

Working With Faculty of Record
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BY

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Many early graduate student instructors have the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant for a large, lecture-based course. These assignments come in all different shapes and sizes: leading a weekly discussion section (how I cut my teaching-teeth), conducting a lab, or serving as a grader. When I received my first TA assignment, I'll admit, I was a little disappointed. I wanted more responsibility, my own classroom, more power freedom! Little did I know, these types of TA assignments are a fantastic way to test out your teaching style in a relatively low-risk setting; I got a sense of my identity as a teacher without the pressure of running an entire course. Introductory courses are nothing to sneeze at: as you may have read, introductory courses can be incredibly influential on a student's choice of major. And while I initially chafed at my assignment, I found that the mentoring relationships I was able to develop with Faculty of Record (FOR) were incredibly formative, meaningful, and influential in my work as a teacher.

Working with FOR can be like an apprenticeship in teaching. It's an opportunity to learn the tricks of the trade from an experienced teacher; you'll also gain a friendly face at department events, someone to help you improve in your teaching, and write future letters of recommendation. Maintaining a good relationship with your FOR is good for your students and will ensure that you have a positive learning experience. The following hacks—compiled from two years, four semesters, three courses, 250 students, and four (*very* different) FOR—can help you make the most of this experience.

Clarity

Like any working relationship, **clear expectations are essential**. Spend time before the semester begins asking your FOR about his or her expectations for you, your working relationship, and the course. You'll want to ask a series of logistical questions, including:

- What is the purpose of the discussion section? How does the discussion section fit into your goals for the course?
- How much freedom will I have to develop content, lesson plans, or assignments?
- How much, and how, will we coordinate the lecture and the discussion section? Will I have the opportunity to guest lecture?
- Will you be observing me, and how often? How will I be assessed?
- How often will we meet? How would you like me to report back to you, and what information is relevant?
- How will we manage grading? Am I responsible for all grading? Will you be providing rubrics?
- You should also ask any clarifying questions about the syllabus: will late work be accepted? What are the policies for make-up exams? Do you offer extra credit? What is the course policy on plagiarism?

These logistical questions can easily open the door for more philosophical conversations about pedagogy. *How will we manage grading?* is a short step away from, *What are your grading strategies?* *What, in your mind, is the purpose of feedback?* Similarly, *How will I be assessed?* can be followed-up with, *How do you know that you've done your job well?*

Above all, **never be afraid to ask why**. Store up these answers for the day when you get to design your own course.

Remember, you are a student and your FOR is a teacher; **be teachable**. Each FOR that I've worked with has been committed to my success as a teacher-scholar, and has been happy, no *eager*, to tell me about their experiences in graduate school and swap a horror story or two. I've worked for some truly amazing lecturers, and it was easy to be intimidated. It was always nice to be reminded that they, too, were once first-time instructors.

One last logistical matter: before the semester begins, **study your contract closely**. Find out the maximum number of hours specified by your contract, and **keep track**. If you are regularly exceeding your maximum hours, you'll need to work with your FOR to help develop more efficient work habits, or you'll need to discuss reducing the workload. Your institution may have a Graduate Employees Union or a University Ombudsperson; make yourself aware of the grievance process and avail yourself of these services if necessary.

Consistency

Some TAs will find that their FOR has very specific plans for discussion sections—one of my FOR provided lesson plans and materials each week. Other TAs will find that they have complete and total freedom—I once had a class watching Lady Gaga music videos to illustrate the difference between story and plot. One way or another, be sure that you're clear on the learning objectives for the course, and ask yourself, are my goals aligned with the course goals? Is my discussion section helping students meet the learning objectives?

Consistency becomes all the more important when working with a group of teaching assistants. Your fellow TAs can be an immense support when planning lessons, developing review sessions, and troubleshooting difficult situations. Consistency between TAs and the FOR becomes especially important when grading. Students *will* compare their grades on exams and essays, so you'll want to be sure that students are assessed fairly and consistently across sections. One of my FOR instituted a group grading process for my fellow TA and I: we would spend an hour with five or six papers. We would each "grade" the same paper, using the same rubric, and defend our grade to the group. Conversations got *very* heated! Over time, we developed a common set of grading standards, resulting in very consistent evaluation (and no feelings stayed hurt for long). Consider grading as a group, or asking your FOR to offer his or her evaluation of an essay or exam that you've already graded as a barometer.

Communication

The FOR will not be able to develop a personal relationship with each student; that's the nature of a large course. But you will: discussion sections allow you to connect with students individually, and while you may not get to know them all well, you will have a good sense of their strengths, weaknesses, and improvements throughout the semester. I love getting to know my students in office hours, working together on a paper, or talking through some difficult issues; these are some of my most gratifying teaching moments.

But sometimes your relationships with your students and your relationship with your FOR can be at odds, and conflicts can easily arise: students find lectures to be confusing and exams to be unfair and you sympathize, and soon, you've inadvertently set yourself up for a power struggle between yourself and the FOR. Or, you may find yourself in a situation where, given your knowledge of a student, you are inclined to bend course policies—my personal Achilles Heel. My compassion gets the better of me ("But he's trying *really* hard!", "Her grandma died!", or my favorite, "But he's improved so much!"), and I find myself in desperate need of my FOR's neutrality.

The best advice I can give is to **communicate with your FOR**. Avoid surprise conflicts by addressing them directly and early, even if the situation is uncomfortable for you. Be willing to admit your mistakes if it means avoiding a larger conflict in the future. I'll say that again: **be willing to admit your mistakes**. Yes, it's uncomfortable—I've been there. But I can guarantee, you'd rather your FOR hear about a mistake from you than from a disgruntled student or parent—I've been *there*, too. Trust that your FOR will have your back when conflicts arise with students, and be willing to go to bat for your students when you feel it's necessary. But whatever you do, **communicate**.

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/working-faculty-record#ixzz2cQmxrQC0>

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