College of Liberal Arts
TA Task Force
Final Report
January 28, 2015

_____

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the findings of the College of Liberal Arts TA Task Force, which has been conducting research on graduate student affairs in the College since the beginning of Fall 2014. Although the Task Force was convened to examine graduate teaching assistant affairs holistically, many graduate students have understood our primary task to be retroactively investigating the College's recent decision to reduce the total number of semesters that graduate students are eligible for employment from fourteen semesters to twelve. Since this rule was in the process of being implemented before the Task Force convened, and was ongoing during our proceedings, our report does not contain any research (or recommendations) specific to the twelve semester rule. However, we view the creation of our task force as an appropriate and much-needed commitment from COLA to thoroughly investigate proposed policy changes and to solicit feedback from its graduate students. We have organized this final report around clusters of recurring issues that arose during our proceedings. Each section contains a brief summary of the issues, a longer description of our findings, and a list of our specific recommendations.

The Task Force conducted extensive research into the departmental administration of graduate students across the College as well as graduate students' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. The Task Force was granted access to a survey of graduate coordinators previously conducted by the College. We also produced and distributed a qualitative survey for departmental administrators designed to answer questions that arose during our proceedings. To better understand graduate student perceptions, we produced and distributed a quantitative and qualitative survey that addressed a wide range of issues facing graduate students. That survey (officially the 2014 COLA TA Task Force Survey) was administered using Qualtrics Survey Software. The target population was graduate students currently enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts that are working for the College as a teaching assistant or have worked as a teaching assistant in the past. Task Force members distributed the survey link to their home departments and encouraged their fellow graduate students to participate. Completion of the survey was entirely voluntary. In total, 681 out of approximately 1,300 COLA graduate students participated. The survey was open between October 16, 2014 and October 23, 2014. In addition to this original research, members of the Task Force had individual conversations with administrators across COLA and gathered official forms and existing policies relevant to graduate student affairs.

There are two recommendations, in particular, that the Task Force would like to highlight because we feel that they will most immediately benefit the graduate students in the College. The first is a standardized TA contract that outlines the tasks that graduate students will be expected to perform during their employment. We recommend this contract in response to some of our most troubling findings. A substantial number of graduate students in COLA work more than twenty hours a week, many are asked to perform duties outside of what should be considered reasonable, and many feel uncomfortable speaking with *any* administrator about these problems. We recommend that a standardized, modular contract be

implemented across the College to encourage the routine communication and retrospective examination of graduate student employee workload. A sample contract is included in the final section of this report.

The second recommendation we would like to highlight is the design and implementation of an online "clearinghouse" for available employment opportunities. The current process for determining available TA/AIships and employing graduate students interdepartmentally relies on emails or personal contact between graduate coordinators. We find that the complex task of satisfying teaching needs while ensuring employment for graduate students has become so complicated that interdepartmental hiring is systematically inefficient. To assist graduate coordinators in this difficult task, we recommend that COLA solicit Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services (LAITS) to design and implement a website that graduate coordinators can use to share information about current and ongoing employment opportunities for graduate students. While the details of the online clearinghouse's implementation will be left up to LAITS, we recommend that they empower graduate coordinators in the design process by soliciting their feedback throughout.

While not contained within the body of our report, the Task Force would like to highlight an ongoing logistical problem that produces unnecessary hardship for graduate students across the College. Due to what appears to be a conflict between financial calendars in different administrative offices, graduate students employed by the University are frequently faced with a gap in their health insurance coverage. The gap occurs at the beginning of a semester and lasts up to several weeks. Because this problem is University-wide, our ability to fully understand the causes for this oversight were limited. However, the potential dangers of having a health emergency during this insurance coverage gap creates widespread anxiety among graduate students. We encourage the deans of the College of Liberal Arts to advocate for a change in University health insurance policy to eliminate this gap in coverage.

As our proceedings drew to a close, we carefully assessed our own performance and considered the future of the Task Force and its recommendations. While we felt that we were effective at conducting research and making recommendations in a short timeframe, we feel that the Task Force would not be viable in the long term under its current organizational structure. To that end, some members of the Task Force have discussed its goals with the members of the Graduate Student Assembly who are behind the drafting of a Graduate Student Bill of Rights. We have found that the recommendations of the Task Force and the principles underlying the proposed Bill of Rights are closely aligned. Furthermore, we view the Graduate Student Assembly as better equipped to sustain our goals into the future through a democratic process. We therefore recommend that the deans of the College of Liberal Arts support the members of the Graduate Student Assembly as they finalize and implement their Graduate Student Bill of Rights.

To provide access to our findings and guidance for our recommendations, the Task Force has agreed to be available for the remainder of Spring 2015 in anticipation of a final, retrospective meeting at the end of the semester. We further request that the College of Liberal

Arts commit to an additional retrospective report on the progress of our recommendations on September 1st, 2015.

The College of Liberal Arts TA Task Force
Laura Beerits, English/The Center for Teaching and Learning
Collin Brown, Germanic Studies
Caitlyn Collins, Sociology
Griselda Guevara Cruz, Mexican and Latino/a Studies
Justin Doran, Religious Studies
Anthony Edwards, Middle Eastern Studies
Kyle Endres, Government
Jessica Fears, Economics
Manny Galaviz, Latin American Studies
Jerry Green, Philosophy
Kim Canuette Grimaldi, Comparative Literature
Amy Hyne-Sutherland, Asian Studies
Peter Hamilton, History
Travis Knoll, Latin American Studies
Adam McBride, French
Molly Polk, Geography and the Environment
Susan Quesal, American Studies
Daniela Radpay, Spanish and Portuguese
Leslie Rice, Psychology
Robin Riehl, English
Tammi Stout, Linguistics
Laura Takakjy, Classics
Debora Trein, Anthropology
Patrick Vilim, Italian

I. TRANSPARENCY AND CLARITY

Graduate students systematically lack understanding of the employment assignment system and their own basic rights and responsibilities as TAs. Our survey findings suggest that departmental guidelines for employment are nonexistent or ineffectively communicated. Graduate students also expressed dissatisfaction that they do not receive their employment notices in a timely and transparent manner.

Findings:

There is a widespread lack of clarity about Teaching Assistant (TA) and faculty responsibilities. Faculty, graduate students, and staff across the College of Liberal Arts (COLA) are often unclear about what constitutes TAs' proper roles and specific duties. This ranges from big-picture issues like the number of hours workable per week to smaller details, such as how much feedback to give when grading. Thirty-six percent of surveyed graduate students in COLA say they have never received written guidelines regarding their responsibilities as a TA.

There are multiple contributing causes for this problem:
1. Though much of the relevant information is available, it is often ignored, undistributed, unread, or forgotten.
2. Different professors have varying expectations for their TAs, and different courses require different kinds of work.
3. TAs are often uncomfortable asking for guidance, and faculty can be uncomfortable giving guidance.
4. Departments tend to defer to individuals to work out their arrangements.
5. COLA lacks a unified basic standard for TA working conditions, causing wide variations in standards by departments.

Generally speaking, there are no clear mechanisms for articulating and enforcing guidelines. Members of faculty do not always communicate clear expectations to their TAs, and some lack clear expectations altogether. In some cases, faculty have clear but incorrect expectations for their TAs, e.g., about what kinds of work are appropriate for TAs. 34% of surveyed graduate students in COLA say that they have been asked to perform work that they deemed to extend beyond their responsibilities as TAs. They also report being unclear about the relationship between their role and that of their faculty supervisor. Some departments have guidelines, but many departments defer to individual faculty members on a course-by-course basis.

Furthermore, there is a perceived lack of transparency in the process of TAship assignment. Over four-fifths (84%) of survey participants reported either that they did not know or did not fully understand the TAship assignment process. 91% of survey participants did not know whether a written policy existed that explains how their department makes TA assignments.

Delays in both TAs' appointments and particular assignments are common across COLA. Delays in appointment, in particular, result in significant insecurity and may prompt TAs to seek employment outside UT because this delay is disruptive to TA financial planning. The majority of survey respondents reported that TAship assignments are offered by graduate chairs or graduate coordinators between 1-2 months before the start of every semester (52% of the time, in comparison with 28% of assignments offered between 2-3 months, 14% of assignments offered between 3-5 months, and 6% offered over 6 months in advance). A striking 56% of surveyed graduate students reported that they have received a TA assignment less than 30 days prior to the start of the semester. Not knowing TA work hours in advance makes it even more difficult to secure outside employment.

Graduate students who responded to the survey reported that they would prefer to be notified of their specific TA assignment between 2-3 months ahead (36%), a preference marginally higher than the group of graduate students that favored 1-2 months (35%). Graduate students who participated in the survey seemed to favor the 1-3 month window over 3-5 months and 6+ months in being notified of an available TAship. From the Graduate Coordinator survey conducted by COLA, 21%, 26%, and 11% of departments settle TA assignments on the starting month of the Spring, Summer, and Fall semesters, respectively.

Recommendations:

1.   *Create a modular TA Contract for each appointment*
        We recommend that COLA institute a college-wide modular TA contract that departments use for each student's TA assignment each semester. This contract will have three parts:
        (i) COLA-wide policies, including the 20-hour rule and a list of appropriate teaching duties;
        (ii) departmental policies, including meeting times, office hours, etc., to be signed by the TA and the department chair;
        (iii) a course-specific checklist of responsibilities to be filled out and signed by the faculty and TA together. A sample contract can be found at the end of this report.

        This document has three main purposes: it reminds both TA and faculty what is expected of them for each class, it prompts both TA and faculty to agree in advance about the details of the course, and it serves as a record which can be used in evaluations once the semester is over. Both faculty and TA should sign this document prior to the start of the semester.

2.   *Create a TA Handbook for all COLA TAs and faculty members*
        We recommend collecting information relevant to the rights and responsibilities of TAs in order to assemble a TA handbook. This handbook will be sent to students on

a regular basis. A single website should be maintained with links to the relevant offices, procedures, and guidelines. This website should be emailed to TAs, and to faculty using TAs, at the start of every semester.

3.   *Institute a "Best Practices for TAship Assignments" and include timing of assignments in regular departmental performance reviews for all COLA departments.*
Many departments are able to assign TAships to TAs before the 30-day window, while others are not. While some late TAship assignments are due to inevitable last-minute **course** changes, a percentage of these late assignments should be avoidable and thus reduce TAs' insecurity. Best practices from successful departments should be shared with other departments that chronically make TA assignments less than 30 days before the first day of class.

If not already in place, a TA assignment timeline should be integrated into COLA departmental reviews, which would identify departments that are unable to settle TA assignments before the 30-day window, and establish best practices to aid that department in better organizing and expediting the TA assignment process.

In addition, departments should communicate the TA assignment process to graduate students at least once every academic year to ensure transparency and accountability.

4.   *Create an organization chart for addressing problems for each department*
The university has parties who are responsible for addressing the various concerns TAs might have with their assignments, but many TAs do not know who these parties are, or who is responsible for what.

We recommend that each department create a clear flow-chart for students and faculty to use to help determine whom to talk to address a problem. For instance, in most cases, the student should talk to their professor first, then to the graduate coordinator if the problem hasn't been resolved, then the department chair, and so on. But for some issues the TA should go directly to HR, or the ombudsman, or the administration of COLA. This information should be given to all TAs and faculty every term.

II.   WORKLOAD

While the amount of work stipulated for a graduate student employee is usually set at 20 hours per week, the number of hours spent on employment related tasks varies widely across the College. The causes of this variance cluster around unclear expectations for the responsibilities of teaching assistants and ineffective procedures for filing grievances.

Findings:

Purpose of a TA

The 2006 Handbook of Operating Procedures issued by the University Policy Office defines that teaching assistants (TA) are entrusted with "help[ing] faculty with the conduct and delivery of courses." The Handbook proceeds to outline six categorical "duties" for which TAs are hired and expected to perform: grading, monitoring, leading lab and/or discussion sessions, offering office hours assistance to students, and performing clerical tasks associated with course instruction. Yet, while the Handbook of Operating Procedures defines these duties, the reality of TAships remains widely unclear in both definition and objective. Are TAships primarily meant to be clerical support for members of faculty in executing a course, or should TAships also help train a future academic colleague through mentorship from an established professor? We strongly endorse striving for the latter.

A detailed review of different departments' TA contracts, the Graduate Administrators Surveys of 2013, and the 2014 COLA TA Task Force Survey reveals that TA responsibilities are inconsistently communicated to graduate students who are working as TAs. The 2014 COLA TA Task Force Survey in particular reveals that 36% of teaching assistants report never receiving written guidelines for the courses to which they are assigned. Some departments do provide disclosure forms to both the teaching assistant and the faculty with whom s/he is working, while other departments simply concede the necessity to "institute a written policy."

In reality, most TAs reported spending by far the most time on administrative tasks. Among survey respondents, 60% reported that they spend a "significant" amount of time on grading, while 30% reported a "moderate" amount of time, and only 10% "some" or "no time" on grading. Grading absorbed much more time than other tasks that we surveyed, including office hours, attending lectures, training, and planning or preparation. The second highest reported use of "significant" time spent was on planning and preparation. Only 34% of respondents even reported spending a "significant" amount of time on this task.

Unsurprisingly, few TAs perceive spending so much time on grading as useful to their professional development. Among surveyed respondents, only 28% reported grading as "very useful" to their professional development. 53% reported grading as "somewhat useful" and 18% reported grading as "not at all useful" to their professional

development. Respondents did believe there was more relevancy to tasks such as planning and preparation or holding office hours.

One factor behind this over-concentration on grading stems from the very widely shared perception that the number of students assigned to each TA is too high. Nearly two-thirds of surveyed TAs (63%) believe the student-to-TA ratio is too high in the department they typically work for as a TA. In fact, 21% reported that it is far too high. 36% reported thinking the ratio is about right. Only 1% believe the ratio is too low.

Q: In the department that you typically work as a teaching assistant, how would you describe the student to TA ratio?

21% way too high

42% little too high

36% about right

1% little too low

0% way too low
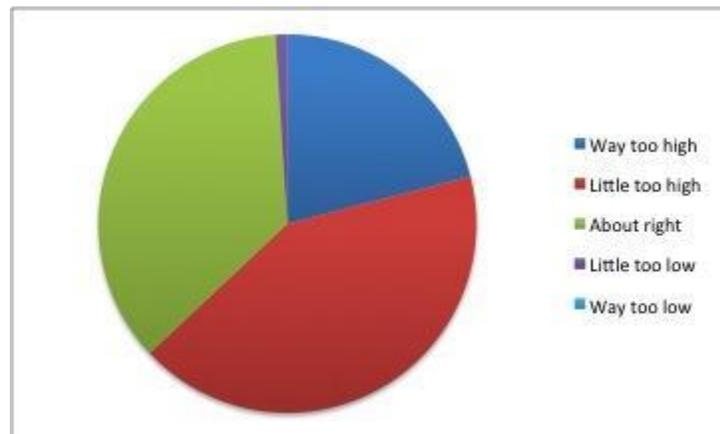
A second potential factor is that graduate students receive very different amounts of training across COLA departments. Departments most commonly offer only a 1-2 hour TA training within their new student orientation. Some departments offer more extensive training over several days (e.g., Classics, English) and other departments offer no formal training (e.g., American Studies, Anthropology, Asian Studies, Geography, Linguistics) or expect their TAs to be trained by the employing departments (as is the case with Comparative Literature, which does not offer any departmental TA appointments). Depending on their TA appointment, graduate students may also receive required training from UGS (for Signature Course appointments) or the Sanger Center (for Supplemental Instructor positions). Among our surveyed respondents, over half (55%) reported spending "no time" on training. 32% spent "some time" and 13% spent a "moderate" or "significant" amount of time.

Despite this wide variety in training, surveyed TAs expressed mixed feelings about receiving more. Many students report having felt ill-prepared to begin TAing and strongly desirous of more training, while others felt adequately prepared with the training they received or do not believe additional training would be valuable. Such diversities of opinion often appear within the same department. Few students reported finding that departmental trainings have been useful to their professional development. When asked about the usefulness of attending training for their professional

development, 34% reported "not at all useful," 51% reported "somewhat useful," and 15% reported "very useful."

Finally, across departments, a resounding 94 percent of all respondents felt they knew the course material well enough to answer their students' questions about the readings and lectures as TAs. Our conclusion is that despite this content knowledge, many TAs did not feel they knew how to *teach* the material. While 186 respondents reported feeling adequately prepared to TA for the first time (usually citing training or past work experience), a troubling 135 respondents reported not feeling adequately prepared to begin their TAship. The most commonly requested areas for additional training were: lesson planning/discussion section planning; grading; and working with students from diverse backgrounds—including English Language Learners and particularly students with learning differences and Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) accommodations.

Grievances with TA Responsibilities
As seen, graduate students self-report that the majority of their working time is spent on grading, trailed by planning and preparing for class, attending lecture, holding office hours, and/or leading discussion sections. However, quantitative and anecdotal data from the 2014 COLA TA Task Force Survey reveals that primary instructors are also giving teaching assistants work inconsistent with TAs' responsibilities or simply fair expectations. In response to the survey question, "Have you ever been asked to perform responsibilities that you felt were beyond the requirements of your position as a TA?," 34 percent responded "Yes." These excesses included, but are not limited to: grading within a very constrained timeframe; delivering the lecture without much notice to prepare; heavy writing responsibilities to develop the syllabus; compiling information for or even writing professors' lectures; writing the course's examinations; handling issues of student misconduct without guidance from the professor; organizing non-classtime events; and lastly, performing personal tasks for professors, such as parking the professor's car.

It is relatively common for TAs to be overworked and there is no clear structure for addressing such problems. In the 2014 COLA TA Task Force Survey, roughly one quarter of TAs (26%) reported consistently working more than their 20-hour appointment. Roughly half (48%) believed that they work approximately 20 hours per week, and a final quarter (27%) stated that they work less than 20 hours weekly.

Q: In your current or most recent 20-hour TA appointment, do you feel you work on average:
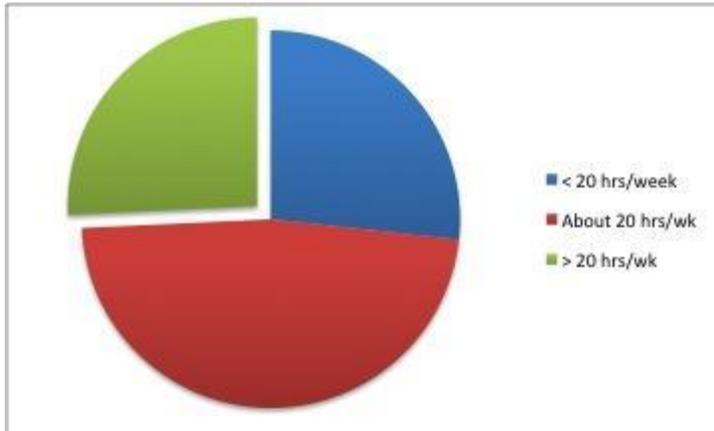
27% Less than 20 hours/week

48% About 20 hours/week

26% More than 20 hours/week

When problems do arise, many TAs perceive that they do not have adequate resources to address them. 29% of surveyed students declared that they would be uncomfortable talking to anyone in their department about excessive workload. 24% reported the same about inappropriate work requests. When asked to choose <u>all</u> the parties that they might approach with an issue, 44% of surveyed students indicated they would feel comfortable approaching the class professor. 36% would feel comfortable approaching their faculty advisor. 35% would feel comfortable approaching the graduate coordinator, while 34% would feel comfortable approaching the graduate advisor. 17% reported feeling comfortable approaching the department chair.

Finally, Synchronous Massive Online Courses (SMOCs) are not a feasible pathway to improving these grievances. In particular, the Government and Psychology departments currently offer SMOCs as options for their introductory courses. Of our surveyed respondents, 58% of those who have TAed for one of the SMOCs or another online course report that such courses are much more work. 25% report the SMOCs are somewhat more work and 17% report the SMOCs are about the same amount of work as a traditional classroom course.

Recommendations:

1. *Implement a semesterly TA-Faculty contract for every course*
    As noted in the previous section (I.1), we recommend that COLA implement a standard departmental contract between each faculty member and each TA. This form should be completed by both parties, signed before the start of the term, and filed in the department. After every course, TAs should add to the form whether the amount and type of work conformed with the contract. Every two years the department should be required to review these responses and re-evaluate TAs' workload. With courses that are found routinely to overburden TAs, professors should be required to adjust responsibilities and/or the class format. If funding is available, the course should be prioritized for hiring an additional TA or graders. This system would both create an

institutional record of TAs' actual workloads and remind all COLA graduate students and members of faculty that regular and open communication is imperative.

2. *Argue for a Professional Development/Mentorship Model*
    A TA's responsibilities should be geared toward developing abilities as a future professor, rather than simply acting as support for the instructor of record. Our committee urges a reorientation on how instructors perceive their TAs. We believe that instructors should see their TAs as working toward professional development goals, and thus should mentor the TA and assign at least some tasks with this end in mind. Such a transition should also help departments to establish cultures where TAs feel comfortable voicing concerns with their workload.

3. *Create an online compliance module on how to be a mentor*
    Many instructors may not be aware of what TAs hope to gain from their teaching assignment. They may also not realize when their TAs believe that assigned tasks do not contribute to their professional development. As a result, we propose that COLA require all instructors to complete a yearly or bi-yearly training module that would advise them on being a successful faculty mentor. This module would highlight what types of responsibilities should and should not be required of TAs, as well as how instructors could contribute to a TA's professional goals. This module would reinforce our other recommendations and address general topics applicable to all TAs, regardless of their departments.

4. *Alleviate grading workload*
    Many TAs are hired for the sole purpose of grading all student assignments. This situation can be a very tedious and time-consuming task. We recommend that instructors alleviate this workload by occasionally participating in the grading, even if it only alleviates an hour or two for a TA. Instructors' participation would allow the TA to spend time preparing a lesson plan to present to the class, as well as facilitate instructors' awareness of students' comprehension. We also recommend that instructors set reasonable grading deadlines for their TAs, with at least one week to return major assignments.

5. *Offer and incentivize greater optional training opportunities*
    While we strongly endorse a professional development/mentorship model of TAships and suggest that such training be provided (discussed in section IV), there is also the need for departments to offer practical survival training. Many TAs end up needlessly "reinventing the wheel." Because TAships and their associated workloads vary tremendously across COLA because of subject matter, course design, and degree requirements, we recommend that a) the college mandate each employing department offer *some* training for first-time TAs and b) that the college expand and incentivize optional practical training opportunities.

We recommend that while training should be left up to each employing department, there should be some consistency in information dissemination across all COLA departments. This is particularly important because COLA graduate students often TA for a variety of departments across their graduate careers. Our survey also found that responding students particularly wanted more information about university resources, particularly about Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). While campus offices such as SSD, the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, the Gender and Sexuality Center, and the Counseling and Mental Health Center, offer their own trainings throughout the semester or by request, almost no students mentioned attending these trainings, despite their expressed desire. This raises questions about both student awareness of these trainings and the burden or availability of these trainings. We recommend that COLA create a brief 'coursepack' or presentation for all new TAs that provides an overview of university services. We recommend the creation of a committee (made up of administrators, faculty members, and graduate students) to oversee this process and ensure that information remains tailored to TAs and AIs. This collated information should then be made readily accessible through departmental websites.

COLA has recently begun to expand its TA training offerings. Since fall 2013, COLA and the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) have piloted "GRS 097: Fundamentals for Teaching Assistants," an optional college-wide pedagogy/support course for first-time TAs leading a discussion section. In post-surveys, TAs who took the course in the 2013-2014 academic year reported significant growth in their overall teaching effectiveness, and 18 out of 18 students reported that they would recommend the class to their peers. It is worth noting that numerous respondents to our student survey indicated that while they do think they would benefit from such additional training (197 of 388), they feel "at capacity" with their time, workload, and the amount of work they already do for their pay. Since thoughtfully-designed training should benefit TAs, professors, and undergraduate students, COLA should consider incentivizing training to reach a wider group of graduate student TAs. This could include awarding certificates or small stipends for attending training workshops and/or offering stipends or course credit for GRS 097.

6. *SMOCs are not a means to reduce the number of teaching assistants.*
   The current format and implementations of SMOCs result in TAs often working more than they would in a traditional classroom course due to the increased administrative duties and inflated student-to-TA ratio. Departments should re-evaluate how they format their courses and how they allocate their TAs for SMOCs.

III.   WAGES AND JOB SECURITY

Survey responses indicate that the vast majority of graduate students find the annual salary for a TA inadequate for sustaining even a frugal life in Austin, forcing them to take out loans and seek outside employment, which hampers progress toward degree completion. Furthermore, graduate students occasionally find themselves with no funding at all from their home department and must independently seek jobs in other departments or outside the university. Across the board, graduate students lack opportunities for summer employment, another significant factor slowing their time to degree.

Findings:

Inadequate Compensation and Financial Instability
A significant majority of survey respondents find their TA salaries inadequate. Of survey respondents, 64% feel dissatisfied with their compensation, compared to 24% who feel satisfied and 12% who feel neutral.

Q: How satisfied are you with the current TA compensation based on your typical TA workload?

64% Dissatisfied
12% Neutral
24% Satisfied
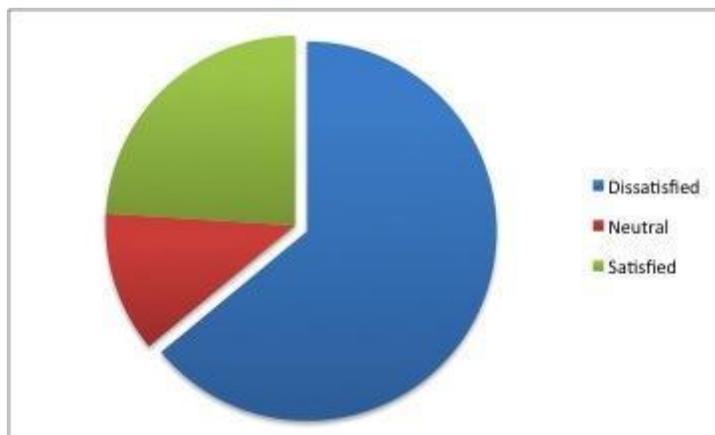
Most graduate students are unable to afford the cost of living in Austin without supplementing their TA salaries with outside sources of income or incurring substantial debt. Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents have taken out loans to support themselves, and 60% have sought employment outside the university to supplement their income. Of these, 25% work at least 10-15 hours per week in jobs outside of the university system. Working outside the university saps time and energy from students' research and teaching responsibilities, slowing graduate students' time to degree. Furthermore, graduate students in certain departments may not receive TA appointments at all, forcing them to seek TAships in other departments or other means of employment.

Lack of Summer Employment
Very few summer employment opportunities are available to graduate students, whether TAships, AIships, GRAships, or fellowships. Of survey respondents, 27%

reported they were likely to receive a summer TAship, 13% a summer AIship, 24% a summer GRAship, and 33% a summer fellowship. While the lack of summer employment is disruptive and financially unsustainable for all graduate students, international students are particularly affected by this trend because students on a F-1 or J-1 visa are prohibited from seeking employment outside of UT (as well as university employment over 20 hours per week). Attempts to circumvent this rule may result in removal of visa and the removal of the student from the US. International students who lack summer university employment must either leave the United States during the summers in order to seek employment in their home countries, or remain in Austin with no income. Lack of summer income may also cause American students, particularly out-of-state students, to leave Austin during the summers to seek employment elsewhere or to stay with family. Isolation from advisors, colleagues, and the larger university community hampers graduate research productivity, and devoting time to other summer employment further slows graduate research, another factor lengthening overall time to degree.

Recommendations:

1. *Create a "clearinghouse" web portal to expedite interdepartmental hiring.*
    A number of departments "import" TAs from other departments to fill TAships that were not taken by in-house graduate students. However, there is currently no clear or integrated way for unemployed graduate students to seek and apply for available TAships outside of their own department.

    A web-based portal would allow individual departments to advertise open TA positions to graduate students from other COLA departments, which would likely facilitate the TA assignment process for graduate coordinators and graduate students alike.

2. *Offer additional opportunities to AI and amend AI exception policy for upper division courses.*
    Allowing qualified graduate students to be instructors of record is a win-win solution for COLA and graduate students. Offering added AI opportunities bolsters the College's instructional mission at a lower cost, since AIs earn less than faculty, and broadens course offerings for undergraduates. Moreover, having an AI experience on a curricula vitae notably improves graduate student job market competitiveness. Acting as the instructor of record for a course provides valuable on-the-job training that furthers professionalization while simultaneously improving UT's graduate job placement outcome measures. In the College of Natural Sciences, many courses are taught by AIs. We believe that COLA would benefit from additional AIs and could look to the College of Natural Sciences as a successful model.

    At present, graduate students who have taken 398T are qualified to be an AI only for lower level undergraduate courses. Teaching an upper division course requires special approval by the Dean of the Graduate School and is rarely granted more than once per

student. We recommend that qualified AIs should be considered equally for lower and upper division courses at the sole discretion of the department.

3. _Offer TAs the option to receive stipends over 9 **or** 12 months._
   Because the survey revealed that summers are a key source of financial instability for graduate students, we recommend that the University offer TAs the option to stretch their stipends over 12 months (while retaining the option to earn the stipend over 9 months). This option is presently offered to faculty and would, we believe, require minimal changes in accounting practices in place.

4. _Offer additional TAships over the summer._
   We further recommend that COLA work with departments to provide additional TAships during the short summer terms. This is particularly important for international students.

5. _Accelerate receipt of 1st paycheck._
   Current University accounting practices stipulate that compensation is made in arrears. This means that TAs employed in their first semester as graduate students receive their first paycheck on October 1. In practice, TAs work without one month of compensation. The effect of this timing can have serious financial consequences for TAs. We recommend that the first paycheck of the fall semester be received on September 1. If this is not possible, every effort should be made to notify incoming graduate students of the accounting policies so that they can make the necessary financial preparations.

IV.   CAREER

COLA departments vary widely in how they consider graduate students' academic interests and career goals when making both appointment offers and particular TA assignments. All claim to solicit and consider such information, but only a few have clear systems in place to do so. Those departments lacking transparent systems to collect graduate students' aspirations primarily rely on faculty preferences when making assignments, which can have both positive and very negative consequences. We divide these two kinds of departments into "job-oriented" and "career-oriented" departments. We strongly praise the latter.

Findings:

While all COLA departments seek to track and facilitate graduate students' long-term career goals, most lack formal systems to do so. Of our surveyed Graduate Coordinators, 17 of 17 or 100% stated that they track students' academic progress and use students' interests and expertise in determining graduate student employment. Indeed, 53% of departments indicated that this information is the primary factor for decisions on graduate students' assignments. However, only 24% of responding departments were able to demonstrate a clear policy or system for tracking these professional interests.

As a result, while departments expressed a widespread sentiment that graduate students' degree plans and career interests should be a primary factor for placing them in related TA/AI positions, our survey revealed that the methods for tracking and considering these interests were highly inconsistent. We believe that this finding dovetails with other sections of this report in which many departments throughout COLA are perpetuating a culture where employment is viewed as disconnected from students' early careers and is primarily tied to rewarding academic progress and/or personal relationships with members of faculty.

TAs' Dependence on Faculty
As a result of our survey of Graduate Coordinators, there is a clear and widespread overreliance on faculty members' advice and preferences when placing graduate students in TA/AI positions. The outcome is a dangerous power imbalance between faculty employees and graduate student employees of the College. In our survey, when asked how they track graduate students in making employment decisions, a majority of responding departments indicated explicitly that faculty were their primary sources of information about graduate students. For graduate students' career interests, reports from either individual faculty advisers or departmental graduate advisers were the most common (and sometimes the sole) source of information. In addition, some departments indicated that faculty preference for certain graduate student employees is a primary factor for placing graduate students in certain TA/AI positions.

The input of faculty on student career progress and planning is invaluable. However, faculty input does not replace soliciting career interests directly from graduate students. The combination of relying on faculty as gatekeepers for information about graduate students while simultaneously delegating employment decision-making power to these same faculty members creates a flawed system in which graduate students are professionally and economically beholden to faculty, as opposed to their department or their employer, the College. We believe that this concentration of power contributes to the current culture in which 29% of surveyed graduate students feel uncomfortable notifying *anyone* in their department about excessive workload demands made by supervising faculty. We also generally feel that that using faculty preference as the first or primary factor in deciding graduate student employment is demeaning to the indispensable role that graduate student employees play for the College.

TAships: Job-oriented vs. Career-oriented

Our graduate student survey also revealed that COLA departments vary widely in their understanding of how graduate student employment relates to graduate students' post-degree careers. Graduate students from different departments expressed strikingly different opinions on how trainings, orientations, interactions with undergraduates, and attending course lectures contributed to their careers. Simultaneously, within individual departments, students generally expressed very similar views as their peers about such issues. For instance, the majority of respondents from one large department viewed TA/AI orientation as not positively contributing to their careers at all, while the majority of respondents from a different large department viewed orientation as positively contributing to their careers.

We draw the conclusion that department-specific employment patterns and department-specific cultures mold how graduate students perceive their employment's contribution to their careers. In other words, graduate students' perception of their career progress reflects their department's views on graduate student employment. While all departments must resolve practical teaching needs with diverse employees' desires, individual departments tend to fall into two broad camps on the purpose of graduate student employment. We divide these camps into: departments that treat graduate student employment as purely a necessity for sustaining oneself through graduate school (**job-oriented**), and departments that treat graduate student employment as an important basis for a successful career (**career-oriented**.)

Job-oriented departments are more likely to view employment as a reward for satisfactory academic progress, to rely on faculty input before graduate student input, and to have less explicit and more informal policies toward employment decisions. Career-oriented departments are more likely to regularly solicit information from graduate students directly, to balance faculty advice with graduate student input, and to have explicit and transparent policies toward employment decisions. Size of department and instructional need does not determine a department's employment orientation—there are both large and small departments in both categories. However,

and it is worth stressing, the distribution of departmental fellowships *does* seem to correlate with employment culture: departments that give out more fellowships tend to be career-oriented and departments that distribute fewer fellowships tend to be job-oriented.

Recommendations:

1. *Encourage departments to solicit and track graduate students' career interests*
We recognize that graduate coordinators are overburdened with departmental duties. Nevertheless, we feel strongly that without regular, systematized solicitation of career plans and employment preferences, these factors will never be seriously incorporated into employment decision-making. We therefore recommend that departments should be encouraged regularly to solicit their graduate students' preferences for employment opportunities. We further recommend that these general goals and specific preferences be used when placing graduate students in TA/AI positions. Ideally, this information should be structured such that it could be incorporated into holistic, multi-year departmental strategies on graduate student employment.

2. *Foster the idea that graduate school employment should be professional development*
We feel strongly that departments with a career-oriented view toward graduate student employment produce more satisfied and successful graduate students. We therefore recommend that the College encourage its departments to view their graduate students as early career professionals whose employment should contribute to their career progress, rather than temporary employees fulfilling ad-hoc teaching needs. This encouragement should extend to the other features that career-oriented departments tend to share, such as the regular solicitation of graduate student preferences (see Recommendation 1), the balancing of faculty feedback with that of graduate students, and formal, explicit, and transparent decision-making policies toward employment.

3. *Empower graduate coordinators to view College-wide employment opportunities through a "clearinghouse" web portal*
Most departmental administrators embraced this committee's preference for a career-oriented employment culture but could not alone enact that vision while balancing their department's teaching needs with the employment needs of their graduate students. Thus, we reiterate our recommendation that the College implement a web portal for sharing employment opportunities across the college.

4. *Expand and Incentivize Professional Training*
Graduate students must share in the labor to rethink TAships as professional development, in part by pursuing their own further training. While we recommended above that mandatory practical training be left to each employing department, we

believe COLA should expand the college-wide training opportunities that are available. COLA currently offers semester-long TA training through the optional GRS 097 "Fundamentals for Teaching Assistants" course, the UGS training required of all Signature Course TAs, and the Sanger Center training required of all Supplemental Instruction (SI) leaders. Since these courses all primarily focus on leading discussion sections and require a semester-long commitment, COLA should offer other training opportunities for TAs who do not lead discussion sections, for TAs who support daily language instruction, or for TAs who cannot commit to a semester-long course. These opportunities could range from one-time workshops on issues such as teaching, grading, or being successful as an academic, to to an abbreviated GRS 097 course tailored for TAs without discussion sections. COLA, CTL, and the Sanger Center have already begun conversations about creating these kinds of new training opportunities, and results from the 2014 COLA TA Task Force survey confirm interest in additional, optional TA training. Incentivizing such training with stipends or certificates would further encourage TAs to recognize themselves as young professionals whose training is valued and worthwhile.

University

Teaching assistants are graduate students who help faculty with the conduct and delivery of courses. Services provided by teaching assistants include, but are not limited to, grading, monitoring, leading lab and/or discussion sessions, offering office hour assistance to students, and performing clerical tasks associated with course instruction. Teaching assistants are supervised by the course instructor of record and are subject to established departmental policies on student academic employment.

To be eligible for appointment as a teaching assistant a nominee must:
1) be a degree-seeking graduate student without existing admissions conditions imposed by the Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies;
2) be in good academic standing and making satisfactory progress toward a graduate degree; remain registered in courses that count toward the graduate degree for at least nine semester hours during each semester of the long session; and
3) if holding an appointment for any summer term (first six weeks, second six weeks, nine weeks or twelve weeks), must remain registered in courses that count toward the graduate degree for at least three summer hours during any term of the summer session.

Appointments of teaching assistants must be made on the basis of percent time employment and only from teaching assistant accounts and other approved accounts. Appointments shall be made in accordance with the titles and definitions and within salary scales.

Appointments should, in general, be made on a semester-by-semester basis and in accordance with the percentage of the full-time equivalent base. The period of appointment shall not exceed one academic year and shall terminate at the expiration of the stated period of appointment without notification of non-renewal. If a department determines that it is to the benefit of the institution, it may nominate a teaching assistant for reappointment.

Although they are not members of the faculty, teaching assistants are expected to conform to the same standards of conduct in the performance of their academic duties as are members of the faculty and shall respect the rights and opinions of students and uphold the academic standards of the University.

Teaching Load

A teaching assistant holding a half-time appointment in any college or school of UT Austin will be expected to devote an average of twenty hours per week to his or her assigned duties. Appointments may not exceed twenty hours per week during the first two long-session semesters of graduate study at the University and thirty hours per week during subsequent long-session semesters.

Duties of Teaching Assistants

1) Teaching assistants may only be assigned duties which are adjunct to regular classroom instruction. All duties performed by teaching assistants shall be under the supervision and direction of a designated member of the faculty.
2) Such duties may include student practice sessions, discussion sessions, assistance in laboratories, recitation sessions, review sessions and similar activities.
3) In addition, teaching assistants may be assigned to hold office hours, hold student conferences, evaluate student work, and to perform similar common academic duties.
4.) Teaching assistants may not be assigned regular classroom instruction duties nor may they serve as an instructor of record for any instructional activity.
5) The dean of the college, in consultation with the chairs of departments in which teaching assistants are employed, shall set the basic workload policy for teaching assistants within the college.

<u>COLA</u>

Period of Appointment	Percent of time	Total Salary
Fall 2014: 09-01-2014 to 01-15-2015	50%	$7,390 ($1,642/month pre-tax)
Spring 2015: 01-16-2015 to 05-31-2015	50%	$7,390 ($1,642/month pre-tax)

The following figures pertain to an academic year:

Stipend = $14,780

The bases for these positions are 4.5 months per semester, 9 months per academic year. A 50% position indicates 20 hours of work per week. In the semesters of employment, a benefits-eligible academic employee receives: a monthly salary, full tuition up to 9 credit hours, faculty/staff-level medical insurance coverage, and a waiver of the student health insurance charged by the International Office.

<u>Department</u>

Your primary work assignment in the _____ department is:

       Course: _____

       Instructor: _____

Meeting Times: _____

 Section Times: _____

In addition to the policies listed above, the Department has the following additional guidelines:

Chair: _____   Signature: _____   Date: _____

TA : _____   Signature: _____   Date: _____

Course

Responsibility	Required (Check all that apply)	Frequency
Attend class		
Read assignments		
Lead discussion sections		
Maintain office hours		
Take attendance		
Take class notes		
Conduct review sessions		
Conduct lab sessions		
Prepare teaching materials		
Prepare/maintain course website		
Post lecture notes to web site		
Communicate with students		
Proctor Exams		
Maintain class records		
Meet with Professor		
Assisting with computing final grades		
Copy or Upload class reading		

Other:

Expectations and time commitment required of a TA vary by course and instructor. However, TA workload should not exceed 20 hours per week. Additionally, TAs are never responsible for:
- Giving primary course lectures more than 2-3 times per semester
- Assisting with the instructor's personal research (e.g. data entry, proofreading, retrieving books or making copies unrelated to the course, etc)
- Assistance with unrelated personal tasks, even if they free up teaching time for the instructor (e.g. personal errands, providing transportation for instructor, etc).
-Any other tasks that are not directly related to course instruction

Instructor: _____   Signature: _____   Date: _____

TA : _____   Signature: _____   Date: _____