Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) GRANTS 2013
Final Report

Title of Project: Preparing Teaching Assistants (TAs): A National Survey of Canadian Post-secondary Institutions' TA Orientations

Principal Investigator:
Cynthia Korpan
University of Victoria
Learning and Teaching Centre
University of Victoria
PO Box 1700 STN CSC
Victoria BC V8W 2Y2
Canada
tatrain@uvic.ca
250-472-4798

Overview of the project:
With this research project, the Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA - a special interest group of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE)) Executive Committee sought to ascertain the general characteristics of teaching assistant (TA) orientation frameworks at post-secondary institutions across Canada. Broadly speaking, TAGSA seeks to raise the profile of TA and graduate student development in Canada and to provide leadership in highlighting initiatives to develop teaching skills and other professional skills in graduate students.

This project builds on (1) previous research by TAGSA into the state of TA professional development (pro-d) in Canada, and (2) on the model TA orientation (TAO) classification system developed by Spencer Robinson at Ohio State University. The former report, published in 2011, provided a unique snapshot of the TA pro-d initiatives in place around the country (see Korpan, 2011). Robinson's (2011) article, produced as part of a wider project intending to map the range of graduate student pro-d programs in North America, classified TAOs based on a nine-question survey that was sent to a selection of twenty research-intensive public universities, including two in Canada (Queen's University and the University of Calgary). Using Robinson's questions as a starting point, our aim was to undertake a comprehensive survey of TAOs in Canada. The published report (forthcoming) is intended to inform future program development by allowing developers to assess, and potentially enhance, their TA training programmes using qualitative and quantitative descriptions. In addition, we hope that the report will encourage and inform the building of a set of TA competencies, currently being developed by TAGSA, which could be used as a guideline for all Canadian institutions.

Educational findings/outcomes
Not surprisingly, most institutions do not require any *mandatory* training for TAs on a university-wide scale. Often, any mandatory training comes in the form of department-specific orientations, or individual consultations between TAs and the supervising instructor. Though few universities have mandatory TA training, almost all offer some form of voluntary program.

TAOs come in a wide variety of forms. Our survey considered the question of form based on six discrete categories: schedule, duration, structure, curriculum, presenters, and delivery format. In Robinson's (2011) study, a one-day orientation held immediately before the Fall term was most common. Our survey turned up a similar result, with the most common duration (50% of respondents) being a full-day orientation. While there is some uniformity in terms of scheduling, the duration of TAOs varied widely beyond the most common full-day offering. Some orientations were as little as 1-2 hours, while others were as long as two days, four days, and, in one case, a week-long TAO.

We also asked respondents to tell us whether the structure of their TAO was fixed, open, or a mix of these two options. Again, not surprisingly, the respondents' answers reveal significant diversity. Fifteen percent said their orientation structure is "fixed" and designed specifically for an interdisciplinary audience. In one case the format is decided upon by individual faculties and departments. In another case all participants attend the same sessions over the course of a two-day program. Fifty percent of respondents arrange their TAOs with an "open" structure. The most common approach is to offer concurrent sessions so TAs have the ability to design their own schedules based on their disciplines, interests, and experience level. Several respondents said they design their orientations in streams, to accommodate differences between disciplines. For the majority of TAOs (70%), the curriculum is designed in part by a central organization, and in part by the presenters themselves. We asked respondents to select from a list of formats and provide a percentage weighting for each format they employ. The most commonly utilized format, not surprisingly, is the interactive workshop, with 95% of respondents saying they used these in their TAOs.

One hundred percent of our survey respondents said that they collected feedback from TAO participants. We also asked respondents to give an impressionistic estimate of the "effectiveness" of their chosen feedback methods. We wanted to find out: (a) which formats allow organizers to determine the degree to which TAs are well-served by the TAO; and (b) which formats provide feedback to facilitate strategic adjustments to programming offered. Interestingly, responses here also varied. Some respondents claimed online formats were most effective because not everyone always attends the whole orientation. Others said a delayed online feedback process, though resulting in a lower overall response rate, allowed TAs to respond to the effectiveness of the TAO based on how it helped them in their actual roles. Conversely, paper formats tended to have higher response rates overall, but with feedback that was ultimately of limited use.

In the second part of our survey, we asked respondents to tell us more about their curriculum choices. We based our questions on the categories identified by Robinson (2011): university policies, students, teaching, professional development, campus resources, and educational technology. We also included an "other" category to catch any unanticipated topics. Not unexpectedly, all survey respondents claimed that their TAOs covered issues related to students and teaching, while the vast majority also covered areas related to campus resources, university policies, professional development, and educational technology. Within these broad categories, we asked respondents to elaborate on their offerings by identifying specific topic areas. These responses reveal trends in the priorities of TAO organizers. Some of the most popular (greater than or equal to 80%) categories include: student feedback, encouraging student engagement, classroom management, evaluating essays and exams, writing centre, TA basics, labs, resources for

students with disabilities, tutorials/discussion groups, writing feedback, and time management.

Within the section about demographics, our original intent was to attempt to identify which disciplines tend to participate in university-wide TAOs and how those numbers compare nationally. We also wanted to determine the general composition of the TA population in Canada. We were surprised at how difficult it was to obtain this information, so we asked our respondents to make their best estimates if they did not have concrete figures on hand. Greater institutional awareness of the demographics of the TA population would provide essential data for use in program design. The first question we asked was about the numbers of TAs employed at the institution. It was assumed that these numbers would be reasonably accessible, so we were surprised with the number of respondents who found that this information was not available. Some said that these statistics were only tracked at the department, rather than institutional level. Others said that these stats are not tracked at all. Almost half of respondents (43%) were able to provide rough estimates, while still fewer (24%) were able to give exact figures. When we asked about further details such as the numbers of undergraduates and international students employed, or the breakdown of the TA population by faculties, many respondents again found it difficult to obtain these figures. Some respondents went to great lengths in contacting deans, faculty representatives, and administrators to access the relevant data; we are grateful for their effort and dedication.

Though undergraduates generally make up a small proportion of the TA population, we found that a full two-thirds of institutions employ undergraduate TAs; and, in several cases, undergraduates made up over 10% of the TA population – as high as 35% at one school. About 30% of respondents were unable to find any figures, with a few saying that these records are not tracked.

International TAs represent a distinct category of graduate students, one with a unique set of needs. Since they often come from different cultural backgrounds and educational systems, ITAs often require specific training and orientation to academic life in Canada. As such, we were interested to know the magnitudes of ITA populations at universities across the country. At some institutions these numbers were again difficult to obtain, or not tracked at all. However, we did find out that ITAs form a significant portion of the overall TA population – between 30% and 50% at many institutions. Like with undergraduate TAs, several respondents pointed out that these numbers vary widely across disciplines.

Typically, attendance rates at TAOs fall between 100 and 200 TAs at a given institution. Overall, this roughly equates to a 20% attendance rate. In many cases, TAOs are not the only professional development programs available to TAs, strictly related to TA work. Seventy-six percent of respondents said there were other programs available to their graduate students besides the primary TAO. Eighty-six percent of respondents said that individual faculties offered their own TA training programs. Many teaching and learning centres offer some sort of professional development certificate program, individual departments provide TA training specific to their units, and programs like the Instructional Skills Workshop are often available to graduate students. At several institutions, senior TAs are hired to provide mentorship and guidance to TAs in their home departments or faculties.

Lastly, we asked about TA competencies. In general, TA competencies include the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours required for TAs to perform their roles

effectively. The hope is that this research project can inform the development of the set of TA competencies. To this end, we asked respondents to list, in their opinion, the top three most important competences which TAs at their institution should possess. In some ways, there was a significant degree of overlap in responses, but there were also some interesting outliers. Not surprisingly, the most common responses tended to cluster around such areas as: knowledge of and ability to use effective teaching and assessment strategies (36%); knowledge of learning theory, especially learner-centred approaches (27%); positive interactions with students (27%); caring, empathy, and respect for diversity (23%); time management (23%); professionalism, ability to exercise good judgement, fairness (23%); providing constructive and targeted feedback (23%); facilitating discussions, tutorials, seminars, and labs (23%); and strong interpersonal skills such as communication (23%). Other competencies our respondents suggested include: problem solving and creativity, the ability to find and utilize support services, effective use of educational technologies and learning management systems, and self-reflection. Somewhat surprisingly, content knowledge was very low on the list, with only two respondents saying that this would be in their top three competencies. The vast majority of respondents (95%) felt that their TAOs supported TAs in developing the competencies identified as important. In some cases, respondents said that their TAOs were designed with these competencies specifically in mind; the competencies identified were used as learning outcomes in the design of the overall program. In most cases, TAOs provided an introduction, while further workshops and opportunities were necessary to effectively inculcate the expressed values.

Despite overall satisfaction with the programming offered, most respondents did feel that there was room for improvement. Respondents identified three key areas in which their TAOs could be improved: (1) mandatory attendance; (2) more open dialogue between the learning and teaching centre and graduate studies, as well as individual faculties and departments; and (3) integration within larger training programs. In most cases, improving the TAO meant finding ways to increase attendance. Half of respondents argued that TA training should be mandatory for all new TAs, and TAs should be paid to attend the orientation. Respondents also felt that the conversations with and between departments and faculties across the university were lacking. Finally, most respondents agreed that an introductory TAO is in itself insufficient to provide the training that most TAs need. Several argued that the TAO should be at least a full day event, if not more, and that learning outcomes should actually be achievable within the scope of the TAO. Some of these respondents, and others, argued that the TAO should be the beginning of a much more comprehensive training program which would include experiential learning opportunities, "authentic" learning activities, and opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Korpan, C. (2011). TA Professional Development in Canada. Retrieved from Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education website: http://www.stlhe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/TA-ProD-in-Canada-Report_July-2011.pdf.

Robinson, S. (2011). An introductory classification of graduate teaching assistant orientations. In L. L. B. Border (Ed.), *Mapping the range of graduate student professional development* (pp. 19–36). Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Budget

a. What was the amount of your original award? $2494.00

b. How was it spent? One graduate research assistant at $23.98 per hour plus 4 % vacation pay x 100 hours

Conference Presentations and/or publications based on the project:

- Preliminary findings were presented at the TAGSA preconference at STLHE conference, Queen's University, June 2014
- Completed findings and full report will hopefully be presented at EDC in February, 2015
- Completed findings will be published on the TAGSA website