

Graduate Teaching Assistant Protocol

Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology

Texas A&M University

Guidelines first adopted June 22, 2020

Purpose

The goal of this program is to offer qualified graduate students in good standing with the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology with opportunities to obtain education, training, mentoring, and experience in college level teaching, while simultaneously providing students in our classes with the best possible educational experience. Graduate students with career interests in college-level teaching are encouraged to participate in opportunities offered by the Academy for Future Faculty (<https://cte.tamu.edu/Graduate-Student-Support/AFF>), part of the TAMU Center for Teaching Excellence (<https://cte.tamu.edu>) to leverage their experience as a teaching assistant and gain valuable preparation for employment for faculty positions with teaching appointments.

Teaching assistants are a highly valued part of instructional learning in our department. Classroom, laboratory, and online teaching in ECCB courses carry high expectations for defining and communicating learning outcomes, lesson relevance, demonstrations, and assessment, as well as providing mentoring and guiding student discovery.

The Associate Department Head for Graduate Programs is responsible for coordinating and supervising this program, for ensuring TA compliance with required training, and for reporting course enrollment and historical TA assignments to the Department Head, Associate Department Head for Undergraduate Programs, and faculty. The Associate Department Head for Graduate Programs recommends TA assignments to the Department Head for approval.

Participation in the department teaching program can be fulfilled as follows:

1. As a paid Graduate Teaching Assistant (GAT)
 - a. Half-time = 20 hours/week (depending on size of assignment)
 - b. Quarter-time = 10 hours/week (depending on size of assignment)
2. As a paid Graduate Assistant Non-Teaching (GANT). These assignments are reserved for roles that involve logistical and/or technical support for a course.
3. As a paid hourly student worker (hours vary depending on load). These assignments are made for courses that require only intermittent and limited teaching support.

Steps Associated with Application, Compliance, Evaluation, and Selection of Teaching Assistants

1. TA Selection Process

- a. Many of our TAs are pre-selected based on match agreements for various internal/external fellowships, awards, or agreements with individual faculty. These students are guaranteed TA positions for the time-period of their agreement, as outlined in their offer letter, and are automatically assigned each year. The graduate programs advisor will notify you of your assignment at least two months prior to the semester start.
- b. **Call for applications:** Fall and Spring semester TAs for the following year will be sent by email to faculty and graduate students by April 15 of the previous academic year. This call covers all course teaching needs not filled by pre-selected TAs, but also is an opportunity for pre-selected TAs to declare their teaching preferences. Assignments are announced in late May. Criteria for selection is described below in Section 2.
- c. **Round two:** If any class needs are unfulfilled, a second round of applications for Spring semester TAs will be called immediately, typically in November.
- d. Every effort will be made to make TA assignments as quickly and efficiently as possible; however, some elements of the process are subject to delay and out of departmental control. Patience with the process is appreciated.

2. Guiding Principles for TA Course Assignments

- a. Must be eligible to teach. See details of eligibility below.
- b. Every effort will be made to match students with appropriate courses based on needs driven by courses, sections, number of students to be served, and responsibilities required. To the extent possible, graduate TAs will be matched with courses according to knowledge/experience. In cases where a TA is not as familiar with a course, informal education by the TA on course topics should occur.
- c. Both instructors and prospective TAs are given an opportunity to provide input into the selection process. When students complete the application, they will list their course preferences in ranked order. An attempt will be made to assign the applicant to one of his or her top choices, although this is not guaranteed.
- d. First priority is given to TAs pre-selected based on awards and fellowships (see 1a). For any additional assignments, preference will be given to ECCB Ph.D. students, ECCB M.S. thesis students, ECCB M.S. non-thesis students, and finally non-ECCB students whose advisor is in ECCB, in that order. Exceptions can be made for non-ECCB majors to teach if qualified and no ECCB students are qualified.
- e. Preference will be given to students who are earlier in their graduate studies, although exceptions are frequently made. Being a TA is a valued service to ECCB and also provides students with career-building experience, as part of their overall graduate education. As such, we strive to limit the times a student serves as a TA

throughout their graduate studies, so the individual can focus on their own research and coursework. Ideally, students should teach no more than one semester per year for up to two years (M.S.) or three years (Ph.D.).

- f. TA assignment requests from students nearing completion of their degree without other sources of funding will also be considered. Program progress will be assessed with respect to the date of matriculation (including degree plan, proposal, prelims, time to degree).

3. Notification of TA assignment

Graduate students will be notified of TA assignments via email from the graduate programs advisor by June 30. This email will have an offer letter attachment for the student to complete in a timely manner. The letter will detail the teaching assignment, number of hours per week, and other specifics on health insurance and tuition and fees coverage.

4. Compliance and Eligibility

- a. The applicant's academic schedule must match the assignment. We ask students to check their degree plans and course schedules well in advance and plan accordingly. Notify the graduate programs advisor immediately if there are conflicts.
- b. TAs must be in good academic standing. GPA will be assessed upon posting of grades at the end of the semester prior to assignment. They must also not be on probation for any non-academic reason.
- c. Verification of training requirements:
 - i. Teaching Assistant Training and Evaluation Program (TATEP)
 - ii. ECCB Teaching Methods for Science Lab/Courses Course (1 credit)
 - iii. FERPA
 - iv. Van training (if applicable)
 - v. Others as required
- d. Verify examination scores for ELP program for International Students
- e. Written acknowledgement of ECCB Guidelines (this document)
- f. Approval of major advisor
- g. Some courses have specific requirements that must be met, such as a valid driver's license.

5. Instructor requests for TAs and other teaching support (GANT, TI, hourly student workers, etc.)

- a. Selection of undergraduate courses that will get TA support will be based on departmental teaching needs driven by courses, sections, high-impact activities, and number of students to be served (see criteria below). Requests for graduate TAs for a course may be denied by the Department Head based on assessment of departmental teaching needs and budget constraints.
- b. New instructor requests for TAs will be communicated by email to the graduate advisor no later than April 1 for the following year (both fall and spring terms). At this time, faculty can also request preferred TAs. Requests made after April 1 will be

handled on a case-by-case basis. Please provide a full description of job duties and estimate time spent on various tasks. In addition, provide justification for the request using the criteria listed below.

- c. The following undergraduate courses have priority to receive TA support (in priority order):
 - i. ECCB Core Curriculum lab courses
 - ii. Lab courses with high enrollment per lab section
 - iii. Lab courses with lower enrollment

The following courses have lower priority to receive TA support (in no particular order):

- iv. High enrollment ECCB Core Curriculum non-lab courses
 - v. Online courses requiring web-based instruction support
 - vi. Writing intensive courses
 - vii. High impact non-lab courses with field trips, major projects, or other learning activities that require extra instruction
- d. Courses that have historically required one or more TAs will be reassessed annually to ensure they continue to meet ECCB requirements for TA support at that level, based on current job duties and time requirements. Expect to submit a new TA request and justification following substantial changes to enrollment, instructor(s), and/or curriculum, or upon request by the Department Head.
 - e. Graduate courses are not a priority for TA support, as they tend to have low enrollment and more specialized instruction. However, requests for graduate TAs will be evaluated on a case by case basis using the above criteria. See section 4 below for details on approved responsibilities for these TAs.

Paperwork, ELPE, and Benefits

1. Paperwork Process

For TAs to be placed on payroll, the following steps must be taken:

- Successful completion of a background check.
- Student's ability to provide employment eligibility documentation required by federal law, and if applicable, compliance with Selective Service law.
- Schedule an appointment to complete all necessary paperwork with Miki McClenton at mmclenton@tamu.edu or 979.845.5034.
 - You will need to bring the following items with you:
 - US Citizens:**
 1. Social security card (physical card)
 2. Driver's license
 - International Students:**
 3. Passport
 4. Any information regarding your status (I-94, I-20, visa, etc.)
- Paperwork must be completed in a timely manner, prior to the first day of classes. TAs will not be able to work until their paperwork is completely processed. This affects the

student's ability to be placed on eCampus as "instructor." Once the paperwork is complete, then the TA can be added into the course on eCampus.

2. Title Code Information

	GAT	GAR	GANT
Title	Teaching Assistant	Research Assistant	Non-Teaching
Ph.D. Tuition	Covered by department if on fellowship or COALS if TA only	See faculty advisor for information on tuition coverage	See faculty advisor for information on tuition coverage
M.S. Tuition	See faculty advisor for information on tuition coverage	See faculty advisor for information on tuition coverage	See faculty advisor for information on tuition coverage
Pay	Monthly	Monthly	Biweekly
Health Insurance	Yes	No	No

3. ELPE Requirements for International Students

International graduate students who wish to serve in teaching positions can certify for English proficiency before enrollment by achieving requisite scores on the oral component of the following standardized tests: TOEFL, IELTS or PTE exams. [See chart below.]

International graduate students who wish to serve in teaching positions and have not met certification requirements prior to enrollment can certify by passing the oral section of the English Language Proficiency Exam (ELPE) offered by Testing Services on the Texas A&M campus.

Eligibility levels for international graduate students serving in teaching positions

Level 1: Students eligible for teaching assignments

Level 2: Students conditionally eligible for teaching assignments for one semester only but must simultaneously participate in Center for Teaching Excellence English Language Proficiency (CTE-ELP) instruction and achieve a certifying score on the oral section of the ELPE by the end of the semester.

Level 3: Students not eligible for teaching assignment. Students should participate in spoken language training (such as those offered by CTE-ELP or other independent English language instruction providers) to assist them in meeting English language proficiency requirements.

	Global Standardized Tests			Locally Administered (on Texas A&M campus) Exam
Level #	TOEFL speaking section	IELTS speaking section	PTE speaking section	ELPE oral exam
1	26-30	>=8.0	>=85	80
2	23-25	7.0-7.5	75-84	75
3	<23	<7.0	<75	65

Expectations, Duties, Responsibilities and Grievances

1. Terms of Employment

- a. As employees of ECCB, TAs are expected to adhere to all policies and procedures set forth for student employees. TAs are subject to termination for misconduct or not fulfilling their responsibilities.
- b. TAs are expected to maintain close contact with their instructors via email and be reachable by telephone in case of emergency.
- c. If you are unable to fulfill your duties for any reason, contact your immediate supervisor (the instructor of record, typically) immediately.
- d. Report any issues or concerns in a timely manner to your advisor, instructor, or the Associate Department Head for Graduate Programs, as appropriate.

2. Roles and Responsibilities

- e. Teaching duties performed typically include:
 - a. Teaching laboratory sections
 - i. Lab material setup and maintenance
 - ii. Explaining lab assignments to class
 - iii. One-on-one student assistance
 - b. Teaching computer lab sections
 - i. Explain assignment to class
 - ii. Troubleshoot and maintenance of software
 - iii. Assist students with assignments
 - c. Assist instructor with field-based activities
 - i. Driving students to/from field locations
 - ii. Assisting students with field activities
 - iii. Providing logistical support for field activities
 - d. Holding office hours
 - e. Assisting individuals and groups with project/writing assignments
 - f. Hosting discussions on web-based forums
 - g. Grading assistance. Must adhere to FERPA rules for confidentiality. See section 4 below for graduate-level courses.

3. Maximum additional hours

- a. Fall and Spring
 - a. Students employed in a GAT position are not allowed to work beyond 20 hours (50% FTE) without the approval of OGPS. This also applies to the processing one-time payments for additional work by graduate assistants.

- i. **International:** International students may not exceed 20 hours per week (50% FTE) in Fall or Spring in all combined jobs and in accordance with the [Department of Homeland Security Regulation 8 C.F.R. §214, paragraph \(f\)\(9\)\(i\)](#). See [F-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#) & [J-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#).
 - ii. **Domestic:** Domestic students may request approval to work up to 9 additional hours per week (72.5% FTE) beyond the assistantship in Fall or Spring in all combined jobs.
 1. If in a graduate assistant position and working more than 20 hours a week, an [add job form](#) must be submitted for approval.
- b. Summer
- i. **Domestic:** Domestic students may work up to 40 hours (full-time) in all combined jobs.
 - ii. **International:** International students may work up to 40 hours (full-time) in all combined jobs. See [F-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#) & [J-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#).
 - iii. **Domestic and International:** If in a graduate assistant position and working more than 20 hours a week, an [add job form](#) must be submitted for approval.
- c. Break when classes are not in session (Thanksgiving, Winter Break, Spring Break, Intercession periods between fall and spring, spring and summer and summer and fall)
- i. **Domestic:** Domestic students may work 40 hours (full-time) in all combined jobs.
 - ii. **International:** International students may work 40 hours (full-time) in all combined jobs. See [F-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#) & [J-1 On and Off Campus Employment](#).
 - iii. **Domestic and International:** If in a graduate assistant position and working more than 20 hours a week, an [add job form](#) must be submitted for approval. See section #5 below.

4. Expectations for faculty

TA assignments are valuable learning opportunities for graduate students to gain experience as teachers. Faculty are expected to communicate TA expectations clearly at the beginning of the semester and set reasonable expectations for weekly duties. Ideally, TAs should have at least one week to carry out their grading work, and two weeks to return more complex assignments (papers/projects) for large classes. Instructors should explain any special needs when they request graduate students. Faculty are encouraged to check in with TA at least once a week to communicate about student issues and provide guidance and input regarding grading procedures, group assignments, and other ongoing activities related to the course. Instructors are expected to discuss with the TA all elements of the course, preferably before the first week of class, such as:

- number and character of quizzes, exams, papers, and other graded assignments

- amount of grading and clear evaluative criteria for all graded assignments (including who will provide answer keys for tests, quizzes, and written exams, etc.)
- due dates and desired return dates for all graded assignments
- expectations for the length and frequency of TA office hours
- expectations for the length and frequency of teaching team meetings
- possibilities for TA guest lectures
- provisions for review sessions
- responsibility (if any) for equipment
- discussion of any additional TA responsibilities outside of regular class time

5. Guidelines for TAs teaching in courses with graduate students enrolled*

Faculty Responsibilities	TA responsibilities
Independently developing course content, objectives, assessment.	Assisting students with projects and homework, as approved by course instructor.
Instructing students in course, with exception of guest lectures.	Occasional guest lecturing and content-based instruction is acceptable, but TAs should not regularly instruct courses.
Grading graduate student assignments.	Communicating due dates and other information to students in email or in person.
	Holding office hours.
	Letting course instructor know if any conflict of interest issues arise.

*Also applies to stacked courses

6. Grievances and Mediation

A major goal of the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology is to foster a learning environment nurturing diversity and promoting inclusion.

Texas A&M and the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology is committed to the fundamental principles of academic freedom, equality of opportunity and human dignity. We encourage a climate that values and nurtures collegiality, diversity, pluralism, and the uniqueness of the individual within our state, nation and world. Texas A&M University, in accordance with applicable federal and state law, prohibits discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation, or veteran status in employment, educational programs, and admissions. We do not tolerate racial and ethnic harassment (<https://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule31>) or sexual harassment (<https://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule47>) and require TAs to report any incidents to the proper authorities (<https://tellsomebody.tamu.edu>). All decisions and actions

involving students and employees, including GATs, should be based on applicable law and individual merit. As employees, GATs should be aware of the policies on consensual relationships with undergraduate students (<https://policies.tamus.edu/07-05-01.pdf>).

Except in the cases of Title IX violations, teaching assistants should attempt to informally resolve disagreements or complaints with the instructor. If this is not possible, teaching assistants can seek outside mediation by speaking directly to the Associate Department Head for Graduate Programs, who will take appropriate action to resolve the conflict. Should this further action not result in a satisfactory resolution, any and all participants may refer the matter to the Head of the Department.

Any request of assistance is strictly confidential, and no retaliation is allowed for grievances aired by teaching assistants. Teaching assistants seeking assistance about grievances may also refer to the following offices:

- The Student Assistance Services (Student Services at White Creek, 979-845-3113) has staff members who are trained to help students with grievances:

<https://maroonlink.tamu.edu/organization/studentassistance>

- The Ombuds Services for Graduate Education (ombuds@tamu.edu) advocate for the fair processes of graduate education and provides equal, open access to all parties : graduate and professional students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

<https://catalog.tamu.edu/graduate/ombuds-services-education>

<https://ogaps.tamu.edu/New-Current-Students/Ombudsperson>

To be completed by graduate teaching assistant prior to semester start:

I, _____, have reviewed the graduate teaching assistant protocol as outlined above
(printed name)

and agree to adhere to all policies while fulfilling my role as a teaching assistant for the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology.

Graduate TA Signature

Date