

# Teaching Assistant (TA) program at RSMAS: Requirements and resources for students and faculty

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## **Background:**

All RSMAS PhD students are expected to be a Teaching Assistant (TA) for two courses while pursuing their degree. The training session (below) and two teaching opportunities are offered as courses in educational training (I, II and III). The mandatory TA program will include training of new TAs, evaluation of their performance, and recognition of excellence. The goal is to make the experience as valuable as possible for the TA, the faculty, and the students taking our courses. Below is a description of the program elements (training, evaluation, and recognition), and a set of requirements to be followed by both the TA and the faculty instructor. There are also some suggestions and resources provided in the appendices.

- **TRAINING**
  - **Educational training I:** Students are required by UM to complete an online TA training. To supplement this, and better prepare TAs for their new roles as teachers, a 3-day RSMAS training workshop has also been developed. Day 1 will provide an overview of the basics of teaching, including learning theories, classroom culture, assessment, and classroom management. Day 2 will focus on presentation skills and labs. Day 3 will provide TAs with the chance to give a practice “mini-lesson” in small breakout groups and obtain constructive feedback following their presentation. It is recommended that the faculty instructors attend Day 3 of the workshop.
  - **Educational training II and III:** Following the initial training session, students will be assigned specific courses and instructors for the further development of their teaching training and experience. During the time when students are assisting the faculty instructor they will be given the opportunity to perform no less than two but no more than five significant teaching events (lectures, labs etc) and will be assisting with marking, office hours and other duties as assigned.
- **EVALUATION:** Evaluations of the TA will be done at the end of the semester (1) by the students in the class, and (2) by the faculty instructor. An evaluation form has been developed specifically for TAs (see Appendix C). In addition, TAs will evaluate their experience at the end of the semester (form provided in Appendix D).
- **RECOGNITION:** Three ‘RSMAS TA Excellence’ awards will be given at the end of the academic year. The three categories for these awards will be: undergraduate lab, undergraduate lecture, and graduate class. The faculty instructor will be asked to nominate students for the award, and the nominations will be evaluated based on a letter from the faculty and the end-

of-semester class evaluations. The three awardees will have the opportunity to run the TA training session the following school year.

- **REQUIREMENTS for the TA (lecture and lab):**
- Register for Educational Training courses
- Complete online TA training (the graduate school will contact TAs by email before the start of the academic year)
- Foreign students must pass a 'Speak test' (the graduate school will contact TAs by email before the start of the academic year)
- Complete RSMAS TA training workshop (August)
- Meet with faculty **BEFORE** the beginning of the semester to discuss duties/expectations (preferably before TA training)
- Attend first day of class to be introduced to students
- Set up and maintain consistent office hours. Add your name, contact information, and office hours (location/time) to the course syllabus.
- Spend on average 12-15 hours/week on class-related duties.
- The student must have a minimum of 2 significant teaching opportunities during the semester. If more than 2 teaching opportunities are offered to the TA, the faculty instructor must be present and provide feedback for these activities. This could be a lecture, a discussion section, or a lab. (For more ideas, see Appendix A)
- Perform an end-of-semester evaluation of their experience in the course.

### **REQUIREMENTS for the Faculty instructor (lecture and lab):**

- Provide GSO with a paragraph describing the duties and expectations of the TA for your course (at the time of the TA request); this should include the expected time commitment (attends lectures, gives lecture, office hours, preparation of homeworks/tests, grading ...etc), and list the possible teaching opportunities that the students will have. The course-related duties should be able to be completed within an average of 12-15 hours per week.
- Meet with TA **BEFORE** course to verify that (1) the TA has a good command of the course material, (2) that he/she understands the duties and expectations, (3) has any feedback on those responsibilities and/or the course.
- Introduce TA on the first day of class, and explain the role of the TA for the course (i.e. leading reviews, office hours, etc.). Make sure their name, contact information and office hours are on the syllabus.
- Provide the student with a minimum of 2 significant teaching opportunities during the semester. If more than 2 teaching opportunities are offered to the TA, the faculty instructor must be present and provide feedback for these activities. This could be a lecture, a discussion section, or a lab. (For more ideas, see Appendix A)
- Hand out TA evaluation forms at the end of the semester (GSO will provide)
- Perform an end-of-semester evaluation of the TA that will include a discussion of the course evaluations, and your own assessment.
- Nominate your TA for the 'TA excellence' award at the end of the year if appropriate.

## **APPENDIX A: SUGGESTION/ADVICE FOR TA AND FACULTY** **(beyond the usual grading)**

- Leading discussion/study groups
- Holding review sessions before exams (during class time or outside)
- Individual tutoring with students
- Developing homeworks /labs/class projects
- Assistance with homework questions, class projects
- Labs - set up, cleanup, running labs, grading lab reports
- Developing lab manuals
- Organizing and maintaining the class webpage/blackboard/blog/facebook page etc. (upload course documents, lead discussions, input grades, etc.)
- Develop grading rubrics for subjective assignments and be consistent
- Developing exam questions (revamping old exams)
- Exam proctoring
- Establishing a set of TA notes
- Developing a personal plan for the semester and each class (i.e. how will you handle your duties)

## **APPENDIX C: End of Semester TA evaluation form**

### **TEACHING ASSISTANT EVALUATION**

**COURSE # & SEMESTER:** \_\_\_\_\_

**COURSE TITLE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**TA NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

**INSTRUCTOR** \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this questionnaire is to critically evaluate your RSMAS TA in a constructive manner. The results will be summarized and made available the student TA and faculty instructor. Answer only those questions which are applicable to this course.

- 4.--strongly agree**
- 3.--agree**
- 2.--disagree**
- 1.--strongly disagree**

**A. TA**

- 1. \_\_\_ The TA attended the first lecture.
- 2. \_\_\_ The TA set up and maintained consistent office hours .
- 3. \_\_\_ The TA was available and willing to help students.
- 4. \_\_\_ The TA presented their lecture/discussion material clearly.
- 5. \_\_\_ The TA was knowledgeable about the course material.

I would nominate this TA for a 'RSMAS TA Excellence Award' (circle one):

YES

NO

*PLEASE COMPLETE THE OPEN-ENDED RESPONSE SECTION ON THE BACK OF THIS PAGE*

### OPEN-ENDED RESPONSE SECTION

The following items allow you to express your opinions about this course. The faculty instructor will receive this form as is, and will share this information with the TA. However, this written evaluation will be sent to your instructor only *after* grades are reported.

1. What sort of activities did your TA offer to help with? (i.e. teaching, leading review sessions, homework, tutoring)
2. What activities did you utilize your TA for?
3. In what ways do you feel the TA improved your experience in this course?
4. What things could the TA have done better?
5. Do you have any other comments for your TA?



## **APPENDIX E: RESOURCES**

**Below is a list of excellent resources about science education. All are publically available, and/or hard copies can be found at the RSMAS library and the GSO:**

National Research Council. (2000). *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning. Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., Cocking, R.R., Editors. with additional material from the Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice. Donovan, M.S., Bransford, J.D., and Pellegrino, J.W., Editors.

National Research Council. (2001). *Knowing what students know: The science and design of educational assessment*. Committee on the Foundations of Assessment. Pellegrino, J., Chudowsky, N., and Glaser, R., Editors

National Research Council. (2002). *Scientific research in education*. Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research. Shavelson, R.J., and Towne, L., Editors.

Teaching Assistant Guidelines, University of Pennsylvania Department of Engineering: <http://www.cis.upenn.edu/grad/documents/taguidelines.pdf>

'Bike riding and the art of learning.' Robert G. Kraft. *Change* Vol. 10, No. 6 (Jun. - Jul., 1978), pp. 36, 40-42 – RSMAS Library

'Preparing future faculty,' University of Miami Graduate School workshops: [http://www.miami.edu/gs/index.php/graduate\\_school/current\\_students/preparing\\_future\\_faculty/](http://www.miami.edu/gs/index.php/graduate_school/current_students/preparing_future_faculty/)

### **University of Rochester Resources:**

Notes and Suggestions for TAs:  
[http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining\\_notes](http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining_notes)

Procedures for Lab TAs:  
[http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining\\_lab](http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining_lab)

Improving Classroom Climate in Science and Engineering:  
[http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining\\_climate](http://www.pas.rochester.edu/urpas/page/specialtatraining_climate)

### **Resources for Foreign TAs:**

Manual for Foreign Teaching Assistants, second edition, by Gary Althen, University of Iowa, 1988

The Foreign Teaching Assistants Manual, by Patricia Byrd, Janet C. Constantinides, and Martha C. Pennington (Collier Macmillan, New York)