowledge| Focus on assessment requirements and criteria| Check evidence for conclusions;         |
      | TA Approach        | Transmit knowledge                          | Help connect concepts                      | Encourage conceptual understanding       |

      Table 1: Adapted from the *Teaching Assistant and Graders Handbook* from the Dept. of Engineering Sciences and Applied Mathematics (2020)

   b. **Student Backgrounds**

      As a TA, you will find your classroom also filled with students of different backgrounds. Differences in background mean many things: culture and diversity; socioeconomic status; learning, physical, or mental disabilities/limitations/difficulties; and different technical backgrounds. It is important to understand and respect all students and strive to practice teaching in a way that fosters an equitable environment to ensure all students feel accepted and are able to succeed. Table 2 below offers basic examples of these differences and how you as a TA can ensure that you are respecting all your students and serving as the best resource possible.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture &amp; Diversity Status</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Physical, or Mental Disabilities / Limitations</th>
<th>Technical Backgrounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different personal boundaries or methods of social engagement;</td>
<td>Different family backgrounds related to education, income, and occupation; Varying access to resources</td>
<td>Difficulty with certain physical tasks, such as moving, writing, seeing, hearing, etc.; Difficulty with reading, learning, or focusing; Difficulty with emotional and mental states or taking care of oneself, such as anxiety or depression; Chronic medical conditions, such as chronic pain, skin conditions affecting appearance, etc.</td>
<td>Different levels of knowledge of each subject (based on quality and type of school attended previously, or even based on who taught a previous course required for the one you’re a TA, or if elective vs. core course); Masters and PhD students especially, as many come in with different undergraduate degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different political affiliations, ethnic identities, sexual identities;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different ways of relating to other students or the professor; Language barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**TA Approach**

| Don’t make assumptions about what students are like, have experienced, have access to, or need/don’t need; Ask yourself why are you making that assumption about a student? Is it a personal bias? Adapt your way of communicating and relating to each student to respect boundaries | Don’t make assumptions about ability to access resources (e.g., stable internet, computers, textbooks, food, secure places to live); Share university resources (Student Enrichment Services) to promote student success and meet needs | Don’t make assumptions about what students can do; Don’t single out a student with a disability.; Be patient, provide help when asked or offer when appropriate; Be conscious of ableism– Can all my students do this problem/activity I’m proposing? | Don’t make assumptions about what students know; Explain relevant missing background to those that need it; Adapt the level of detail and scope of explanations to student needs; Guide students through problems using guided questions |

**Table 2:** Adapted from the *Teaching Assistant and Graders Handbook* from the Dept. of Engineering Sciences and Applied Mathematics (2020)
3. **Teaching Assistant Resources** *(Resources for training, support, and teaching materials)*
   
a. **Searle Center**
   
   The Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching has a wealth of resources for faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates to enhance learning and teaching. Specifically, for graduate students and post-docs, the Searle Center offers various programs and services:
   - Graduate Student Teaching Conference
   - Teaching Certificate Program
   - Graduate Teaching Mentors
   - Graduate Teaching Fellows
   - Feedback on Teaching
   - Center for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) at Northwestern
   - Workshops on Teaching and Learning
   
   You can find general information on the Searle Center at the following link:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/grad/workshops.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/grad/workshops.html)

   Searle provides a list of teaching resources here on a variety of topics such as teaching strategies and materials and assessments of student learning:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/index.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/index.html)

   Searle also provides materials on teaching strategies including:
   - Diversity in the classroom
   - Course design
   - Teaching methods
   - Teaching and learning with technology
   - Grading and assessment
   - Evaluating courses and instruction
   
   You can find these resources and more at the following Searle Center link:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/teaching-strategies-materials.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/teaching-strategies-materials.html)

   b. **Inclusive Teaching Practices**

   Searle also provides resources on fostering inclusive learning environments here:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/diversity-equity-inclusion/inclusive-learning-environments.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/diversity-equity-inclusion/inclusive-learning-environments.html)

   They also provide a list of campus resources here, including AccessibleNU, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), LGBTQIA+ Resources, and Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/diversity-equity-inclusion/campus-resources.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/diversity-equity-inclusion/campus-resources.html)

   c. **CIRTL**

   The Center for Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning is a national network of universities focused on developing future faculty. There are on-campus events at Northwestern, including Mentored Discussions of Teaching, Searle Teaching-as-Research Program, and CIRTL Workshop Series. You can also connect online through journal clubs, workshops, and courses hosted by CIRTL. You can find their resources here:
   [https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/grad/cirtl/index.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/searle/initiatives/grad/cirtl/index.html)

   d. **AccessibleNU**

   AccessibleNU is Northwestern’s office dedicated to equal access to education and university life. Through this office, you or your students can receive academic and exam accommodations. You can find out more about their resources here: [https://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/](https://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/)
e. Student Enrichment Services

Northwestern’s Student Enrichment Services partners with first-generation, lower-income, and/or DACA/undocumented students to foster identity development, navigate campus resources, and build community. You can find their resources here:
https://www.northwestern.edu/enrichment/index.html
https://www.northwestern.edu/enrichment/resources/top-ten-list-of-resources-for-fgli-students.html

f. Book a Room

25Live
You can book rooms in any building on campus through 25Live. You can specify the date, the number of people, whether or not the event recurs, and other useful specifications. This can be useful if you are in charge of booking rooms for office hours. You can use the following link to book rooms: https://25live.collegenet.com/pro/northwestern#!/home/dash

MUDD
You can also book rooms in Mudd Library. These are more useful for smaller groups, but there are a few larger rooms. You can use the following link to book rooms:
https://northwestern.libcal.com/booking/mudd group

Lightboard
The Lightboard is located in the Lightboard Studio in Mudd Library. The Lightboard is a piece of technology where you can record yourself writing, as if on a white board, but the board is clear and when the video is processed, it will show you behind the board and flip the writing automatically to be readable to the audience. Alternately, you can project PowerPoints and animate things as you wish. This can be a great way to provide extra resources for students outside of the classroom, such as examples of working through problems or explanations of concepts. You can sign up for the Lightboard Studio as you would other rooms in Mudd using the link below. https://digitallearning.northwestern.edu/article/2016/04/12/lightboard-studio
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Optional</th>
<th>Not an Option</th>
<th>Anticipated hrs/wk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Office Hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Review sessions for exams</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Discussion/Recitation sections</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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**Discussion Section Follow-Up** (only complete if applicable):

What role will discussion sections serve in this course?
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________

Define responsibilities of TA (compared to instructor) in designing/planning discussion section content
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________

**LECTURES**: For which of the following will the TA be responsible?

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<th>Expected</th>
<th>Optional</th>
<th>Not an Option</th>
<th>Anticipated hrs/wk</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attendance at all lectures</td>
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<td>2. Planning and giving a lecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Substituting lectures</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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</table>
ACCOMMODATIONS NOTICE

If a student has gone through AccessibleNU to receive accommodation for the course, please remember to have a follow-up discussion between the instructor and all TAs to avoid confusion and establish clarity on what changes will be enacted and how!

TA Name: ______________________________________
Research Advisor: ____________________________  Course Instructor: ____________________________
Guidelines for TA award

To facilitate the choice of student to receive the TA award, MGTC recommends the following practice. TA awards may be awarded per quarter or on a yearly basis. If possible, a cash award is recommended. Departments who have a cash award ranges between $500-$1000.

Include in each course’s CTEC:

1. [department] gives a TA of the [year/quarter] award. On a scale of 1-6, how strongly would you recommend this TA for the award?
2. Briefly explain why.

Compile responses and choose a shortlist of nominations. Optionally a) choose finalist based on CTEC responses only, or b) allow faculty to vote among nominations.