Psychologists have highlighted the need to prepare psychology graduate students for their current and future teaching responsibilities; however, the amount of preparation that they actually receive remains unclear. This investigation assessed teaching assistant (TA) training from the perspective of both psychology TAs and department chairs, noting points of convergence and divergence. We present national survey data that describe the nature of TA training in departments of psychology and specific training methods used. In addition to summarizing descriptive data, we explored factors associated with the amount and kinds of training offered to psychology graduate students.

Since 1969, psychologists have highlighted the need to prepare psychology graduate students for their current and future teaching responsibilities (Finger, 1969); however, the amount of training that they actually receive remains unclear. For instance, Meyers, Reid, and Quina (1998) found that many psychology graduate students in their sample felt insufficiently prepared for their teaching responsibilities. These students reported they had received minimal training in constructing exams, grading, developing classroom assignments, and organizing syllabi.

However, a different set of findings emerged from an investigation of 108 chairs of doctoral-level departments of psychology (Mueller, Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1997). Mueller and colleagues reported that 65% of psychology departments offered training for their TAs. Departmental TA training programs commonly addressed a wide range of practical topics and used a variety of instructional techniques.

To obtain a more accurate measurement of the extent to which psychology graduate students are prepared to teach, we assessed TA training from the perspective of both psychology TAs and department chairs using national survey data. The purposes of our research were to assess the (a) prevalence and scope of TA training that psychology departments provide and (b) factors associated with differing amounts of TA training that psychology graduate students receive.
Teaching assistants’ experiences and responsibilities. Participants reported means of 6 semesters (SD = 3.9) of graduate education and 3 semesters (SD = 3.0) of TA experience. On average, TAs worked 15 hr per week (SD = 5.8). The majority of participants reported having full responsibility for teaching their courses (38%) or supporting the professor’s teaching (51%). The remaining 11% reported having nonteaching, administrative duties as a part of their assistantship or did not indicate the type of TA position they held.

Participants most frequently reported that they assisted with or independently taught one course during a semester (79%) and generally instructed single-section (56%) rather than multiple-section courses (44%). The majority of participants taught undergraduate-level (86%) rather than graduate-level classes (14%) and noted that they most often taught courses within psychology (95%).

Teaching assistant training and supervision. Of the sample, 68% stated that they had received formal training for their current TA duties and reported spending an average total of 22 clock hr (SD = 22) in these training activities. Table 1 presents the time participants reported spending in various TA training activities.

Of the participants, 62% reported receiving supervision of their TA duties, typically on at least a weekly basis (68%); however, meeting monthly or by appointment was also common (32%). Most participants were individually supervised (49%), but many reported that they received group supervision (40%). A small number of TAs received both individual and group supervision of their teaching duties (11%). Supervision was most often conducted by the instructor of record for the course (82%), but participants also reported receiving supervision from another faculty member who offered the course (10%), university-wide offices (5%), or their academic advisor (3%). Forty-seven percent of the participants received either training or supervision for their TA duties, 40% received both training and supervision, and 13% received no training or supervision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Activity</th>
<th>M Time (Total Hours)</th>
<th>% of TAs Who Completed the Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attending workshops on teaching techniques or theory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming or peer discussion on teaching theory and techniques</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching faculty or veteran TAs model teaching techniques</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing teaching skills and receiving evaluation and consultation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading literature on teaching theory and techniques</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching videotapes of self practicing teaching techniques</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking coursework related to teaching theory and techniques</td>
<td>1 ^a</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching videotapes of actual teaching methods</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other or miscellaneous activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. TA = teaching assistant.

^a Measured in number of courses completed.

Method

Procedure and participants. We mailed a questionnaire regarding departmental TA training to the chairs of all 259 departments and schools of psychology surveyed in Study 1. Of these, 181 respondents completed the questionnaire, representing a 70% response rate. Our sample included chairs from a wide range of institutions (Research I, 37%; Research II, 16%; Doctoral I, 17%; Doctoral II, 12%; Comprehensive I, 9%; and professional schools, 8%) and geographic regions (Midwest, 28%; Northeast, 25%; South, 23%; West, 16%; and Canada, 8%).

Instrument. In addition to demographic data, respondents provided the following information about their department: (a) number of graduate students enrolled, (b) number of students supported by teaching assistantships, (c) salary for TAs, (d) expected number of hours of work per week for TAs, (e) level of course responsibilities that TAs assumed, (f) percentage of TAs participating in training, (g) division of responsibility for TA training between the university and department, (h) whether training was required of TAs, (i) format of departmental TA training, (j) techniques used in departmental TA training, and (k) topics addressed in departmental TA training.

Results

Descriptive data. Most respondents (170; 94%) stated that their department offered graduate teaching assistantships. Chairs reported that their departments enrolled an average of 115 graduate students (SD = 110.5) and supported approximately one fourth of them (M = 28.3; SD = 22.3) with teaching assistantships. Most chairs employed psychology TAs to assist faculty with routine course matters (71%) or lead discussion sections (85%); however, 57% of departments had TAs assume full course responsibility. On av...
which was most often mandatory (71%).

Respondents indicated that on average 85% of TAs participated in training, training only through a university-wide program. Respondents reported that their TAs received some formal preparation. Most of these participants (60%) stated that their TAs were prepared solely at the departmental level. The remaining 7% reported that TAs received training both by an all-university office and the psychology department, but a sizable minority (33%) stated that their TAs were prepared solely at the departmental level. The remaining 7% reported that TAs received training only through a university-wide program. Respondents indicated that on average 85% of TAs participated in training, which was most often mandatory (71%).

Comparing TAs’ and chairs’ ratings. We conducted a series of chi-square analyses to evaluate the consistency between chairs’ and graduate students’ descriptions of the availability and use of TA training. As summarized in Table 3, chairs’ reports of the availability of most TA training opportunities was significantly higher than TAs’ endorsed participation in them.

Predicting the amounts and kind of training. To isolate the variables associated with psychology departments’ preparation of TAs, we performed three separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting the number of formats, techniques, and topics used in departmental training. We included data from those 137 respondents whose departments offered TA training and who responded to all pertinent survey questions. Table 4 lists the predictor variables and summarizes these results.

The scope of departmental TA training was significantly associated with the number of TAs whom psychology departments employed, number of hours per week that TAs worked, number of TAs with full-course responsibility, and whether the psychology department was the only outlet for TA training. In addition, the percentage of TAs participating in departmental training emerged as a significant predictor for the number of training topics addressed.

Discussion

Reports from both TAs and chairs indicated that most psychology departments provide graduate students with preparation for their teaching responsibilities. More important, the amount of TA training offered by departments varied considerably. Many provided TAs with thorough training; such departments generally employed relatively large numbers of TAs who were compensated with half-time assistantships for assuming full-course responsibility. In general, “bigger” (i.e., psychology departments who used many TAs to teach their courses) implied “better” (i.e., more comprehensive preparation for teaching) when accounting for differences in the scope of TA training.

Although many departments offered training opportunities, psychology TAs did not spend much time participating in these activities. The statistically significant difference between the amount of pedagogical training that departments offered and graduate students received is noteworthy. Several factors may account for this discrepancy: (a) TA training was voluntary in about one third of surveyed psychology departments; (b) TAs may have participated in some, but not all, aspects of training; and (c) chairs’ and graduate students’ reports of training may have been biased or contained measurement error.
Beyond this discrepancy, our data suggest other reasons for concern about the current state of TA training. First, a number of psychology departments (14%) did not provide any form of training or supervision for their TAs. Second, the average amount of teaching preparation that psychology graduate students were offered or received is low in comparison to other areas of professional training. For example, doctoral students generally complete a multiple-course sequence in statistics and research design to develop research expertise; they also conduct at least one independent research project under faculty supervision. Twenty-two hours of teaching-related training and weekly supervision for one semester seem modest in comparison to this standard. If graduate-level psychology faculty are truly committed to the development of competent scientist–practitioner–educators, then graduate training must reflect this balance. Rigorous models to train psychology graduate students as college instructors exist and include courses in the teaching of psychology, supervised teaching practica, ongoing mentorship, and peer support (e.g., Benassi & Fernald, 1993; Korn, 1997).

One limitation of this study is that we assessed the amount and scope of TA training but not training quality. Although it seems likely that training quantity and quality are related, they are not synonymous. That is, more preparation does not necessarily imply better preparation. Future studies can incorporate ratings of both the quality and quantity of training to assess the relation between these constructs as well as their effects on graduate students’ teaching skills.

Although previous studies have found that TA training is related to overall course evaluation ratings (Benassi & Fernald, 1993; Rickard, Prentice-Dunn, Rogers, Scogin, & Lyman, 1991), the effectiveness of different training approaches, topics, and methods on psychology TAs’ classroom behaviors remains unclear. Researchers have yet to determine which TA training techniques work with whom for which teaching assignments. In sum, well-founded ideas about how to improve graduate students’ teaching will most likely originate from future research that uses multiple observers (e.g., undergraduate report, self-report, and faculty observation), multiple assessment periods (e.g., pretraining and posttraining ratings), and multiple measures of TAs’ classroom behavior within different teaching contexts.

References


Notes

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