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** (o*utline 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/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.

	Surface	Strategic	Deep
Intention	Cope with course requirements	Achieve high grades	Understand for oneself
Process	Memorize facts and procedures; Study with little reflection; Treat courses as unrelated bits of knowledge	Put consistent effort into studying; Manage time well; Focus on assessment requirements and criteria	Relate ideas to previous knowledge; Look for patterns and underlying principles; 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.

	Culture & Diversity	Socioeconomic Status	Physical, or Mental Disabilities / Limitations	Technical Backgrounds
Examples	Different personal boundaries or methods of social engagement; Different political affiliations, ethnic identities, sexual identities; Different ways of relating to other students or the professor; Language barriers	Different family backgrounds related to education, income, and occupation; Varying access to resources	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. NOTE: not all of these are visible, and these can be identities much like sexuality and race	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
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 4 • 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

      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

      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

   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
      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

   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 5 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

   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/

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

[Template for TA contract](#)

TA Responsibilities Checklist

Course: _____ Quarter: Fall 2022/Winter 2023/Spring 2023/Summer 2023

Course Teaching Modality: In-Person/Hybrid/Remote

Instructor: _____ TA: _____

TA Assignment (circle or highlight): Grader (5 hr)/Part-time TA (10 hr)/Full-time TGS TA (20 hr)

GRADING: Which of the following will the TA be grading? Consider if grading needs to be coordinated between multiple TAs!

1. Homework Exercises
2. Quizzes
3. Midterms
4. Final Exams
5. Essays/Reports
6. Projects
7. Other (Please Specify): _____

Estimated grading time per week: _____ hours

OFFICE HOURS/REVIEW SESSIONS: For which of the following will the TA be responsible?

	Expected	Optional	Not an Option	Anticipated hrs/wk
1. Office Hours				
2. Review sessions for exams				
3. Discussion/Recitation sections				

Total:_____hrs/wk

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?

	Expected	Optional	Not an Option	Anticipated hrs/wk
1. Attendance at all lectures				
2. Planning and giving a lecture				
3. Substituting lectures				

Total:_____hrs/wk

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.