Most resources on preparing graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) for their responsibilities have emphasized the technical matters of training, such as which formats to use, topics to address, or methods to employ (Prieto & Meyers, 2001). Others have described effective teaching practices to guide GTAs, such as how to deliver a well-organized lecture, lead an engaging discussion, or design a fair test (Davis, 2009). Fewer authors, however, have discussed how training occurs within an interpersonal context, and that the relationship between faculty members and graduate students needs to be cultivated because it significantly impacts GTAs' performance and emerging sense of competence. Professors mentor, encourage, and empower GTAs when a responsive supervisory relationship is intentionally formed. On the other hand, professors raise GTAs' anxiety, create self-doubt, and promote frustration when they disregard rapport development or derogate graduate students.

Nevertheless, focusing on relationships may be uncertain territory for some supervising faculty members. Many faculty may be more comfortable considering other aspects of GTA training rather than personal areas that require self-reflection. I pose and discuss the following questions to enhance such working relationships: Am I clarifying GTAs'
Responsibilities and providing them with structure? Am I being attentive to
GTAs' changing developmental level and needs? Do I display sensitivity and
respect for GTAs as professionals in training? Do I provide feedback and
manage conflict in constructive and supportive ways?

Clarify GTAs' Responsibilities and Provide Structure

Graduate students' responsibilities vary widely depending on the nature of
their teaching assistantship. Some GTAs mainly provide administrative sup­
port for classes and/or proctor and score exams. Other GTAs have greater
instructional responsibilities and conduct discussion or laboratory sections.
Still others assume full course responsibility and teach classes under the
supervision of faculty members. Given this range, graduate students are
often initially uncertain about the scope of their work (Wilson & Stearns,
1985). Moreover, faculty members have their own unique expectations for
GTAs whom they supervise, which can add to the ambiguity with respect
to GTAs' roles and responsibilities.

A clear delineation of graduate students' tasks reduces their anxiety and
potential confusion, which maximizes the likelihood that GTAs understand
the professor's expectations for their work and provides criteria for sub­
sequent evaluation, feedback, and remediation. Clarifying these responsi­
bilities essentially structures the relationship between the faculty supervisor
and the TA.

Professors can begin explaining GTAs' duties in an initial meeting
before the start of the semester. In this discussion, faculty members outline
their expectations in concrete and detailed ways. For example: Are GTAs
expected to hold office hours? Where should they be held and for how
long? Are GTAs required to attend every class led by the professor? Will
GTAs be expected to read all texts for the class? If GTAs grade assignments,
will they be provided with grading criteria? What is the desired turn­around
time for completing such work? If GTAs lecture to the class, how often will
they do so? Will the professor be present to provide feedback afterward, or
will the TA lead class in the professor's absence?

This level of detail may appear excessive. However, the relationship
between GTAs and faculty members can be strained on both sides when
needs are unstated and, as a consequence, are unfulfilled. Some supervisors
create written job descriptions for GTAs to assist with this clarification.

Discussions of GTAs' responsibilities should continue as the semester
progresses. It is difficult for supervising faculty members to anticipate all
questions that graduate students may have, and unexpected situations often
arise during the term. Teachers can continue to support GTAs through
regularly scheduled supervision meetings as well as through impromptu
conversations.

Finally, faculty members should consider and explain how they will actively
assist GTAs during the semester. The guiding principle of mutual obligation
challenges the notion held by some faculty members that GTAs are "theirs"
because students receive funding that supports their duties (McNaron, 2002).
Balanced and productive relationships are formed when professors appreci­
ate that they are mentoring future faculty members and are willing to share
their expertise. Professors can emphasize their availability and commitment,
genuinely collaborate with GTAs and consider their input, answer questions
thoroughly and thoughtfully, and remain cognizant that they are role models.

Be Observant and Attentive to GTAs' Developmental
Level and Needs

Clarifying roles does not imply being rigid about them. Graduate students'
abilities and needs change as they gain experience both in their field and
in the classroom. This development has implications for the relationship
between supervising faculty members and GTAs at the different points of
students' professional development.

Nyquist and colleagues (e.g., Nyquist & Sprague, 1998; Nyquist &
Wulff, 1996) proposed three stages through which GTAs progress, each
differentiated by GTAs' concerns, their communication style, how they
approach authority, and how they relate to their students. At the outset
of their experience, GTAs are best characterized as "senior learners," who
tend to personalize their interactions with undergraduates and are preoccu­
pied by whether students will like them. They are more dependent on their
supervisors and generally provide students with simplistic explanations
because of their limited graduate coursework and knowledge.

With greater experience, GTAs are more appropriately considered
"colleagues-in-training," who likely want greater autonomy from their
supervisors. At this point, GTAs increasingly embrace their emerging identi­
ties by using the technical language of their fields (sometimes to excess) and
focus more on the mechanical skills of instruction.

The working relationship between professors and GTAs shifts again when
graduate students become "junior colleagues." GTAs in this stage begin
to relate to faculty as collaborators. They have a more nuanced view of
the learning process and are more focused on undergraduates' educational
outcomes. Graduate students are increasingly comfortable at this point with
their professional socialization, and they can use technical discourse as well as explain concepts in understandable ways.

Given this development, supervising faculty members need to be adept at gauging the appropriate amount of support that they should provide. Although there is individual variability depending on the abilities, needs, and personalities of the particular graduate student, Nyquist and Wulff (1996) highlighted that professors generally should alter their supervision style from the role of manager to that of mentor. At each step, instructors need to reevaluate their expectations, provide appropriately challenging responsibilities, and grant GTAs increasing authority and independence.

Prieto (2001) added nuance to this progression in his Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision for Graduate Teaching Assistants (IDM-GTA). He proposed that graduate students move through three similar stages of development (i.e., beginning GTAs, advanced GTAs, and junior faculty members). A different level of motivation, point of focus (i.e., students vs. self), and desire for autonomy characterize each stage. However, the IDM-GTA emphasizes that these dimensions and categorizations vary across seven different teaching domains (i.e., presentation skills, assessment skills, academic ethics, organizational skills, sensitivity to students' individual differences, interpersonal skills, and networking abilities). A GTA may be adept and autonomous in one area, but depend on assistance in another area at the same point in time. Thus, supervising faculty members must be highly attuned to the varied skill levels of GTAs, closely monitor changes in each domain across time, and adjust their supervision as needed.

Display Sensitivity and Respect for GTAs as Professionals in Training

Faculty members who are committed to establishing effective working relationships with GTAs also need to monitor whether they are conveying respect in their interactions. Consider these contrasting quotes from two graduate students, cited by Meyers (1995), as they described their supervising faculty:

The professor I worked for separates people into two categories—those with a PhD and those without. He feels that those without deserve no respect and should feel privileged to work for those who have one. His way of teaching GTAs is to yell at them when a problem arises in a lab.

The attitude he had was that this was a collaborative experience—that we were in it together and could both share and learn from the experience. The respect he had for what I did and the appreciation he showed for the work done was also very important.

Professors enhance their working relationships with GTAs when they are intentional about developing students' feelings of competence and confidence. They should consider praising GTAs for their accomplishments, conveying a genuine interest in their activities and professional growth, and remaining pleasant and upbeat in their interactions. Professors also accomplish this goal when they solicit GTAs' input into decision making at an appropriate level and respectfully listen to graduate students' opinions.

Respect and sensitivity are important hallmarks of effective relationships between professors and GTAs. Prieto, Scheel, and Meyers (2001) assessed the extent to which GTAs valued three supervisory styles exhibited by professors. These included professors' collegiality (e.g., characterized by traits such as flexibility and openness), interpersonal sensitivity (e.g., featuring traits such as perceptiveness and intuitiveness), and task centeredness (e.g., emphasizing goal accomplishment by being evaluative or prescriptive). Their results generally documented that GTAs significantly favor a supervisory style that is collegial in nature, but that also incorporates some interpersonally sensitive elements.

These findings are echoed by Meyers (1996), who asked GTAs across a range of disciplines to characterize their professors' supervision styles as "democratic" (i.e., frequently encouraged verbal give-and-take, promoted discussion of expectations, provided clear but flexible standards, appreciated differences of opinions), "authoritarian" (i.e., did not permit GTAs to question decisions, required compliance to requests, became upset during disagreements), or "permissive" (i.e., seldom provided guidance or expectations, allowed GTAs to have their way as they pleased, allowed independent decision making). Graduate students' ratings of democratic relationships with their professors were significantly associated with higher satisfaction levels and higher ratings of their effectiveness as a GTA. In contrast, ratings of professors' authoritarian behavior were associated with lower self-rated satisfaction and competence. Ratings of professors' permissiveness had generally weaker associations with GTA outcomes.

Notably, the commitment to enhancing the working relationship with GTAs has to originate with faculty members because of the power imbalance that exists between the two parties. Faculty members can treat students who serve as GTAs in disrespectful ways often without consequence because of the level of influence they have within graduate programs.

Successful faculty members are actively invested in both the short-term and long-term success of GTAs. They realize that they are preparing future faculty, and they optimize their relationship toward this end. Supportive interpersonal connections increase the probability of graduate students' success and completion of their programs (Wulff & Austin, 2004). However, almost half of the respondents in a national survey of 32,000 current and recent doctoral students reported that they lacked sufficient supervision.
of their teaching responsibilities (Fagen & Suedkamp Wells, 2004). This mentorship deficit was most pronounced among underrepresented groups, especially for students of color.

**Provide Feedback and Manage Conflict in Constructive and Supportive Ways**

Effective working relationships between faculty members and graduate students are vital when providing GTAs with feedback to help them refine their instructional skills. Without a sense of trust and openness, GTAs are more likely to conceal their struggles and avoid approaching their supervisors for needed assistance because they fear criticism, blame, or negative evaluations.

Boehrer and Sarkisian (1985) emphasized how vulnerable graduate students feel when they first assume their teaching responsibilities. Some GTAs are anxious because they are daunted by public speaking or teaching material that they find novel. Other GTAs doubt or blame themselves for their students’ poor performance or apathy in class. Faculty members must be mindful that many graduate students feel as if they are taking a risk by being candid and exposing their difficulties. A supportive relationship provides graduate students with the reassurance to display vulnerability and to disclose their problems.

In their survey of supervisors and GTAs, Myers, Douglas, Madden, and Briggs (2002) found that maximizing collaboration and empathy within the context of evaluation was essential. Teaching assistants were most likely to accept feedback when they played an active role in the evaluation process by providing supervisors with background information about their class session, their instructional goals, and their own areas of concern. Planning meetings can allow graduate students to suggest emphases of the evaluation and how best to collect information (Black & Kaplan, 1998). A collaborative framework can also be used in a post-observation session to identify areas of strength and to develop concrete goals, strategies, and follow-up plans to enhance performance (Black & Kaplan, 1998).

Strategies that build the relationship between faculty members and graduate students are also needed when conflicts emerge. Significant problems and disagreements sometimes occur with GTAs. These situations may relate to a teaching deficit; however, conflicts may also focus on issues of deportment (e.g., communicating respect to supervising professors) or responsibility (e.g., appearing on time to lead a discussion or lab section; grading papers in a timely fashion).

Many of the approaches outlined earlier have the potential to improve such situations. Research on conflicts between professors and students can be instructive (Meyers, Bender, Hill, & Thomas, 2006). The interventions that have been shown to be the most effective begin with professors respectfully broaching the issue and acknowledging the student’s circumstance and emotions. With a shared, concrete understanding of the problem and each person’s concerns, faculty supervisors can ask GTAs to help solve the problem rather than solely dictate a remedy. Through this approach, conflicts are addressed through the lens of mutual respect, common interest, clarified structure, and developmentally appropriate power sharing.

**Conclusions**

The working relationship between faculty members and GTAs is a critical ingredient of training. Its development needs to be as purposeful as the implementation of other formats and methods that supervisors use to cultivate graduate students’ teaching skills. However, there are several hurdles in this process. First, supervisors need to realize that the relationship itself is important and can moderate the effectiveness of the other elements of training. In other words, GTAs are more likely to successfully implement their skills when they are encouraged and monitored by a supportive faculty member.

The second hurdle is that addressing the faculty-GTA relationship is an inherently personal practice. Faculty members need to be introspective and self-aware as they ask themselves difficult questions such as “How do I exercise power in professional settings?” or “How much patience do I display?” or “To what extent do I consider the needs and views of others as I supervise GTAs?” These can be hard for some professors to answer with candor and conviction if changes are needed.

Finally, supervisors need to understand that effective relationships with GTAs start with “being nice,” but then exceed this benchmark. Professors must provide structure and role clarity for GTAs. They also have to monitor GTAs’ changing level of professional development and alter their expectations to allow graduate students to grow into their potential as future faculty members.

**References**


Nothing substitutes for knowledge and experience—and that is especially true as graduate students face their first teaching experience. In this chapter I will focus on what new graduate student teachers fear and five practices that can be implemented to address those fears.

In an ideal world, graduate students would know of their teaching assignment well before the term begins and have time to prepare by reading the relevant research-based literature (but see Benassi’s Chapter 7 for an exception; see also Stiegler-Balfor & Overson’s Chapter 23 for an annotated bibliography). In a less ideal world, new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who find out their assignments immediately before the term begins are so overwhelmed that they often feel that they do not have the time to read such preparation materials.

In our ideal world, graduate students also would begin their teaching assignments as “true GTAs” and not as “the teacher of record.” Being a “true GTA” provides opportunities for new GTAs to observe the teaching of veteran instructors (GTAs and faculty) and to ask questions about their teaching decisions and behaviors. “True GTAs” would also participate in discussions about teaching, either informally, with veteran instructors and/or other GTAs, or more formally, in a class focused on preparing to teach or in mentoring communities (Thomas, 2006).