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In Praise of Teaching Assistants

BY TOM GARRISON

Teaching assistants (TAs) are an indispensable part of the dynamics and economics of higher education today. Without their dedication, patience, and knowledge, most college and university programs—especially highly technical ones like marine science departments—would grind to a halt. Their enthusiastic presence helps make our department the lively, hard-working, and generally joyful place it is.

Unlike a research university, my two-year community college doesn't have a built-in supply of graduate students in need of temporary employment. We draw our TAs from the best of the department's student population. Given the conditions of employment imposed on our TAs, one might question the sanity of applicants. We can't afford to pay them. We have no office space dedicated to them. They set up and break down lab preps before and after class meetings. They sit in on classes they've taken before. They grade piles of papers. About the only perk is a standing invitation to the department's traditional Friday lunch at a local bar/restaurant and a unit or two of college credit in a "special studies" section.

So why do we have more potential TAs than we can handle? What makes this demanding and rigorous job so attractive? Let's start with the invitation process. Our laboratory classes range from nonmajor, general-education beginning oceanography to advanced marine biology. All faculty members teach lab classes. At our open-door community

college, our students range in ability from beet-like to brilliant. Leaders soon emerge in every lab section, and the more vegetative members of the class fade away. Now we watch. Who grasps the concepts quickly and accurately? Who instinctively turns to a confused member of his or her group to offer insight? As the semester progresses, a few students in each lab section will combine consistently good grades on assignments with critical thinking, writing ability, and a winning personality. These people are truly enjoying the subject matter, the conversation, and the overall lab experience. They are not afraid to ask questions, to stay after class, and to engage the TAs and faculty member. (It should be noted that the vast majority of these students are not marine science majors—or even science majors—but are taking these classes to fulfill general education breadth requirements.) Near the end of the semester, the lab instructor and TAs decide who to invite to join their ranks. If the candidates agree, they are introduced to their peers as future TAs on the last day of the class. And, of course, we give them a lab coat!

I have a personal not-so-hidden agenda in selecting TAs for my honors-level coursework. I want to recruit great middle school and high school science teachers. My life was changed by great teachers, and my most satisfying professional reward is the appearance at my office door of a former student who announces he or she is now teaching science in a public school. If that dedication began in one of our labs,

I get *very* happy indeed!

My colleagues sometimes joke about my occasional TA "projects." Once in a while, I'll take on an unlikely prospect: a student in whom I see a quality that (perhaps) the student himself does not see. A recovering addict, a minority student who has never believed in his or her academic potential, an older student attempting college for the first time—those nontraditional students will sometimes rise to surprising heights. Or not. But if they are successful, if their lives are changed by working in the demanding environment of a teaching assistant, we all win the grand prize.

Gilbert Highet, for many years a classics professor at Columbia, wrote an intriguing book on teaching called *The Immortal Profession*. In it, he develops the idea that one's teachers continue to teach indefinitely. That is, your teachers are—in a sense—still alive within your mind, and the attitudes and loves they taught are reflected in your teaching. And *their* teachers affect you as well. As do *their* teachers, and so on and on, back to Socrates or Lao Tzu or whomever. Immortal profession indeed!

The next time you walk into your lab or lecture hall or prep room, look at the faces of the TAs. Remember how proud you were when your professor selected you for one of those positions? Highet was right. 📖

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