

Department of Economics

Guidelines for the Duties and Responsibilities of Teaching Assistants and their Supervisors

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a vital role in the educational activities of the Department. They enhance the teaching capacity of instructors, and provide valuable additional instruction to students. They are an integral part of our program delivery. In accepting a teaching assistant role, graduate students become employees, with new responsibilities and rights. At the same time, TAs are students themselves. They must balance the demands of their TA responsibilities with the pursuit of their own educational goals and the associated demands of their coursework. The working relationship between TAs and their supervising instructors should be based on a mutual recognition of these dual roles that TAs play in the Department.

The specific responsibilities of TAs can vary between departments and between courses. The following guidelines are not meant to replace existing collective agreements for TAs and instructors but will provide additional information to help make this relationship work smoothly.

Responsibilities and Conduct of TAs

- TAs should adopt a professional approach to their TA duties, both in terms of their interaction with their students and with their supervisor.
- TAs must ensure that the assigned duties are completed within stated deadlines, and that any unanticipated problems regarding the work schedule and/or deadlines are communicated to the supervisor in a timely way. TAs should expect heavier workloads around exam times, and should plan their own personal study timing accordingly.
- In the event of a particularly severe confluence of TA duties and personal study requirements, TAs should feel free to request from their supervisor some flexibility with respect to the timing of TA duties. Supervisors will accommodate these requests when they do not affect the ability of students to meet the course requirements and adhere to University deadlines.
- TAs are jointly responsible with their supervisors for completing the Checklist of Assigned Duties and Approved Work Schedule form at the start of term (no later than the fourth week of the term). They should each keep a copy of the Checklist, and TAs should keep an ongoing written record of their hours worked. If actual hours worked appear to be consistently trending above the anticipated level then the TA should bring this to the attention of their supervisor so that any necessary adjustments can be made. The TA should not wait until a significant shortfall in hours develops before alerting their supervisor.
- TAs should recognize that some assignments and some supervisors may be more demanding than others. While every effort is made to ensure that all TA assignments of any given number of hours will translate into the same overall demands on the TA, some differences across assignments will inevitably occur. The appropriate benchmark for assessing whether or not a TA is being treated “fairly” is the assigned number of hours, not the hours actually worked by other TAs in comparable positions. The TA Collective Agreement states, in Article 14.03(c), that “... the work schedule (particularly self-scheduled time), is only an approximation of the time required for completing the assigned duties, since the actual hours may be affected greatly by differences in the expertise and experience of the employee and even by the differences in style and approach to aspects of the work.” Any concerns about the TA duties or the actual workload relative to assigned hours should be brought to the attention of the supervisor.
- Any problems arising from a review of the hours and duties assigned will normally be resolved by the TA and the supervisor. A resolution may consist of a decrease in the duties, but normally not an increase in paid hours. In the event of a conflict between a TA and their supervisor that cannot be resolved to their mutual satisfaction, the TA or supervisor should report the problem to the Department Chair.

Responsibilities and Conduct of Supervisors

- Supervisors should adopt a professional approach to their interaction with their TAs.
- Supervisors must clearly identify the job expectations and deadlines and should set reasonable deadlines with respect to the completion of grading assignments. It is important for supervisors to recognize the dual roles that TAs play in the department, and to set their expectations accordingly.
- At the beginning of the term supervisors should advise their TAs on the timing of midterm examinations, assignments and other events around which the workload is likely to increase. This can facilitate planning by the TA with respect to organizing their overall workload.
- The supervisor is required to make every reasonable effort not to schedule or reschedule work in such a way that it conflicts with the TAs' scheduled academic duties (e.g. classes, conferences, an oral defence or an examination). The supervisor should also make every effort to accommodate flexibility with respect to the timing of the self-scheduled TA workload when requested to do so by the TA, but the supervisor has ultimate authority in setting deadlines. Where a conflict exists, the TA and supervisor will attempt to resolve it themselves. In the case of a scheduled conflict (e.g. mid-term or final exam), possible resolutions can include having the TA switch duties with another TA or having the supervisor request additional TA support from the Administrative Officer.
- Supervisors should ensure that the qualifications of TAs and the nature of the duties to be performed are accurately specified in the request for teaching assistant support, which will be included in the advertised posting of TA jobs. The TA Collective Agreement requires that all positions designed primarily for students be advertised 3 months before the start of each term.
- Supervisors are jointly responsible with their TAs for completing the Checklist of Assigned Duties and Approved Work Schedule form at the start of term (no later than the fourth week of the term). They should each keep a copy of the Checklist, and supervisors should ensure that TAs keep an ongoing written record of hours worked. If actual hours worked appear to be consistently trending above the anticipated level then it is the responsibility of the supervisor to address the situation, either via recommendations to the TA with respect to achieving greater efficiency, or via revisions to the workload. Supervisors may not ask TAs to work more hours than they are contracted to perform.
- Supervisors bear the primary responsibility for all aspects of course delivery. The Department's Standard for the Distribution of Duties and Responsibilities defines the teaching assignment to include preparation of course outlines, regular updating of course content, setting and grading tests and final examinations, setting and grading assignments and/or essays, designing and organizing labs, holding regular office hours, and making oneself available by appointment for students unable to meet during regularly scheduled office hours. Elements of each of these duties can be delegated to TAs, but the supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the TAs carry out these tasks in a satisfactory manner.
- Supervisors should familiarize themselves with common practices and expectations within the Department with respect to TA workloads. While some supervisors may reasonably set higher expectations than others, it is important for the purposes of equitable treatment of TAs that workload expectations do not differ dramatically across supervisors within the Department. Supervisors should be willing to hear concerns raised by their TAs with respect to workloads, and make a genuine effort to determine whether or not their own expectations are reasonable in the context of common Departmental practice.
- In the event of a conflict between a supervisor and their TA that cannot be resolved to their mutual satisfaction, the supervisor or TA should report the problem to the Department Chair.