GSA General Assembly Meeting
February 15, 2012

Report from the “Academics and Professional Development Committee”

By Oliver Bunn

On February 8, 2012, our committee met with Judith Hackman and Howard el-Yasin from the Teaching Fellow Program. Below is a summary of our discussion during this meeting.

1. Assignment of Teaching Positions

   • It is overly burdensome for students, particularly in the Humanities Division, to apply for teaching positions in multiple departments, because of a variety of different rules and regulations (set by the respective DUS) across different departments and because of frequent changes in the rules and regulations within a department.
   • The GSA Academics and Professional Development committee suggests enhancing the current teaching database to include a feature for graduate students to apply for teaching positions by selecting from a list of courses, allowing them to complete all of their teaching applications at once in a consolidated manner.

2. Graduate Students as Teaching Fellows in Language Courses

   • The workload arising from the current cap on section sizes often proves too much to handle for graduate students, against the background of balancing teaching and dissertation research.
   • Even the inclusion of exchange students to instruct language classes one day of the week does not alleviate the problem, as the course syllabi are so dense that most of the section leaders have to teach on the day of the language instruction by the exchange student anyway.
   • The concept of Part-Time Acting Instructor (PTAI) appears inappropriate for language classes, as graduate students in fact carry the full burden of being the acting instructor, without being acknowledged as instructors, but merely as PTAI.

3. Associates in Teaching Program for Language Courses

   • The description of the program on the webpage of the Graduate School of Arts and Science has changed. Currently, the description advertises the program for lower-year Ph.D. students, whereas it was originally designed for more experienced TFs.
• The change does not appear to be in accordance with the policy of the Teaching Fellow Program and should be reversed.

4. Graduate Students as Teaching Fellows in Ph.D.-Level Courses

• The workload for graduate students as TFs of Ph.D.-level courses, particularly in the Social Sciences Division, consistently exceeds the target workload by a wide margin, interfering with the ability to conduct dissertation research.
• There is a big disparity between the workload for Ph.D.-level courses and undergraduate courses that is inappropriately reflected in the TF units assigned to the classes.
• For example in Political Science, upper-year students that rely on teaching to cover their living expenses often are assigned TF2 positions to teach for Ph.D.-level courses. Although their workload is comparable to or even exceeds that of other students with TF4 positions in undergraduate classes, they only receive half the amount of money, imposing a financial burden.
• The GSA Academics and Professional Development committee suggests reducing the maximum section size for Ph.D.-level courses in the Social Sciences Division, compared to undergraduate courses.

5. Teaching Verification Survey

• The Teaching Verification Survey has just been sent out to all the graduate students currently holding a TF position.
• The Teaching Fellow Program is very interested in learning about problems related to graduate student teaching from the survey. However, among the students that actually fill out the survey only a small fraction includes an actual complaint. The Teaching Fellow Program is diligently investigating all of these complaints.
• Anecdotal evidence and evidence during the meeting’s discussion suggests that complaints or concerns are much more common than they appear in the survey. A particularly important issue relates to discrepancies between the number of TF units and the actual workload for a TF.
• The GSA will reach out to the graduate student population to encourage them to share their problems and concerns with the Teaching Fellow Program, so that these issues can be addressed.

6. Reader Positions

• Particularly in the Humanities Division, graduate students are frequently holding positions as “readers” for courses, which prevents them from obtaining valuable teaching experience.
• Given the current state of the academic job market, reader positions put graduate students at a relative disadvantage compared to students from other universities, as they have less chance to develop a strong teaching portfolio.

7. Caps on Enrollment for Undergraduate Classes

• Particularly in the Humanities Division, a department’s course offerings are often dominated by few very large classes, at the expense of a wide variety of smaller, more specialized classes.
• This makes TFs teach for classes that do not directly align with their research interests, which prevents them from obtaining valuable teaching experience in their area of expertise. This will prove to be an obstacle for graduate students in an increasingly competitive academic job market.
• In order to guarantee diversity in course offerings, it therefore appears reasonable to introduce enrollment caps for large undergraduate classes.
• An enrollment cap might also be advantageous, as it reduces the uncertainty for graduate students in the beginning of the semester about whether their teaching assignment changes.

8. Inclusion of Ph.D.-Level Courses in the Electronic Teaching Evaluation System for TFs

• Currently, only undergraduate courses are included in the electronic teaching evaluation system for TFs.
• Graduate students would very much like to have their teaching in Ph.D.-level courses included in the system, in order to have a more complete record for their teaching portfolio when they apply for academic positions.