

Teaching Assistants at Bethel: Guidelines and Policies

INTRODUCTION

The practice of hiring undergraduate students to work as Teaching Assistants (TAs) creates a complex mix of duties and benefits that in many ways differs from the traditional relationship of employer and employee. While the use of TAs benefits both the institution and students financially, teaching assistantships are also part of the university's educational mission. The educational aspects of a TA program include mentoring, instruction, socialization, collaboration, and departmental camaraderie, as well as deeper experience in a specific field of study. Because TAs are primarily students who are also at-will employees, and because a range of practices in the recruiting, hiring, training, use, and supervision of TAs exist, this document is intended to establish helpful guidelines in the appropriate and ethical use of TAs. These guidelines are based on current practice and are, for the most part, advisory rather than mandatory. One of the strengths of the TA program is its flexibility in serving so many different departments with such different needs and expectations. However, some uniformity is necessary, and this document describes, to varying degrees of specificity, the policies that should govern the use of TAs at Bethel. It is important that those who supervise and use TAs, as well as the TAs themselves, have a clear understanding of the most common, reasonable, and productive practices that ensure a wise and mutually beneficial relationship between academic departments and the student employees.

GUIDELINES

The TA Employment Agreement

Supervisors should make a good faith effort to estimate the amount of money a TA will earn during the period of employment; the Office of Financial Planning provides a formula for such an estimate. TAs should be cautioned not to expect a predetermined amount of money, but supervisors should provide as accurate an estimate of student earnings as possible, and to monitor those earnings during the school year. In many cases, the Teaching Assistantship is not the student's only source of income; nonetheless, if it appears that a TA will earn much less than expected, the supervisor may want to discuss this possibility with the student. Conversely, if students are earning more than planned, some adjustment of work load may be necessary, perhaps in consultation with individual professors. Supervisors do not need to be concerned about the status of a student's qualification for need-based funds, but all TAs apply for financial aid. All TAs must complete an I-9 and an W-4 form prior to beginning work. These documents need to be completed just once at Bethel.

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Hiring Process

As described below, departments (or courses) may choose a number of options in hiring Teaching Assistants; whichever process or combination of processes is selected, students should be told how the hiring process works. These processes are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may include:

- ◆ a formal application process open to all interested and qualified students
- ◆ an informal solicitation of interest from individual students
- ◆ department-wide consensus on hiring
- ◆ selection of TAs by individual professors
- ◆ posting of open positions in Career Services

Those who hire students should have clear goals for their use of TAs, as well as consistent criteria for TA qualifications.

TA Qualifications

TAs should be current Bethel students, but are usually hired without reference to financial need or qualification (though financial considerations may be taken into account). While TAs tend to be majors or minors in the department for which they work, qualifications for TA work in a particular department (or for a particular course) may be established at the discretion of the department or instructors. For some responsibilities (e.g., lab work, technical support), it may be necessary to require special expertise or experience of the student.

TA Supervision

From an institutional perspective (e.g., communication with the Office of Financial Planning), the supervision of TAs is normally the responsibility of the department chair or program/course director. This aspect of TA supervision includes:

- ◆ submitting requests for TAs (including estimated hours to be worked)
- ◆ signing and submitting employment agreements, and separation notices (when students stop work mid-year)
- ◆ on-line approval of timesheets

In practice, however, TAs may be appropriately supervised by other members of a department or, in the case of large, interdisciplinary courses, by a faculty member on the teaching team. However TA supervision is assigned for a department or a course, at least one faculty member should be responsible for the following areas:

- ◆ recruiting and hiring process
- ◆ providing training
- ◆ approving hours worked
- ◆ ensuring the timely completion of work

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- ◆
- ◆ monitoring the quality of work
- ◆ arbitrating disputes
- ◆ taking disciplinary action

Supervisors may require TAs to keep a log of hours worked in order to verify their timesheets.

TA Training

Supervisors are encouraged to develop or use a system for training TAs. Such training may be inevitable or necessary, especially if TAs are handling sensitive materials in a laboratory, but all TAs could benefit from clear guidelines, especially in the ethics of being a Teaching Assistant. Departments can provide their own training or request that their TAs be included in the Academic Enrichment and Support Center's tutor training workshops. These workshops emphasize confidentiality, as well as tutoring and interpersonal skills. **All departments must ensure that TAs understand The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if TAs will be working with students' grades and/or records. This should be included in TA training. TAs should sign the FERPA Agreement indicating they understand the confidentiality of student records. The signed agreements should be kept on file by the department.**

TA Assignments

A range of approaches to assigning TAs currently exists; TAs may be assigned to work for:

- ◆ individual professors
- ◆ particular courses
- ◆ an entire department

Each of these approaches has its own strengths and weaknesses and may be used alone or in combination, depending on the needs of different departments and programs/courses.

TA Hours

TAs at Bethel work a wide range of hours, from 2-10/week, with a rough average of 3-5 hours weekly. Expectations for TA hours include at least the following issues:

- ◆ the number of hours worked weekly
- ◆ the scheduling of hours
- ◆ the flexibility of hours
- ◆

In some cases, TAs may be required to keep office hours, to tutor, or to work in a lab. If so, TAs are expected to keep these hours conscientiously, and the consequences of failing to keep those hours should be established. In other cases, TAs may be given work to do independently within a certain time frame. Again, there should be a clear communication between the professor and the student about the deadline for completion of the assignment. In short, some work hours may be considered "non-negotiable," while other

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hours may be more flexible; in either case, the faculty must communicate expectations clearly.

TA Tasks

TAs may perform a wide range of tasks, depending on the needs of departments, courses, and individual professors:

- ◆ clerical work
- ◆ helping with classes
- ◆ grading
- ◆ tutoring
- ◆ working in labs
- ◆ research
- ◆ special projects

In general, TAs should not be asked or expected to perform tasks for which they are unqualified or untrained, or with which they are uncomfortable. TAs should always work under the supervision of a faculty member; this does not mean that TA initiative or creativity should not be encouraged, but that final responsibility for TA preparedness and suitability for particular tasks belongs to the supervising faculty. This supervisor may be an individual professor, a course leader, program director, or the department chair.

POLICIES

Ethical Concerns

The TA guidelines and policies at Bethel allow for considerable variety among departments and programs/courses, but it is also necessary and prudent to address a number of ethical concerns including (though not necessarily limited to) the following:

- ◆ Confidentiality of grades and student records (See FERPA Agreement)¹
- ◆ Conflicts of interest
- ◆ Appropriateness of work required
- ◆ Fairness of work load
- ◆ Boundary issues

Restricted Activities

The following policies should be followed in using TAs at Bethel:

- ◆ TAs should not grade any materials for classes in which they are enrolled.²
- ◆ TAs should not assign final course grades to other students.
- ◆ TAs should not be given computer passwords of faculty members.

¹ Supervisors should familiarize themselves with the memo summarizing “The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act: FERPA” in the advising manual and attached here in a modified version for TAs for legal guidelines on grading and privacy.

² Petitions for exceptions to this policy should be requested in writing from the Dean of Faculty Growth and Assessment

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- ◆ TAs should not be solely responsible for teaching a class on a frequent basis. An occasional teaching experience under close faculty supervision is permissible.
- ◆ TA grading should also be strictly supervised by a faculty member.
- ◆ The role that TAs play in grading should be made clear to all students in a course.
- ◆ TAs should not be required to do work for which they are unqualified.

Teaching Assistants: Rights and Responsibilities

Teaching assistants at Bethel University have the following rights:

- ◆ The right to refuse to do work for which they feel unqualified or which they feel is inappropriate.
- ◆ The right to make completion of their studies a priority in their schedule.
- ◆ The right to appeal for redress if they feel they have been treated unfairly by a supervisor.
- ◆ The right to have their duties clearly delineated.

Teaching assistants at Bethel University have the following responsibilities:

- ◆ The responsibility to do their work competently, with integrity, and in a timely fashion.
- ◆ The responsibility to maintain their work commitments, especially in positions with set hours.
- ◆ The responsibility to use their privileges appropriately.
- ◆ The responsibility to record and report their hours accurately.

It is recommended that each TA and all faculty members working with TAs have a copy of these policies.