

Policies for Strengthening the Professional Development of Teaching Assistants at MIT

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

October 23, 2006

Although a number of departments at the Institute do an excellent job of preparing their teaching assistants to teach, various constituencies have identified the need to provide TAs with more consistent professional development. For example, the Visiting Committee for the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (DUE) in their 2002, 2004, and 2006 reports strongly recommended the Institute improve TA training. Similarly, in a 2003 Teaching and Learning Laboratory survey, teaching assistants themselves identified additional resources, programs, and services they felt would strengthen their abilities. Finally, there has been national, as well as international, dialogue on the necessity for universities to devote more resources to the professional development of their graduate students.

Below are four policies put forth by the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education through the Teaching and Learning Laboratory, which the Deans' Group agreed to implement in all Schools in the fall semester 2006. Together, these policies present a comprehensive plan for better preparing MIT teaching assistants to enter the classroom. Although the training would focus on TAs' teaching abilities, the skills graduate students gain by teaching (e.g., organizing material, presenting, providing feedback, interacting with a range of students) are transferable to a number of professional settings whether in academia or industry. Therefore, by strengthening the teaching abilities of TAs, we are also providing our graduate students with opportunities to improve a broad set of professional skills.

Policy

1. Strengthen TA professional development by creating a minimal standard of training to be implemented by individual departments.

Each department is asked to require that every TA who will be providing instruction in the classroom participate in the equivalent of a one-day workshop before they teach for the first time. It is recognized that the capabilities needed by MIT's TAs vary across Schools, departments, and disciplines. Therefore, Schools and departments may well wish to organize their own TA training workshops. Alternatively, TAs can participate in the all-Institute Orientation for Graduate Teaching Staff that is held at the beginning of the academic year.

A number of other activities could also be developed that would offer TA opportunities to continue to improve their teaching abilities. These include: videotaping the TA in the classroom and providing him/her with feedback; meeting with a faculty member, Master TA (see recommendation #3 below), or educational consultant during the semester; attending department-based workshops on teaching and learning. Departments are urged to consider designing and implementing resources of this kind for their teaching assistants.

2. Use the English Evaluation Test, currently administered by the Institute's English Language Program, to assess the communication abilities of potential teaching assistants who will be providing instruction in the classroom and act on the results.

In order to use the results of the EET effectively, every department is asked to do the following: require that TAs whose English language abilities are rated "inadequate" be enrolled in an ELP subject or a series of subjects, that they be retested, and that they not teach until their language skills reach the level of "adequate." The ability of students rated "limited" on the EET to teach will be decided on a case-by-case basis by the department. Students who have taken an MIT communication class (e.g., the MBA communication class, 15.280) and passed with a grade of B or better will be exempted from this requirement.

For Instructors whose native language is not English, TLL will offer a workshop on teaching in an American classroom and assess individual needs for instruction in English at that time.

3. Develop a Master Teaching Assistants (MTA) Network.

Master TAs are graduate students who have shown exemplary skill in the classroom and have a desire to mentor to junior colleagues. Their responsibilities will differ from department to department, but they might organize discipline-specific TA workshops, review videotapes, or bring department TAs together for discussions around specific topics. Master TAs will most probably not teach their own classes during the semester(s) they are serving in this role. In order to facilitate the development of a Master TA Network, departments are requested to encourage their best TAs to participate. The Master Teaching Assistants Network at MIT will support the continued improvement of TAs, as well as provide graduate students who have a strong interest in teaching and learning with an avenue to pursue that interest.

4. Plan for the implementation of improved policies, programs and standards.

In order to insure that policies are implemented fairly and meet their intended objectives, the Dean for Undergraduate Education will undertake three actions:

Form a TA Enhancement Committee. The Committee will be composed of the Dean for Undergraduate Education, Dean of the Graduate Student Office, two faculty members (one of whom is from the Committee on Graduate School Policy), two graduate students, two undergraduates, and the Director of the Teaching and Learning Laboratory as an *ex officio* member. This Committee will provide support to departments, including, for example, collecting and disseminating information about best practices, identifying ways in which support to TAs may be improved, and helping departments to insure the practices they put into place can be reasonably maintained.

Develop the booklet “Being a Teaching Assistant at MIT.” This short booklet will include Institute policies related to the employment of teaching assistants; responsibilities TAs have towards their undergraduates in order to ensure they are providing those students with the highest quality instruction possible; and a list of resources TAs can call upon Institute-wide to help them as instructors. “Being a Teaching Assistant at MIT” is intended to be a companion to Professor Arthur Mattuck’s “The Torch or the Firehose,” the excellent guide to recitation teaching.

Recognize TAs who have completed a set of professional development activities. TAs who have gone beyond minimal requirements for improving their teaching should be recognized. The TA Enhancement Committee, in collaboration with the staff of the Teaching and Learning Laboratory, will define the set of activities that, when taken together, justify recognition, as well as the form that acknowledgement will take.

Conclusion

The Teaching and Learning TA survey (2003) cited above found that “the graduate student population views the TA experience as an integral part of their education at MIT.” (<https://web.mit.edu/fnl/vol/175/breslow.htm>) To be sure, the success of teaching and learning at MIT depends upon the skill and dedication of a number of distinct groups, with TAs playing a vital role. The aim of these recommendations is to provide faculty and their teaching assistants with additional support that will benefit them and the students they teach.