

## **The Training of Teaching Assistants**

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The Graduate School is searching for ways to help teaching assistants succeed. At present the Graduate School offers two programs to help graduate students. This includes a day-long professional development workshop for teaching assistants and a monthly discussion session on teaching experiences called Fun Fridays. This presentation will provide insights into the professional development efforts of the Graduate School and address additional needs of graduate students.

This academic year began with a professional development workshop for teaching assistants. The one-day workshop, held in mid-August was designed by a committee of faculty and staff to meet the needs of experienced and inexperienced students. This year, close to 300 graduate students attended the mandatory workshop. The workshop format included general sessions followed by breakout sessions. The general sessions focused on meeting the needs of all students. Through games and discussions, students were exposed to the following sessions: a) alternative approaches to teaching; b) strategies for working with first generation and minority students; c) teacher-student mentoring relationships; d) issues related to racial and sexual harassment, and e) an overview of the student honor system.

The breakout sessions allowed students to select topics based on their individual needs. Several sessions discussed campus resources such as the library and information technology services. A few sessions were offered to assist students who would primarily be assisting with instructional activities in laboratories. A special session was offered on hazardous material and safety.

For those students new to teaching, many sought sessions to help them overcome their fear of the classroom. They selected sessions such as "*First Day Terrors: A Workshop in Overcoming New Teacher Anxiety*" and "*All the World's a Stage: the Classroom as Theater*". These sessions were designed to help students adjust to their new role in front of the classroom.

Many of the experienced students attended sessions that were designed to help improve their teaching skills, and help them find balance with their roles as teacher and student. Popular sessions for experienced students included: a) "*The Challenge: Balancing Graduate Assistant Duties with Academic Responsibilities*"; b) "*Best Practices: A Dialog with Experienced TA's and Undergraduates about Creating Good Learning Environments in Labs*" and c) "*Classrooms and Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences*".

Departments especially those where graduate students play a major role in undergraduate teaching, provide additional training workshops for their students. The Graduate School's orientation workshop compliments the efforts of the departments by allowing students from all areas of study to come together and discuss effective teaching and learning strategies. Students learn from experienced faculty and students about alternative strategies to promote the learning process in the classroom and in laboratory settings.

Through the workshop, the Graduate School also informed graduate students about campus resources that are available to help them as teachers and students. We provided students with contact information on the presenters as well as a list of campus resources. We also offered a resource fair that took place concurrently with the workshop in Corbett Center. The resource fair allowed students to meet student support staff and discuss available services.

Students were asked to complete a workshop evaluation questionnaire. The Graduate School received 226 returned questionnaires. We found that most students felt that the workshop was helpful in preparing them for their classroom experience. When asked which workshop was the most helpful, most students stated the session on first year teaching at NMSU. This was expected since most of the workshop participants were new to teaching. Students also appreciated sessions on campus resources and many enjoyed the session on balancing teaching and academics.

When we asked what knowledge students would take away from the workshop, most indicated that they learned about alternative approaches and methods of teaching. They also learned about their roles as teachers. Several also indicated that the workshop held them build confidence in their ability to teach.

The students' evaluation of the workshop was made prior to their involvement in the classroom. To learn of the needs of students and plan for additional activities for them, the Graduate School introduced a new program in October 2002. Fun Fridays is a monthly discussion session on teaching for graduate assistants. The purpose of program is to offer students an opportunity to share their teaching experiences. During the fall semester, the first hour was an open discussion session where students share their experiences with one another and faculty. Faculty were available to answer questions and concerns of the students. The last hour was a social hour for graduate students to meet students outside of their department. Next spring, the Graduate School will begin with a social hour and then have open discussions of teaching experiences during the second hour. We discovered that it takes students a little while before they feel comfortable in speaking about their experiences.

To date, the Graduate School has sponsored three Fun Fridays. The first two sessions focused on teaching problems and concerns. The December session was a holiday social to thank the students for their contribution to New Mexico State University.

I wish to share some of the concerns and issues that emerged during the first 2 Fun Fridays. First, who comes to Fun Fridays? Most of those who come to Fun Fridays are international students. Attendance has ranged from 15 to 35 students at each session with the largest attendance in December for the holiday social. Below I highlight some of the concerns that have emerged from these initial meetings.

<b>Concerns Raised during Fun Fridays by Teaching Assistants</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The need for further language training</li><li>• Strategies to motivate students to learn</li><li>• Alternative ways to promote lively classroom participation</li><li>• Coping with students who lack basic reading, writing and comprehension skills</li><li>• Strategies to encourage class attendance</li><li>• How to handle situations when students work beyond their required hours</li><li>• The need for more teacher training</li></ul> |
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As mentioned prior, the majority of students who come to Fun Fridays are international teaching assistants. Most are adjusting to American culture, a new campus and new teaching experiences. Many of the foreign students are also adjusting to a new language. Departments and the Graduate School need to ensure that foreign students are aware of language training services on campus.

Most students raise questions about the best way to motivate or excite students about learning. Teaching assistants also want to learn of strategies to promote classroom discussions. They need more training on how students learn as well as strategies to engage students in the learning process.

Graduate teaching assistants also raised questions about how to work with freshmen, in particular, those who lack basic reading and writing skills. It's important to make sure that teaching assistants know where on campus they can send students for help.

Teaching assistants also find that they work longer hours than required to be effective teachers and assistants. Students need direction on how to handle long work hours while balancing their academic work.

The Fun Friday sessions suggest that teaching assistants need additional training workshops during the academic year. The Graduate School will explore with faculty and staff ways to meet the current needs of teaching assistants. Should the Graduate School sponsor short, one-hour workshops throughout the year, or a day-long workshop in the spring? Suggestions and volunteers are needed to serve on the Graduate School's Professional Development workshop committee.