

Working with Teaching Assistants

TAs are often an underutilized resource when it comes to course planning. Even experienced faculty frequently won't start meeting with their TAs until after the course has begun. Instead, consider meeting with them a few weeks before the quarter starts (if your department makes TA assignments early enough to make this possible). Make explicit your goals for the course and what you will expect from them. Ask each TA to think about how he or she can most effectively contribute to the course. You may discover that your TAs have excellent ideas for supplementary materials, suggestions for assignment instructions and grading guidelines, and insights on how to explain difficult material.

You will also be giving your TAs an opportunity to learn more about the art of teaching, one of the benefits they deserve from the many hours they will be putting into your course. Ask your TAs if there are specific teaching skills (e.g., giving a guest lecture or designing a new class activity) they would like the opportunity to practice, in addition to the more administrative TA duties. Encouraging TAs to take initiative also requires that you provide them with essential support. In many cases, after all, they will be young, inexperienced, and perhaps not even particularly well versed in the specific area they've been assigned to teach. They may have only the vaguest idea of what it takes to prepare a review, the introduction to a lab, or a lecture. If your department does not provide TAs with an orientation, you can hold your own miniorientation. The Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning (723- 1326) is available to help you; you can also ask the more experienced TAs in your department to provide advice. If the TAs' responsibilities include experiment set-up, managing the course website and email lists, or setting up for lecture, provide them with adequate instruction in these duties. New TAs may also be unaware of the department's curriculum, its grading policies, or its administrative procedures; provide them with whatever information is most relevant to your course.

TAs typically have a number of other academic commitments, including a full course load and substantial research projects, and they may or may not be getting paid for their TA work. For this reason, try to make their TA experience as rewarding as possible, and distribute teaching and grading responsibilities fairly among your TAs. Check with your colleagues and ask TAs what the norms are in your department before you design assignments that demand extra TA time: a course with short weekly papers will require much more work from a TA than one that has only a midterm and a final.

Meet with your TAs on a weekly basis to talk about how things are going and to discuss any problems or questions. Make arrangements to visit their classes, and offer gentle but honest feedback afterward. The notes from these visits may be handy later if your TAs ask for letters of recommendation on their teaching. Let your TAs know of the services, such as videorecording or classroom observation, that are available to them from the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. To keep it a reciprocal relationship, ask the TAs for their comments on how you're doing in the classroom. TAs may also have a good sense of student satisfaction and concerns because of their frequent interaction with them. For these reasons, TAs can be an outstanding teaching resource beyond their obvious support duties.

Department Staff

Get to know your department's staff. They can be an invaluable aid—not only with book orders, equipment requests, and scheduling problems, but as a source of information and assistance on all sorts of daily academic hassles. At the same time, remember that the staff members' experience and expertise deserve your respect. Staff often choose to work at Stanford precisely because they enjoy faculty and student contact. You will make your own and their work more satisfying if you appreciate the importance of their assistance not just to your specific needs, but also to the higher purposes of academics. As one administrative assistant said, "Something more important than money, awards, etc., is for the person who is dishing out the work to say, 'Thank you—great job!' The people who take just a minute, even though they have a busy schedule, to say thanks, I will work all the harder for them next time and squeeze their requests in even if I am swamped myself."

Academic Services

Stanford offers a wide range of academic services for students. Make sure your students are aware of them; they can provide tremendous support to students who require help above and beyond what you or your teaching assistants can provide. Connecting students to these services can save you time and increase your teaching satisfaction by maximizing the number of students who are successful in your course.

Academic Skills Coaching

VPTL provides **academic skills coaching** for students who are experiencing academic difficulties. Each student's difficulties are individually assessed. If the problem stems from learning skills deficits, the learning skills specialist helps the student develop the skills to address these problems, including strategies for time management, reading, note taking, test preparation, and test taking. If the assessment points to a learning disability, initial screenings are provided, and, if warranted, referrals are made to the Office of Accessible Education. If an emotional or psychological problem seems to be at the core of the academic difficulty, referrals are made to CAPS.

Student Peer Support

Calling on your students to take responsibility for their own and others' learning can substantially improve student performance and support your teaching goals.

Peer Study Groups

You can recommend or require that your students form study groups. Group study has numerous advantages. It increases the amount of attention each individual student receives and peers often best understand each other's problems with the material. Group discussion also increases the number of perspectives on the material that each student experiences. Moreover, work in small groups is active, rather than passive, learning. Teaching someone else is one of the best ways to test and reinforce one's own learning. Moreover, group learning, because of its sociable context, tends to be self-reinforcing. Many professors advise students to discuss assignments or papers together before they write them up individually. Students can also prepare and share written summaries, dividing the topics among the people in one group or among the different groups. Each group might also give a presentation to the full class on a certain topic.

Students can **request to join a study group**; VPTL will match students with others in the same class who also submit requests.

Peer Tutoring

Another effective method of helping students, especially in large classes, is appointing student tutors from the class. The late Professor William Reynolds of Mechanical Engineering used to give a test on background material at the end of the first lecture and use the results to select several tutors. He would then assign the tutors to spend two hours each week advising fellow students on how to solve homework problems and checking their results. In addition, Reynolds gave the student tutors a few special lectures to broaden their knowledge of the material. The tutors were excused from turning in their homework, but they took exams and were graded according to the same standards as the rest of the class. Reynolds's approach proved successful because it both saved the teacher time and gave the students a substantial amount of attention.

There are also a host of existing tutoring resources that you can recommend to your students. VPTL, as noted, coordinates **several tutoring programs**, and some departments have their own tutoring as well.