



# Being a TA

## 2017-2018



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## Wondering where to start as a new TA?

Based on course specifics and individual faculty preference, each department requires TAs to perform a variety of duties. Moreover, you, as a new TA, arrive with skills and experience that you may transfer to your TA role.

In the following pages, you will find some suggestions to guide you through the process of being a new TA. Not only will it work towards helping you become reflective, independent, and collaborative teachers, but will also assist in working with your course supervisor. These suggestions can provide a framework to help you determine how best to work in your TA role over the coming years.

# Responsibilities of the TA Supervisor

According to Sprague and Nyquist (1989), anyone who is responsible for TAs (senior lab instructors, professors, or other designates) take on three roles: as a manager, as a professional model, and as a mentor.

## Manager

As a manager, course supervisors are encouraged to do the following:

1. Make sure they have a well thought out plan for what their TAs will be doing in their course.
2. Make expectations clear and don't assume that TAs know anything.
3. Be visible, accessible, and visit tutorials and labs.
4. Keep TAs informed. For example, if there are professional development opportunities on campus or in the department related to TA work (such as the TA Consultant program in your department), notify TAs and explain why it is important that they attend.
5. Be collaborative and open to feedback. TAs know what is working or not in their classroom.
6. Give regular feedback, this way TAs can know how they are doing and what to improve instead of guessing what the students and course supervisors are thinking. Make it clear how the department evaluates their work.

## Professional model

As a professional educational model, course supervisors should demonstrate how you as a TA should act. As a model, they should relay the complexity of teaching to you. This includes codes of conduct associated with a teaching role at the university and exposure to all of the policies that you should be aware of as a TA.

## Mentor

As a mentor, course supervisors should help you understand that learning how to teach is a developmental process that takes time. Course supervisors may want to try a cognitive apprenticeship approach. This is when they talk *out loud* their decisions related to the course, which makes their decisions and reasons for the way a course and its components are designed transparent to you.

Additionally, course supervisors should inform you that you need to be aware of the values and ideas you bring about teaching and learning. Most importantly, help you realize that teaching is not the same as learning. Therefore, your ideas about how you learned best are only valid and applicable to a few students and that you have to learn how to take a teacher approach to teaching, not what worked for you approach. As soon as you take on a TA role, you need to understand that you are taking on a new role, which comes with a whole new set of responsibilities.

Sprague, J., & Nyquist, J. D. (1989). TA Supervision. *Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s, New Directions in Teaching and Learning*, 39, 37-53.



## Communication is key

*A course supervisor should contact you as soon as you have been assigned to the course. The majority of TAs, especially new graduate students, are very anxious about their performance, duties, and responsibilities as a TA. By contacting you early and offering to meet you before the course begins, will help alleviate a lot of your fears and anxieties. However, if you don't hear from your course supervisor, don't hesitate to contact him or her immediately.*

### **To get a sense of the type of experience a TA has, a course supervisor may send you the following questionnaire:**

**1.** *Have you had any formal course work or training in how to teach?*

\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

- If yes, how long did that training last?
- About which topics?

**2.** *Have you had any past teaching (including grading) experience?*

\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

- If yes, at what levels have you taught?  
\_\_\_ Elementary (Gr K - 6)  
\_\_\_ Secondary (Gr 7-12)  
\_\_\_ College\university

- And for how many years?  
\_\_\_ Less than one year  
\_\_\_ One to two years  
\_\_\_ Three to six years  
\_\_\_ More than six years

**3.** *In thinking about upcoming TA assignments, what are the three biggest concerns you have?*

- What students will think of me
- Preparing for class
- Establishing and maintaining credibility
- Teaching students
- How to grade students
- Understanding what is expected of me
- Teaching in English or with students who have a different educational culture from my own
- Managing time effectively
- Handling potential conflicts with students
- Doing a good job
- Encouraging students to think critically
- Mastering content well enough to teach
- Working with students of diverse backgrounds
- Other

What are your strengths?

- \_\_\_ Writing papers
- \_\_\_ Study habits
- \_\_\_ Reading papers
- \_\_\_ Working in groups
- \_\_\_ Organizational skills
- \_\_\_ Time management
- \_\_\_ Other, please explain

Adapted from:

<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/supervisor/resources/needs/index.html>



# Before the course begins

*Duties and  
responsibilities need to  
be clear*

**Course supervisors should try to be as detailed as possible.** Even though grading is second nature to them, TAs often do not have a clue how to approach that stack of marking. Providing marking keys and rubrics are excellent but you will need guidance and examples to help you understand the course supervisor's expectations.

**Refer to the TA Checklist (beginning on page 7).** These are the type of questions that you may want to ask the course supervisor. Often, TAs will not ask for fear of seeming naïve about their role. Please use this checklist as a guide to address what you need to ask. Don't be shy!

**Attend workshops and programs.** Educational sessions offered by the Learning and Teaching Centre will greatly benefit you and highlight how important the TA role is on campus.

**Check in with your course supervisor.** Check in often to ensure that your work is meeting expectations and address all questions you may have.

**Request an observation.** If you are a TA in a classroom or lab situation, ask the course supervisor and/or TAC to observe your interactions with students. At the Learning and Teaching Centre, we have many resources on how to approach teaching observations. Please do not hesitate to ask for guidelines and suggestions.

**Request feedback from students.** Review the Learning and Teaching Centre's publication, *Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic*, which contains many useful ideas on how to gather feedback from students and colleagues. Early and mid-term feedback will help you reflect on what you are doing in the classroom to support students' learning.

# During the course

*Stay in contact*

# When the course ends

*Review the course and provide feedback*

**Request constructive feedback about your performance as a TA.** Not all departments incorporate feedback for TAs into their program and therefore any feedback that you can seek will be extremely helpful for future appointments. At the Learning and Teaching Centre we always encourage asking for positive feedback so that you understand what worked well, then constructive guidance as to what to work on and where to access resources to help in that area. Review the resource *Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic*. It provides many ideas on different ways to seek feedback.

**Feedback to course supervisor.** Provide feedback to the course supervisor from the TA perspective on ways that the course could improve.

The **Manager of the LTC Professional Development Programs and TA Training** has many resources and handouts that can assist you with your duties.

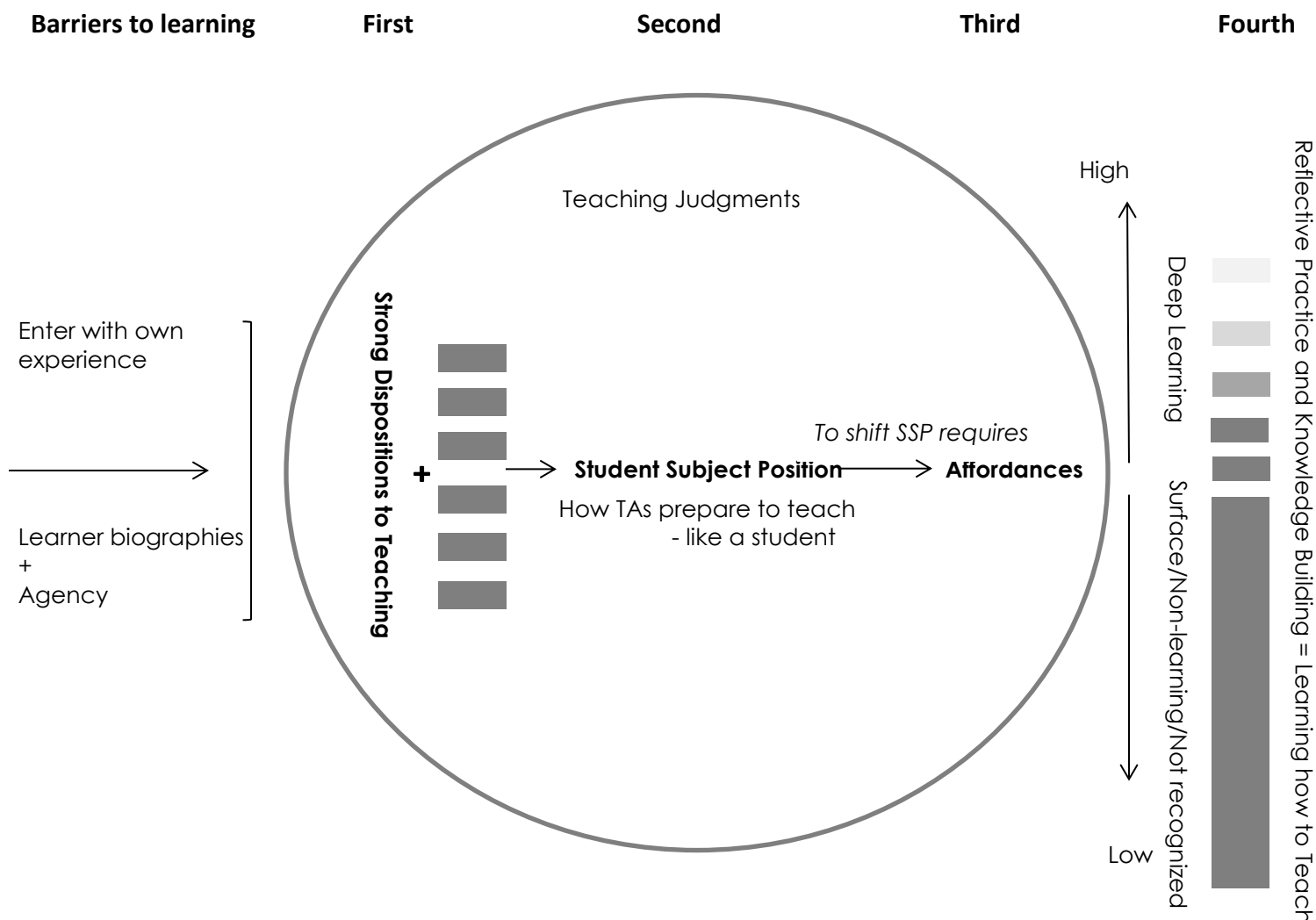


Please do not hesitate to refer your TA to Cynthia Korpan at **local 4798** or through email at **tatrain@uvic.ca** for information, program schedules, or workshop listings.

## Don't new and experienced TAs differ?

You may have years of TA experience. Despite having years of experience, you may not have had the chance for instruction about the work you are performing or may have never benefitted from reflecting on your work. See the next page for the barriers that prohibit TAs from learning how to teach and if not addressed can lead to TAs repeating habits that are detrimental to students' learning.

# A workplace learning approach to TAs learning how to teach: Four barriers that prohibit TAs in their embodied learning process



The diagram above and this discussion originate from research<sup>1</sup> conducted with TAs as the sole instructor in the classroom. Despite this limitation, the results are applicable for other TA positions. The **first** barrier to TAs' learning how to teach is their past experience of being a student. TAs have ideas about learning and teaching that forms their strong disposition about teaching. This disposition, however, is narrowly focused and based on what worked for them. **Secondly**, since TAs have never been in a 'teaching' role, they default to approaching their work from a student subject position. Taking on a new role is a difficult transition so TAs need support to recognize that teaching is completely different from learning. This is extremely important because TAs typically have a lot of autonomy and make many teaching judgments. These judgments can be very detrimental to students' learning if TAs are not given the support they need through affordances – instruction about teaching, and ongoing mentorship. This **third** barrier to learning how to teach, affordances, determines whether a TA learns deeply or has a surface learning experience. Even if a TA is highly motivated to learn how to teach, if not provided with instruction and ongoing mentorship and support, the TA will have a surface or even non-learning experience. But, if a TA is given ample instruction and ongoing support and mentorship, they have a deeper learning experience. Because of the nature of teaching, TAs go through an embodied learning process; learning while teaching. In order to recognize what has been learned through an embodied learning process, TAs need guidance on how to reflect on their learning. Knowing how to reflect on their learning process is the **fourth** barrier to learning how to teach. All of these barriers need to be addressed in order for TAs to learn how to best support students' learning.

<sup>1</sup> Korpan, C. (in process). Doctoral dissertation titled, "Teaching Assistants' Learning in the Workplace."

**The TA will be responsible for:**

working \_\_\_\_\_ (number of hours)  
per week

See Canadian Union of Public  
Employees (CUPE) Agreement at  
<http://web.uvic.ca/~cupe4163/> for  
details about your position.

- holding office hours
- attending lectures
- keeping class records
- creating/selecting class materials
- presenting new material/lecturing
- leading discussions/answering questions
- conducting review sessions
- holding tutorial sessions
- duplicating materials
- preparing/collecting solutions to questions
- grading/providing feedback on assignments and exams
- assigning course grades
- ordering, obtaining AV equipment/materials
- setting up the lab
- running recitation or lab section(s)
- demonstrating procedures or setting up demonstrations
- cleaning the lab
- others (see following pages)

# Overview of Primary TA Responsibilities

*It is important that you, as a TA, determine how many hours you should allocate for class time, laboratories, office hours, preparation, grading, and other duties. By reviewing these pages, and determining which duties you will be taking on, you will be better able to plan your time and perform your responsibilities. Review this list with your course supervisor.*



## Questions TAs may want to ask:

### Course Overview

- What are the course goals/objectives?
- Who are the students (background with subject, level, class list, etc.)?
- What are the names/emails/phone numbers of other TAs assigned to this course?
- What is the procedure to follow if you are ill or must miss a class/lab?
- What is the workload distribution among TAs assigned to the course?

### Initial Tasks

- What are you expected to do prior to the first class meeting?
- Are you expected to attend the first class meeting?

### TA/Supervisor Meetings

- How frequently will you meet with the professor/supervisor?
- How can you be contacted by the professor/supervisor?

\_\_ office phone: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ home phone: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ note on office door: \_\_\_\_\_ (office number: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_ note in laboratory: \_\_\_\_\_ (laboratory: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_ note in box \_\_\_\_\_

- How can the professor/instructor be contacted?

\_\_ office phone: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ home phone: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_ note on office door: \_\_\_\_\_ (office number: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_ note in laboratory: \_\_\_\_\_ (laboratory location: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_ note in box \_\_\_\_\_

It is advisable to take home the contact info for the supervisor and other TAs (if there are any) so that you know who to get in touch with in case of illness or emergencies.



## Questions TAs may want to ask:

continued...

### **Materials**

#### *Textbook/laboratory manual:*

- How can you obtain a copy?

#### *Other materials:*

- If you are responsible for putting materials on reserve, what procedure do you need to follow?
- Will the course have Moodle or another Internet site? (If so, make sure you have access to it.)
  - Find out who maintains and monitors it and who to contact for technical problems.
  - In what way are the students expected to use it?
- Are you expected to read all class materials and answer student questions regarding these materials?
  - Find out who to contact for course content problems.
  - If you are responsible for putting material online, remember that you can only use 10% of copyrighted material

### **Class Meetings**

- How often are you expected to attend class?
  - \_\_\_ every class
  - \_\_\_ exams only
  - \_\_\_ not required to attend any classes
  - \_\_\_ other
- If you are expected to attend classes, at what time are you expected to arrive?
- What responsibilities will you have with respect to the class meeting?
  - \_\_\_ answer questions at the beginning, middle or end of class
  - \_\_\_ distribute/collect assignments and/or handouts
  - \_\_\_ take notes on the lecture
  - \_\_\_ lead discussion(s), facilitate activities
  - \_\_\_ notify students of class cancellations
  - \_\_\_ set up/run AV/lab equipment
  - \_\_\_ lecture/present material (will professor be available for assistance?)
  - \_\_\_ clarify class/university policies (lateness, assignment/test make-up, cheating, etc.)

## Questions TAs may want to ask:

continued...

### **Office Hours**

- Does the professor/instructor hold office hours? \_\_ yes \_\_ no
  - If yes, where and when?
- Are you expected to hold weekly office hours? \_\_ yes \_\_ no
  - If yes, where and when?
- How will students be notified of the location and times of your office hours?

### **Assignments**

- What kind of assignments are students expected to complete?

### **Other Student Contact Responsibilities**

- How will students contact you?
- Are due dates and late-acceptance policy specified in the syllabus?
- If you are working in a lab, it is not always wise to give out your lab phone number. We strongly recommend that you never give out your home phone number.
- An email list or Moodle bulletin board is an easy mechanism for building community/answering questions.
- Are you expected to:
  - \_\_\_ conduct review or help sessions?
  - \_\_\_ tutor individuals or groups (beyond office hours)?
- If so, when and where?

How can you obtain a copy of department policies on grading, plagiarism, and so on, and a copy of university policies that directly affect instruction?

### **Technology**

- Are you expected to reserve, obtain and return AV, computer or laboratory equipment?
  - If so, what equipment will be needed and when will it be needed?
  - Where is this equipment located?
  - Is there a charge, form or project number that should be used when reserving equipment?

### **Photocopying**

- Are you expected to photocopy materials for the course?  
Remember that only 10% of copyrighted material can be used.
  - If so, what materials will need to be photocopied and where are they located?
- Are you expected to bring photocopied materials to class?
- If you are responsible for photocopying, where should it be done?
  - \_\_\_ in departmental office?
    - Will you be provided with a code?
- Are you required to bring the photocopying to:
  - \_\_\_ a departmental secretary?
  - \_\_\_ a duplicating service on campus?
- How much lead time is needed?
- What is the procedure?

## Questions TAs may want to ask:

### Assignments

- What kind of assignments are students expected to complete?
- Are due dates and late-acceptance policy specified in the syllabus?
- How can you obtain a copy of department policies on grading, plagiarism, and so on, and a copy of university policies that directly affect instruction?
- Find out who is responsible for marking schemes and grading rubrics.
- Make sure you know the mechanism for grade complaints and articulate this to your class.
- With respect to assignments, what responsibilities will you have?
  - \_\_\_ preparing
  - \_\_\_ collecting
  - \_\_\_ grading/recording scores
  - \_\_\_ giving feedback
  - \_\_\_ instructing students about specific formats

### Exams

- When will exams be held?
- Approximately how many questions and of what type will you be expected to create for each exam? By when?
- Will the professor/ instructor review the questions you create?
- What resources are available to assist you in preparing questions (e.g.: sample questions, old exams, test banks)?
- Are you expected to score/grade exams? By when?
- Who establishes grading criteria?
- Are you expected to invigilate exams?
- Will the professor/instructor attend exams?
- Are you expected to bring exams to the exam session?
- Are you expected to bring other materials to the exam session?

### Administration/Grading

- What responsibilities will you have with respect to administration and grading?
  - \_\_\_ enforce academic misconduct rules
  - \_\_\_ assign grades/make recommendations for grading
  - \_\_\_ keep class records. If so, when must they be turned in?
  - \_\_\_ tabulate grades. If so, when must they be turned in?
  - \_\_\_ fill out and/or submit grade sheets. If so, when must they be turned in?
  - \_\_\_ post scores /grades. If so, when and where?



**Reference:**

Questions TAs may want to ask was adapted from The Center for Teaching and Learning Services. (2008). TA Responsibilities Checklist. Retrieved July 6, 2010, from the University of Minnesota website:

[http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/prod/groups/ohr/@pub/@ohr/documents/asset/ohr\\_46421.pdf](http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/prod/groups/ohr/@pub/@ohr/documents/asset/ohr_46421.pdf)

## Questions TAs may want to ask:

### TA Performance Evaluation/Feedback

- What manner of performance evaluation can you expect?
  - formal observation/evaluation from faculty/instructor
  - peer observation
  - student ratings
- When will evaluation(s) be given?
  - at mid-semester
  - at semester's end
  - at the TA's request
  - when there is a problem
  - informally during the semester as part of regular meetings
- Student evaluation of TA's performance will be:
  - When? Who will receive copies?

### Course Evaluation

- What manner of evaluation will be conducted regarding the course and the instructor/professor?
- Who gets copies of the results?

### Other

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**The Resource Centre for Students with a Disability has kindly provided the following information to assist faculty.**

Faculty should encourage TAs to become familiar with UVic's [Policy AC1205 and Procedures](#) on providing access to students with disabilities. Students may approach a TA to request or confirm a need for accessible course materials, such as captioning for videos, extra time in a lab, or to sign off on an exam form. Instructors will have received a confidential memo of accommodation for students.

- Students need to expressly permit the sharing of this information with TAs. No further personal information should be requested from the student. If students approach TAs directly for accommodations, they should be referred to the RCSD.

Please refer to [www.rcsd.uvic.ca](http://www.rcsd.uvic.ca) for more information about accommodations and support.

Built in curriculum accessibility (universal instructional design) is the key to reducing the need for individual or “one off” accommodations. Please refer to the booklet: University Instructional Design: Creating an Accessible Curriculum at the University of Victoria

[http://lrc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/publications/documents/\\_UVicUIDBook.pdf](http://lrc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/publications/documents/_UVicUIDBook.pdf)

**Checklist for Accessibility:**

- The course curriculum has been designed in an accessible and usable way and learning outcomes have been established.
- Instructor faces the class when speaking and avoids standing in front of windows or light sources.
- A variety of presentation formats to reinforce or emphasize important points have been used, and discussion questions have been repeated.
- Tour labs and discuss safety concerns, including special issues related to disability. Verbal and written lab instructions were provided.
- Course materials, both printed and electronic, are usable, accessible and available in different formats, such as e-text, or on line.
- Students were informed about willingness to reasonably accommodate and clear expectations for performance were communicated.
- Any request for reasonable accommodation communicated to me by faculty was respected, and referrals to the RCSD were made when students requested accommodation.
- Students who used services and technologies in my class such as notetakers, interpreters or transcribers or who used audio recorders were accommodated appropriately.
- All student disability-related information was kept confidential.

Examples of possible accommodations if there are barriers to accessibility:

- Audio-recording the class
- A copy of notes and PowerPoints
- Missing some classes
- Extra time for exams and in-class assignments
- Extensions (with prior approval) to assignments



# TAC Contact Info

The TA Consultant Program at UVic positions TA mentors (known as “TA Consultants” or “TACs”) in most departments throughout campus. The TACs develop discipline-specific seminars designed for TAs in the departments they are responsible for, taught in the fall or over the academic year, that cover a range of practical topics, approaches and issues most pertinent to TAs at UVic and complemented by supporting materials. Below is the list of departments that have a TAC and the name of the TAC. Please feel free to contact the department for the TAC's contact information.

**Anthropology**

Cindy Huang

**Art History and Visual Studies**

David Christopher

**Biology**

Gerry Gourlay

**Chemistry**

Tasha Jarisz

**Child and Youth Care**

Angie Gray

**Computer Science**

Eirini Kalliamvakou

**Earth and Ocean Sciences**

Emma Pascoe

**Economics**

Ben Paterson

**Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies**

Satinder Viridi

**Engineering**

Pariyan Tayebi

**English**

Janice Niemann

**Environmental Studies**

Claire O'Manique

**French**

Emma Kwasnica

**Geography**

Maleea Acker

**Germanic and Slavic Studies**

Noga Yarmar

**Greek and Roman Studies**

Arnold van Roessel

**History**

Alexie Glover

**International TACs**

Yan Gao and Pei-Ling Wang

**Linguistics**

Adar Anisman

**Mathematics and Statistics**

Chi Ming Kou

**Music**

Alanna Kazdan

**Pacific and Asian Studies**

David Long

**Philosophy**

Aidan Collier

**Political Science**

Didier Zuniga

**Psychology**

Elliott Lee

**Sociology**

Ashley Berard