

# **Handbook for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants**

**Department of Psychology  
University of Florida**

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## Overview

An undergraduate teaching assistant (TA) in the Department of Psychology will work under the supervision of a faculty or graduate student instructor to learn about college-level teaching in psychology. Each undergraduate TA experience is unique, tailored to both the student's skills and knowledge as well as the instructor's needs. Independent of the particular course or instructor, TAs will benefit intellectually by developing their communication and leadership skills and by gaining a better understanding of the ways in which people learn. Volunteering as a TA can offer you an invaluable experience that is unlikely to be found in any of your other classes.

### **Who is eligible to be a TA?**

Undergraduate TAs are required to be more advanced students (junior or senior class standing in terms of time spent at UF, not # of credits) who have previously completed and earned an above-average grade in the course for which they will serve as a TA. TAs must be supervised by either a faculty member or graduate student instructor.

### **How are TAs selected?**

Currently, there is no formalized process by which instructors select TAs. The decision regarding whether or not to have a TA is at the sole discretion of the instructor. Students should approach instructors directly and inquire about serving as a TA. To increase the likelihood of being selected, prospective TAs should demonstrate academic excellence in their courses and interact regularly with their instructors. Prospective TAs should also present themselves as mature and capable of functioning in a teaching role. Selection as a TA is an honor and is therefore reserved for truly outstanding undergraduate students.

### **Can I earn course credit for being a TA?**

Yes. The department requires that students register for credit under PSY 4940, Introduction to Teaching in Psychology, in any semester when the student is a TA. Students can take 1-3 credits per semester, with a maximum of 4 hours to count toward the major. For each credit taken, students must complete 45 hours of work during this semester. This translates into 3 hours per week during Spring and Fall semesters, 3.75 hours per week during Summer C, and 7.5 hours per week during Summer A or Summer B (for each credit taken).

To enroll, students must complete the registration form available on the psychology advising website and obtain the signature of their instructor. If you plan to work primarily with a graduate student as your instructor, you must also obtain a signature from the graduate student's faculty supervisor. Once signed, take the form to the Psychology Advising office (135 PSY), where an advisor will register you for the course. At the end of the semester, the instructor will assign you a S or U grade based on the hours you completed and the satisfactory nature of your work as a TA.

## **Expectations and Responsibilities**

### **What will my responsibilities be as a TA?**

Each individual instructor will determine the tasks with which you will be involved. Typical responsibilities may include facilitating discussion groups or study sessions, assisting an instructor in the preparation of assignments and lectures, reviewing written assignments and providing evaluative feedback, holding office hours, proctoring exams along with the instructor, and responding to student questions and inquiries. TAs often play a critical role in creating a small class atmosphere within a large class. TAs are expected to meet regularly with their instructor to review their responsibilities and receive feedback on their performance.

### **What are TAs NOT allowed to do?**

In compliance with state and federal regulations, undergraduate TAs cannot have access to UFID numbers, social security numbers, or specific grades of other students. Whereas TAs can assist with grading on some assignments or exams, they should not assign final grades to other students, nor should they develop a grading rubric without input from the instructor. Consistent with this policy, all materials that are graded by TAs should be anonymous, i.e., not have the students' names on them. One way to achieve this is to have students in the class select a unique code identifier (not their social security # or UFID) and use this code instead of their names on all coursework. Only the instructor should have access to the list that links codes with names. If a TA is entering grades, he/she should be entering them into a document where the codes, and not the names, are listed.

### **What will the instructor expect from a TA?**

- Throughout the semester, TAs will interact with students in different contexts for various reasons. TAs are expected to treat all students with the respect that every person deserves, refraining from derogatory statements or behaviors under any circumstance.
- TAs are expected to be dependable in fulfilling the responsibilities given to them. Plan ahead and show up for all obligations. Let the instructor know in advance if an unavoidable conflict arises.
- TAs are expected to keep all information about their students and student performances confidential.
- TAs are expected to know the instructor's policies for dealing with student complaints, such as situations in which students miss deadlines. Please discuss these with the instructor, so that you know what you can handle versus what needs to be referred to the instructor.

## **Teaching Tips**

(adapted from <http://medsci.indiana.edu/medsci/Page%20Info/UTA.pdf>)

Many students have not had any prior experience as a TA. Here are some basic principles of teaching to help you get started:

- Greet students in a courteous and friendly manner, both inside and outside the classroom.

- Make sure that you understand the course material and policies so that you can answer students' questions. Showing students that you are confident and prepared will help them to develop confidence in you as a TA.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so. However, make sure to find the answer and follow up with the student at a later point.
- Help students to develop their own answers to questions, rather than simply giving them the answers. Remember that while your goal is to help students learn the course material, you are also teaching them how to study and how to learn.
- Encourage students to talk to each other, discussing class material and sharing their insights. The best way to assess one's knowledge is the ease with which one can communicate it to someone else.
- Discourage direct questions about what will be on the exams. Remind students that you are there to help them gain understanding of concepts presented in the course, not to give them information about exams.
- Give sincere positive reinforcement whenever possible. Positive comments do more than anything else to spur students to higher levels of achievement.

## **Ethical Issues**

In working as a TA, you will be in a position of authority relative to your peers who are students taking the class, and it is important that you treat this authority professionally at all times. Please be aware of and respect the following issues:

### **Confidentiality of student records**

TAs must understand the need to protect student privacy and confidentiality in all aspects of the course:

- Academic and/or personal information about a student that is brought to the attention of a TA through his/her instructional role in the course should not be shared with anyone but the course instructor.
- Grades or other assessments of student performance must not be discussed with anyone other than the student and the course instructor.
- When in the TA's possession, homework and other graded assignments must be stored securely and not left out in areas where they could be viewed inappropriately.
- You should also treat any other information obtained in your TA role as confidential, such as students' attendance patterns and timely submission of assignments.

### **Promoting academic integrity**

One of the goals as a TA is to uphold the academic integrity of the course. The University of Florida Honor Pledge is: "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honesty and integrity." On all work submitted for credit by students at the university, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment."

At the University of Florida, any individual who becomes aware of a violation of the honor code is bound by honor to take corrective action. As a TA, report any misconduct immediately to your instructor. Do not take any action directly, such as confronting the student.

### **University policies on discrimination and harassment**

The University of Florida mandates an educational and working environment for its students, faculty, and staff that is free from discrimination and harassment. For example, sexual harassment is defined as objectionable, unwanted sexual attention from either a person in a position of authority or power or from a peer. Sexual harassment also can involve verbal or written communications of a sexual nature that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational or work environment. Racial harassment can be defined similarly, with the communications involving derogatory comments regarding race.

It is required that TAs treat all students equally and fairly. TAs must never discriminate against or harass students on the basis of race, gender, religion, age, physical disability, national origin, political view, sexual orientation, previous performance in the course, or any other criterion. TAs must also never show favoritism to students on the basis of any of the above criteria. Any behavior that results in the harassment or intimidation of another person will not be tolerated, and the perpetrator will be subject to disciplinary action.

If you are subject to discrimination or harassment from a student in the class for which you are a TA, you should report the incident to your instructor immediately.

### **Appropriate professional behavior with peers**

As a TA, you are in an instructor's role and must work with the professor to minimize conflicts of interest. Consequently, you must keep a professional distance between you and the students in the class. It is inappropriate for TAs to date students in their classes, and TAs are expected to inform their instructors of any possible conflicts of interest due to previous or present personal relationships with students in the course. TAs must also never accept any money or personal gifts from students in the course. Lastly, TAs should dress in a manner that is appropriate for professional interactions with students.