Characterizing the Concerns of New Graduate Teaching Assistants at a Large, Research-Focused University

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Agenda

• Background
• Research design
  • Experimental aims
  • Experimental Framework
  • Research instruments
• Results and Conclusions
• Next steps
• Questions and discussion
Background

• Graduate teaching assistants’ (GTAs’) preparation and teaching skills in a growing areas of research
  • Masters and doctoral-granting schools rely on GTAs
  • STEM departments rely on GTAs

• GTAs typically receive some training
  • Variation between institutions and departments
Roles of and resources for GTAs at UofSC

• Responsibilities vary widely

• Teaching Assistant Orientation (TAO)
• Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE)
  • Certificate programs / Preparing Future Faculty
• GRAD 701 or similar
• Weekly prep meetings
• Informal / formal mentorship
Predicting GTAs’ instructional quality

• Previous teaching experience
• Self-efficacy
• Value ascribed to role
• Access to / participation in professional development
• Gender
• Degree program
Project Aims

• **Aim 1:** Characterize concerns of GTAs at the beginning and end of their first semester as a GTA

• **Aim 2:** Compare concerns of GTAs in STEM and non-STEM graduate programs

• **Aim 3:** Understand what teaching-related resources GTAs chose to utilize and why
Conceptual Framework for GTA Professional Development Evaluation and Research

(Reeves et al., 2016)
Population

- University of South Carolina
  - R1 institution
  - 27,000+ students

- New GTAs at UofSC
  - ~400 in fall semesters
  - ~60 in spring semesters

- Reach GTAs via TAO and GRAD 701
Data Collection Instruments

Current Data Collection Tools
• Pre-TAO Survey
• Post-TAO Survey
• Mid-Semester Survey
• End-of-Semester Survey

Future Data Collection Tools
• Q-Focus Groups and/or Interviews
• Sort Activities

Mix of quantitative and qualitative questions based on preliminary finding. Email me if you’d like to know more specific details about the survey instruments used or implementation procedures: ga2@email.sc.edu
GTAs’ Demographic Characteristics

International GTAs

- International GTAs: 25%
- Domestic GTAs: 75%

GTA Gender

- Female: 49%
- Male: 49%
- Gender Non-conforming / Prefer not to answer: 2%

Age of GTAs in Years

- <20: 32%
- 21-23: 7%
- 24-26: 13%
- 27-29: 48%
- 30-32: 4%
- 33-35: 4%
- 36+: 14%

GTAs’ Programs of Study

- STEM: 48%
- Health-Related: 13%
- Social Sciences: 32%
- Other: 7%
Previous Teaching Experience

- Previous TA experience positively correlated to **confidence in TA abilities**
- Previous TA experience NOT correlated to confidence in ability to find resources or excitement about teaching
- Previous K12 experience NOT correlated to confidence in TA abilities, confidence in finding resources or excitement about teaching
Post-Graduation Plans

- Increased expected time teaching in future career strongly correlated to **excitement about TA responsibilities** Pre- and Post-TAO.
- Increased expected time teaching NOT correlated to confidence in teaching ability or confidence in finding resources.
Other Interesting Conclusions about TAO

• Significant increase in GTAs’ confidence in teaching ability and confidence in finding teaching-related resources.

• No significant increase in excitement about being a TA.
Concerns of GTAs

Aim 1: Characterize concerns of GTAs at the beginning and end of their first semester as a GTA

**Biggest concerns at start of semester:**
- I am concerned about...
  - balancing teaching with other responsibilities
  - keeping all students engaged
  - maintaining a high energy level

**Least concerns start of semester:**
- I am concerned about...
  - being close in age to students
  - communicating in English

**Biggest concerns at end of semester:**
- I am concerned about...
  - balancing teaching with other responsibilities
  - encouraging all students to participate
  - helping students learn content deeply

**Least concerns end of semester:**
- I am concerned about...
  - handling phone calls and emails from students’ parents
  - communicating in English
Concerns of GTAs

Aim 1: Characterize concerns of GTAs at the beginning and end of their first semester as a GTA

Greatest negative changes:
• I am concerned about…
…balancing authority and empathy
…having adequate content knowledge to answer students' questions

Greatest positive changes:
• I am concerned about…
…maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with your students
…designing course objectives, writing a syllabus, creating class materials and writing exams
…encouraging students, including non-majors, to be excited and interested
…setting and maintaining high expectations for
Aim 2: Compare concerns of GTAs in STEM and non-STEM graduate programs

Concerns of STEM GTAs

**STEM GTA’s Biggest Concerns at Start of Semester**
- I am concerned about…
  - time management
  - balancing authority and empathy when working with students

**STEM GTA’s Biggest Concerns at End of Semester**
- I am concerned about…
  - time management
  - balancing authority and empathy when working with students

**Decrease** in concern of **STEM** GTAs with increase in all other groups
- I am concerned about…
  - being perceived as boring
  - communicating the content in a clear, concise and engaging way
Next Steps

- Minor revisions needed to surveys for Fall 2021 data collection with new GTAs
- Pilot Q-sort activities, Focus Groups and/or Interviews in Fall 2021
- Develop quantitative and qualitative instruments to gauge how GTAs choose resources (Aim 3)
- Expand data collection to include GTA Teaching Practice Variables—possibly with classroom observations
References


