

Department of Biostatistics

Policies on Teaching Assistantships

This document outlines Departmental policies regarding Teaching Assistantships. It is intended for both faculty and students to clarify what is expected and to provide some suggestions and guidelines about approaches that can make things easier for the course instructor and TA alike.

Which courses receive Teaching Assistants?

The number of TAs assigned to a course will be on the basis of enrollment and anticipated duties. For larger service courses, the student/TA ratio will not normally exceed 20. TAs are not usually assigned to topics courses.

Who serves as a TA?

Many Masters and doctoral students in Biostatistics serve as a TA. The Department of Biostatistics may require that a student serve as a TA as a component of a funding package. The Director of Graduate Studies is responsible for assigning students to the various courses needing TAs, based upon faculty and course needs and student qualifications and preferences.

What are some of the benefits of being a TA?

Biostatistics Ph.D. students who are TAs typically register for TIME-T to indicate that the teaching work is being undertaken. Other Biostatistics students who register through HSPH typically register for BIO 311, Teaching Tutorial, for 5 units per semester (pass/fail) under the supervision of the Director of Graduate Studies. The monetary payment for a 5 credit course will be set at the beginning of each academic year. Payment and academic credit for a 2.5 credit course will be half the amount of a 5 credit course. Arrangements for payment are made through the Department office. Of course, the teaching experiences and opportunities for working closely with the course instructor can be invaluable to the TA.

What are the Duties of a TA?

TA duties will ordinarily include most or all of the following:

- attending lectures
- holding office hours
- running a lab session
- helping to prepare handouts, exams, homework, and solution sets
- grading homework, keeping a record of all grades
- helping to grade exams, assist with recording of grades
- coordinating access to computing facilities, online data sets, and web applications
- attending regular meetings with other course TAs and/or the course instructor

Timeliness in the completion of these duties is very important. It is strongly recommended that the course instructor and TA communicate on a regular basis to discuss duties, to share feedback, and to ensure that the student's time commitment is appropriate. As a rule of thumb, a TA for a 5 credit course should plan on devoting the same amount of time as they would to a 5 credit course they were taking. In general, students typically spend 10 to 12 hours per week on average, though some may take more or less, depending on

the amount of background they have in the material being taught. Any student who feels that he or she is spending too much time TAing should speak to their course instructor or possibly the Director of Graduate Studies, if appropriate. In monitoring the amount of time spent, it is useful for both faculty and students to take into account the fact that time pressures vary greatly over the course of a semester. For example, TA duties tend to be light for the first week or two, heavy in the middle, and then light during exam week (unless the TA has been asked to help with grading exams). It may be useful for the course instructor and TA to itemize and review the number of hours spent on each of the activities above. Periodic student surveys suggest that grading homework and running lab sessions are the two items that most often occupy TAs, particularly those serving as a TA for the first time. Here are some simple strategies that can help:

- It is helpful and appropriate for the course instructor to provide clear guidelines about the materials to be presented in labs. This might involve, for example, providing data examples or problems. TAs are not normally expected to present new material in lab sessions. Faculty are also reminded that expertise in course material and teaching ability vary from TA to TA and course instructors are expected to assist TAs with any difficulties they may encounter.
- In larger courses with more than one TA, some course instructors have found it useful to split different duties among the TAs. For example, it may be helpful to have a “head TA” whose duties are to prepare lab sessions and coordinate the overall TA activities in the course. Others have modified this idea by having one TA prepare the homework solutions and another prepare lab exercises, and some courses have had TAs alternate the leading of two labs every other week. Such assignment of duties can substantially streamline the work load and improve the overall quality of the course as well. Students and course instructors are strongly encouraged to talk about these and other creative ideas to make the TA experience more productive and rewarding for everyone involved.
- If there are heavy grading loads in courses where the Student/TA ratio is high, but not high enough to warrant adding another TA, the course instructor can request the hiring of a grader for a set number of hours per week. The payment for this work will be an hourly rate set by the Department at the beginning of the academic year. The course instructor and grader must agree in advance about the amount of homework to be graded each week and the time to be spent. The grader would not be expected to attend class or hold office hours, but should be provided with a worked solution set and grading instructions from either the course instructor or a TA. Ordinarily, a grader should not be hired to spend any more than 3 to 5 hours per week on this activity. Course instructors considering this option are encouraged to discuss the idea with the Director of Graduate Studies.

In cases where TA duties include assisting in the grading of exams, course instructors should provide the TA with very clear guidelines with regard to grading schemes. It is important for course instructors to be aware that some students feel uncomfortable about evaluating their peers.

Some course instructors may ask their TA to give an occasional lecture. This may happen, for instance, if the course instructor will be out of town. Giving a class lecture can be an excellent learning experience for a TA. However, it will generally be necessary for the course instructor to provide detailed instructions and close supervision of the TA.

To make it easier for students in the course to contact their TAs, we encourage TAs to share their e-mail addresses and mailbox locations with their students. Of course, this requires regular checking on the part of the TA.

TA Training and Opportunities for Help and Feedback

The Department provides training for new and continuing TAs as part of the Departmental and School-wide Orientation Program in the fall. Students who have not served as a TA in the past at HSPH will be required to participate, though all TAs are invited. Ellen Sarkisian, who coordinates University-wide

training programs in teaching, will help coordinate and provide this training.

There is strong encouragement for students and course instructors to talk regularly about the student's experience as a TA, and for the course instructor to provide ongoing advice and help. In general, TAs are especially encouraged to talk to their course instructor if they experience difficulties. Other sources of advice include the student's academic advisor and members of the Student Advising Committee or the Student Committee.

Evaluation of TAs

Interim course evaluations of the TAs by students in the class can offer helpful suggestions to the TA on ways to improve. These could be carried out in the class lectures or in the lab sessions, early enough to give time for the TA to make any changes necessary. Other useful techniques include having a teaching session videotaped or sitting in on a fellow TA's lab session to observe classroom dynamics and pick up teaching tips. TAs can contact Ellen Sarkisian for student feedback surveys and related evaluation materials and to arrange for videotaping and followup discussion.

At the end of the semester, course instructors fill out a "Teaching Assistant Evaluation Form." Completion of these forms will give TAs more formal feedback on their performance and encourage course instructors and TAs to discuss issues related to effective teaching. The Student Advising Committee uses this information to help with the assignment of TAs in subsequent years. The completed evaluation will be placed in the student's folder. Course instructors are also encouraged to share student course evaluations with their TAs.

Teaching Awards

The Department has a longstanding tradition of recognizing outstanding Teaching Assistants (TAs). Each year faculty are encouraged to nominate TAs for a Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, in recognition of "outstanding teaching." Receiving a Certificate of Distinction in Teaching is an honor that can be added to a student's CV or teaching portfolio.

Sexual Harassment and Unprofessional Relationships

GSAS and HSPH have clear policies against any form of sexual harassment. Course instructors and Teaching Assistants in particular are expected to be aware of the University's requirements and maintain professional relationships with their students at all times. The Student Handbooks for both HSPH and GSAS describe their policies on sexual harassment. In addition, there are a variety of resources available to any student or TA who believes he or she is a victim of sexual harassment. In addition to the Department Chair, the following people can provide assistance: Bernita Anderson, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs (617-432-1069); Chris Ciotti, Associate Dean of Human Resources (617-432-7096); and Linda Wilcox, Ombudsperson (617-432-4040).