

Teaching Experience for graduate students at Stony Brook

The graduate community at Stony Brook comprises a substantial number of teaching staff on campus. What qualifications do the graduate students need to teach? What sort of training is provided to them? Does the mentoring available to graduate students serve to increase their potential as instructors? Is their work properly assessed and is feedback given to them to improve their quality as an instructor and facilitate their development as important future members of the teaching community? Is Stony Brook University realizing their TAs to their fullest potential?

This survey, aimed at finding answers to these questions, was offered online to all graduate students for a period of two weeks. About 27 departments across the campus participated in the survey. Of the 93 responses 84 of them were from doctoral teaching assistants. While the responses were as unique as the individual situations pertaining to each department there were a few general emerging trends and these are described below.

- There is an increased need for training that is tailored to the specific needs of each department and individual teaching assignment.
- While the spirit of generalized teaching practicums like CELT can be appreciated, they provide little to no valuable training to meet the challenges that the TA faces in a real class situation and therefore need to be discontinued.
- Individual mentoring, supervision and assessment from faculty will prove to be a valuable asset to the over all improvement in performance of a TA. It not only makes them more confident to perform their duties here at SBU well but also be more confident about their teaching abilities after they graduate.

The challenges have now been reduced to a two-fold issue- the training a TA has to receive and the assessment they need to be given to improve their performance. New ways need to be explored to meet this twin challenge. To offer the audience the opportunity to review the individual responses and make an educated decision the responses from each department are presented below.

Bio-medical Engineering

4 students responded to our survey from this department and all expect 1 were PHD students.

Start teaching- 1 sem

Minimum number of semesters; they teach- 2 sem (2) / 1 sem (1) / 3 sem(1)

Teaching load-Not clear

Type of teaching assignment-Grading/course instruction/lab and rarely recitation

Teaching assignment (other students)-Grading

Faculty/Departmental supervision-4

Training-received-1

Training-expected-Training by peer/experienced TAs

Satisfied with the training-No(2) / Yes(2)

Do you feel a qualifies tutor-No(2) / Yes(2)

Additional Comments-TA position should be open to all wanting experience (need not be paid)

Coastal Oceanography

2 students responded to our survey from this department and both of them were PHD students. One of them responded that students start teaching during the second semester while the other one chose the 'other' option. Both students agree that there is no minimum number of semesters that they have to teach. The department has a first year TA appointment but it is not mandatory, most students teach in their first year and then they move to RA. Most students teach labs and both students agreed that there is not much supervision from the faculty side. The training students receive was a sample lab class presented by a biology grad student and very general training like the topics to be covered. The students are asking for more training on techniques to communicate information, tone and manner to speak to students and CELT does not seem to be useful rather a burden.

Both students agreed that the kind of training they receive at Stony Brook does not give good preparation to teach here. The one student stated that they feel qualified to teach after they graduate but not because of Stony Brook's help but because of the experience the student had before they came here while the other one was not sure but also stated that the experience here did not contribute to that.

Comparative Literature

4 doctoral students took the survey. Their teaching assignment begins the first semester and they are required to teach more than three semesters. They teach either one or two classes a semester.

Nature of teaching assignment:

The teaching assignment involves course instruction and grading.

Training and mentoring:

The training involves attending workshops but all of them agree that these practicums do not offer much helps because “ you can’t learn how to teach by attending lectures on the topic or listening to role-plays”. They therefore believe that the training they receive does not help them to teach at SBU and that the once a semester faculty supervision they receive is insufficient. While they feel qualified to teach after they graduate they suggest that more mentors be available to answer questions and that a recitation role precede stand alone teaching.

Chemistry

Nine chemistry masters students took the survey. They typically teach their second year.

Nature of teaching assignment:

The teaching assignments are usually either labs or recitations and also include grading. The teaching load includes 1 class, 3 sections of recitation or 2 labs. The teaching assignment requires between 10-20 hours per week.

Training and mentoring:

After an initial three-day workshop for teaching, which they described, as “boring”, the TAs are offered weekly guidance on only the teaching material and procedure for doing the labs through TA and staff meeting. It was the general consensus that there was very minimal training or assessment of their performance as a TA. 50% of the students taking

the survey felt that the training they received for being a TA did not offer them a good preparation to teach at Stony Brook. They further elaborated to say that the faculty/department supervision they received during their teaching was minimal and even had a negative impact on them. In some cases the professor did not meet with the TAs throughout the semester. 50% of the remaining students who answered that the training was good refused to comment on the amount of departmental supervision they received.

Conclusion:

75% of the 9 chemistry TAs who took this survey do not believe that the department assesses their teaching abilities and provides feedback to them. They are not offered room or opportunity for improvement. While 6 of them believe that they would be qualified to teach, 2 are unsure and 1 does not believe that he is qualified, they all agree that they would appreciate increased supervision and would benefit from not having to simply stick to implementation of “needlessly complex workshop structure” of experimental procedures of the labs. This they believe will allow a more whole-some teaching experience both for the TA and the undergraduates.

Computer Science

3 Ph.D students participated in survey.

Nature of teaching assignment:

Students agreed that they normally teach during the first year (1st or 2nd semester). Every student must teach for 2 semesters on average. The most popular assignment is grading, though there are also recitations, labs, and even courses taught by graduate students.

Training and mentoring:

Students claimed that they receive “some” supervision, but absolutely no training, though later claimed that the training was a “good” preparation (all 3 students agreed on it). The training they would like to receive includes the ways of handling the student’s questions and ways of interacting with students.

Conclusion:

All agreed that they will be qualified to teach, but no answer was given whether it is because of SB or not.

Ecology and Evolution

3 students responded to our survey from this department and all of them were PHD students.

Start teaching- II sem

Minimum number of semesters; they teach- 3 sem

Teaching load- 3 classes/year

Type of teaching assignment-Labs

Teaching assignment (other students)-Grading

Faculty/Departmental supervision-2 (scale 0 to 10)

Training-received-2 (scale 0-10)

Training-expected-Training from peer students

Satisfied with the training- Yes

Do you feel as a qualified tutor- Yes

Additional Comments-Organized and prepared lab prep sessions and regular feedback

Economics

4 economics doctoral students took the survey. They typically teach their first or second semester of graduate school

Nature of teaching assignment:

Although there is no minimum teaching requirement for the graduate students most students teach for more than three semesters. It usually consists of one class per semester and the assignment encompasses grading, recitation and course instruction.

Training and mentoring:

The graduate students are offered ESL classes and a teaching practicum by the department. However all of them agree that they could consult with faculty if necessary and also unanimously agree that that they feel qualified to teach both stony brook classes and pursue a career in teaching later.

English

10 students responded to our survey from this department and 9 of them were PhD students. Most of the students (6) said that students start to teach in their second year, while the remaining said that students start teaching in the first semester. Most students (7) said that students teach for more than 3 semesters minimum. The typical load is one course per semester. All students do course instruction, some (5) do also grading and recitation (4). The majority (8) of students responded that the typical assignment is course instruction. Half of the students thought that the supervision is not adequate and some said that it varies. All students receive a practicum to teach writing courses but not formal training for the EGL courses. Students asked for more one-to-one interaction with professors and more discussions, would like to start as assistants rather than starting teaching their own class right away, they asked for a practicum in English Literature and mentor meetings. Most students (6) said that they feel well prepared to teach at Stony Brook. All students feel prepared to teach after they leave Stony Brook, although two pointed out that it was not because of the help of the Department. One student commented on the fact that the distribution of the teaching load is not proper and that they need a teaching practicum.

Genetics

3 students responded to our survey from this department and all of them were PHD students.

Start teaching- I sem

Minimum number of semesters; they teach- 2 sem

Teaching load-6 hrs /week

Type of teaching assignment: Grading/labs and rarely course instruction

Teaching assignment (other students)-Grading

Faculty/Departmental supervision-2

Training-received-1

Training-expected-No comments

Satisfied with the training- Yes

Do you feel a qualifies tutor- Yes

Additional Comments-More guidance/training

History

4 students responded to our survey from this department and all of them were PHD students.

Start teaching- I sem (2) / II sem (1) and other (1)

Minimum number of semesters; they teach- more than 3 sem(2) /none (2)

Teaching load-2 classes/semester

Type of teaching assignment-Recitation followed by grading and rarely course instruction

Teaching assignment (other students)-Grading

Faculty/Departmental supervision-2

Training-received-1

Training-expected-No comments

Satisfied with the training-No

Do you feel a qualifies tutor- Yes

Additional Comments-Ta at SB-Horribly poor and overloaded

Linguistics

3 PhD students participated in survey.

Nature of teaching assignment:

Students start teaching assignments on the first semester. The minimal number of semesters students teach – from none to >3. Normally it is grading or recitations, but also course teaching (often in the summer).

Training and mentoring:

The one-to-one supervision of the instructor of the course is the supervision students receive, though there is no special training students receive. Students claimed that this one-to-one supervision provides good training, and all feel to be qualified to teach after graduation.

Marine Sciences

9 students participated in survey (3 Ph.D., 6 M.A.)

Nature of teaching assignment:

Normally, students start to teach on the first semester, and teach for 1 or 2 (and even sometimes no) semesters. Most of the students teach one or two sections per semester, which takes about 10-20 hours per week. Assignments include all possible types of teaching – grading, labs, recitations, and teaching courses. 5 people claimed that the most popular activity is being a course instructor, though 2 and 2 claimed that it is grading or holding recitations.

Training and mentoring:

Some students teach the courses on other departments (BIO), and in this case there is absolutely no supervision, though if a student teaches on MAR department, the supervision is decent and about enough. Professors help to prepare lectures, sometimes sit in the class, and help to improve lecturing skills. Though, the TA training by university was called worthless. It seems like in BIO sections there is a lot of grading and students would like to know some “speed grading tips”.

Conclusion:

6 people agreed that the training was good, though 3 claimed that it was not (based on which classes they teach – if it was BIO, there was no training, if it was MAR, there was enough training). Only 2 people claimed that they will be qualified to teach, when 5 claimed that they will not be with their current experience. The main concern is the amount of grading. One student claimed that the teaching practicum requirements are not strict enough.

Molecular Biology

5 students responded to our survey from this department and all except 1 were PHD students.

Start teaching- II sem

Minimum number of semesters; they teach- 2 sem

Teaching load-3 hrs/week

Type of teaching assignment: Grading / labs

Teaching assignment (other students)-labs

Faculty/Departmental supervision-9

Training-received-6

Training-expected-More hands on experience

Satisfied with the training- Yes

Do you feel a qualifies tutor- Yes(3) /No(2)

Additional Comments-Lab schedules to be refined

Neurobiology & Behavior

2 doctoral students answered the survey. Most students begin teaching in their first semester and the remaining start the second semester. The students are required to teach 1 or two labs per semester for two semesters.

The teaching assignment includes lab recitation, grading, maintaining office hours and proctoring. While there is an organized lab preparation session each week giving the TA an overview of what needs to be covered in lab that week, both these TAs feel that the training they receive is insufficient to teach at Stony Brook.

Physics

7 students responded to our survey from this department and all of them were PhD students. All students responded that students have to teach from the first semester they come here. 6 students responded that the minimum amount of semesters someone has to teach is two and one answered more than 3 semesters. About the typical load students responded that it is usually 15-20 hours, one course/lab (that might include recitation) per semester. All students responded that the common teaching assignment was grading and the majority (4) said that it also includes labs and some said (2) that it includes course recitation. The majority (6) of the students said that they are teaching labs. Students said that the amount of supervision they receive depends on the supervisor but the ones who had an opinion (3) said that it is minimal. Students listed CELT and a 2-day practice session from senior students. Students seem to not want the CELT training, some believe that what the department has is enough, and some say they need more supervision.

Most (4) students feel that the training they receive gives them good preparation to teach. Most of the students (4) feel that they will be qualified to teach when they leave Stony Brook, 1 said that s/he does not and one said yes but not because of the training here. In the general comments one student complained about the fact that students who do not speak English well are allowed to teach, some asked for more specific training and one said that faculty and students should see the teaching experience more of an opportunity than a job.

Political Science

5 students responded to our survey from this department and all of them were PhD students. The majority of students (3) chose the 'other' option as to when students first teach in the department, 1 student said that they start in the second semester, 1 said in the first year. All students said that the minimum number of semesters that they should teach is 3. The typical load is 1 or two classes per semester and all the assignments include course instruction. The majority of the students (4) responded that the typical teaching assignment is course instruction and 1 student said that the typical teaching assignment is recitation? Most of the students responded that there is almost no faculty supervision although there has to be an evaluation from the faculty the first time or teach which does not always happen. The training includes 2 seminars and two guest lectures where the faculty evaluates the students' teaching. One student asked for more training on how to plan, what kids like, different problems and different solutions that have worked and another one has asked for more training to anticipate the tyros of undergrad situations that arise. 3 students responded that they feel that the kind of training they receive at Stony Brook provides good preparation while 2 students said that it does not. All students said they feel prepared to teach after leaving Stony Brook. Students asked for a monthly meeting to discuss various problems like complications, advice, social/academic support and a little more help on syllabus construction.

Sociology

6 doctoral students answered the survey. Students differ in when they first teach; some start their first semester and others even as late as their second year. They are usually required to teach at least two semesters. They are TAs for 1 class per semester until their third year after which they teach their own class.

Nature of teaching assignment:

Most TAs either do grading or course instruction.

They receive some amount of supervision from their department. They also are required to take a teaching practicum class that is offered to them when they are in their third years. While 4 out of the 6 feel that this is enough training the remaining 2 believe that their teaching experience was "through trail of fire".

Conclusion:

While the students agree that they are fairly happy with their training and 100% feel fully qualified to teach after graduation, they also suggest that the "class size and responsibilities are often too overwhelming to focus on anything but reading papers and grading test" and that an actual class with teaching instructions/ pedagogy as offered at other institutions should be offered at SBU.

One-Response Departments:

AMS – Applied Math and Statistics,
ANT – Anthropology,
ARH – Art History,
DPA – Anthropology (PhD),
ESE – Electrical Engineering,
ESM – Material Science,
ESS – Earth and Space Sciences,
MAT – Mathematics,
MUS – Music,
THR – Theater Arts

One student responded from each of the departments above.

Nature of teaching assignment:

Most students from these departments normally start teaching during the 1st year – either on the 1st semester, or on the 2nd. AMS, ANT, DPA, ESE answers indicated that the minimal number of semesters a student have to teach can be none, and others claimed that it is 2 or more semesters. Average load ranges from 10 hours per week on MAT up to 30(!) hours per week on ARH with average response 20 hours per week. AMS, DPA, ESS and MAT's students normally do grading, ANT, ARH, ESE, ESM normally hold labs and recitations, while students from THR and MUS are often course instructors.

Training and mentoring:

Students from all these departments were either unsure about the supervision they receive, or agreed that there is not enough or little supervision, except for ESS, where a respondent claimed a lot of supervision. The training students receive is essentially none on all of these departments except for MAT, where there is some kind of a “special training from the department” and THR, where there is a teaching practicum for 2 semesters. The training students would like to receive includes mentoring – a senior professor who sits in classes and gives comments and constructive input after, or special departmental training and seminars (from the department!).

Conclusion:

AMS, ANT and ARH respondents claimed that the training they receive doesn't provide good preparation for teaching, while other respondents agreed that it does. All respondents said that they will be qualified to teach after graduation, but some of them mentioned that it is not because of the Stony Brook training.