



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Teaching Assistants: God's Gift or More Trouble Than They Are Worth?

Teaching assistants can be what you make them. I have found that sharing my expectations about the roles they are to play before the term begins makes them more successful. The following guidelines have helped my teaching assistants become more fully involved in the teaching/learning process.

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- **Affirm students:** Give students plenty of positive feedback which is sincere, is genuine, and lets them know you are aware of their efforts and progress. Even the smallest compliment can mean a great deal to those who may be dealing with anxiety and apprehension, and learning new skills. Remember, you will help set the tone for the course. When you give criticism, be certain it is constructive, helpful, and positive.

- **Remember that not all students are in college for the same reasons:** Many will be new to college; others will have experience. The goal is to work with and motivate students from where they are. Students' reasons for taking the class will vary. Being aware of this will help you to help them.

- **Have an attitude:** Make it your goal to be cheerful and "up" no matter what is going on with you outside the classroom. When you are in class, you are there for students. Leave your problems at the door. Bringing problems into the classroom leaves students uncomfortable and/or confused. Lead with your positive energy—it is contagious.

- **Be flexible:** If the instructor wants to try something new or unplanned in class, go with it. Be open to change and experimentation. Always be respectful of the instructor and his or her plans and goals for the class.

- **Help one another:** If two or more TAs are working in the same class, keep the lines of communication open. If you do not have an answer or do not understand how something is done, ask.

- **Listen for student suggestions:** Students often have terrific ideas about activities, in-class work, or how something might be done more effectively. Or, they may confide concerns to you which they would not feel free to communicate to the instructor. If the

instructor is open to it, pass along student concerns and ideas to her/him for consideration.

- **Remember and use students' names:** Are you pronouncing names correctly? What do students prefer to be called? Taking the time to chat with students will help them feel more comfortable and confident in class; help them see you are a helpful, approachable individual who is there to assist them in achieving success.

- **Encourage acceptance and understanding of all types of students in your class and/or among small group members regardless of gender, ethnic background, religious/spiritual affiliation, challenge/disability, or sexual orientation:** Keep yourself in constant check. Are you giving preferential treatment to specific students because they are like you? Similarly, if you find that there is prejudicial treatment between students, discuss it with your instructor.

- **Monitor small group activities:** Reiterate what your instructor has indicated should be accomplished in your group. If students are still unsure of what to do, go through the activity or assignment with them yourself. They will take their cues from you and model your behaviors. Be an up, open, and positive coach.

- **If a directive is given to students which does not make sense to them, explain why you or the instructor is asking that the task be done in a specific manner.** If you do not know yourself, find out and be sure to convey it to them. Students are usually more willing to follow through with requests if they understand the purpose behind them.

- **Lead by example with an appropriate level of discourse:** Avoid foul language. Though you are not an authority in the classroom, you are in a position to positively influence students.

- **Develop a sensitivity to problems:** Take note of problems, both big and small. Do not wait and let a small problem develop into a larger one. Deal with it in a mature and professional manner. Let the instructor know of the situation, even if you think it is only a potential problem. Inform him or her of students with negative attitudes, students who are not cooperative, who are not getting along with others, or who are



reticent about activities. Do not forget to encourage and stroke the egos of those with attitudes—they may need it more than most!

- **Keep track of time:** A specific amount of time will be allowed when you get into small group activities. Be sure that you are allowing plenty of time for everyone to participate. DO NOT get sidetracked with questions and conversation. Get down to business immediately and use time left over at the end to answer questions/concerns, look at student work, or accomplish whatever else is needed.

- **Be cognizant of learning disabilities:** If a student approaches you regarding a learning disability, send him or her to your instructor. NEVER suggest to a student that you feel he/she is having problems grasping the subject or ask if he/she has a disability or challenge. More generally, if you note that any student is struggling with any aspect of the course, inform your instructor of the situation.

- **Take your work seriously:** You have a crucial part in assisting students in becoming less apprehensive and better-skilled in your discipline. Being in top form—prepared, ready to get down to business—will help students enormously. If you are organized, they will be organized. If you are tentative or unclear about assignments and activities, they will follow suit. Make it your responsibility to know what will occur during each class period. Be familiar with chapters and subjects being covered before you come to class.

- **Do not baby-sit:** Your job is to assist students and your instructor, not to do students' work for them. If, for example, they have questions and you know the answers can be found on the syllabus or in the text, request that they first look for the answers themselves and suggest where they might look. If they are still in need, they can get your help in finding answers or solving problems.

- **Above all, enjoy yourself:** Being a teaching assistant is a terrific, one-of-a-kind opportunity for you to develop and to demonstrate instructional and leadership skills that will serve you well in college and in work.

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