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Introduction

As noted in the Graduate Student Manual, the policies concerning the graduate program in the Department of Communication and Journalism (CMJN) are guided by the basic philosophy that the first priority of all graduate students is their education. This is especially important in the balancing educational requirements against your Graduate Teaching Assistantship requirements. CMJN faculty believe that if a graduate student, for any reason, has difficulty maintaining both course work at a high level of achievement and GTA responsibilities, then it is in the best interest of the student to discontinue the GTA position in order to allow the student to focus on her/his education.

Defining the Role of GTAs: What a GTA is...and what a GTA is not.

GTAs are not co-teachers. As a first year GTA, your primary role is to study teaching methods for COMM 1000: Introduction to Public Speaking. Some of you may also assist in courses other than COMM 1000. Whatever the class, your primary role is to observe. In COMM 1000 you are typically required to lecture 2-3 times over the course of the semester. Evaluations of your presentation are conducted by the class instructor. Failure to follow class guidelines, as established by the class instructor, will be reported to the Basic Course Director.

General Information

Eligibility

Graduate teaching assistantships (GTA) are available to U.S. citizens on a competitive basis. (Most international students are not eligible for a teaching assistantship during their first semester, and all international students who apply for a teaching assistantship are required to score a minimum of 50 on the TSE or a 6.5 on the IELTS—International English Language Testing System).

Application Process

Assistantships are awarded on the basis of the undergraduate GPA, the GRE scores, letters of recommendation, the applicant's Statement of Purpose, GTA application form, and occasionally an interview. Assistantships can only be awarded after a student has completed their Graduate School application and identified Communication as his or her graduate program. All GTAs are subject to and must satisfactorily pass a University background check. GTAs are responsible for the cost of the background check. Details are available at the Graduate School website.
**Basic Duties**

Graduate teaching assistants observe the course they are assigned to, maintain office hours, perform service assignments, and must be enrolled in nine (9) graduate credit course hours in the Department of Communication & Journalism per semester. After 18 hours, you may be eligible to teach courses on your own, generally public speaking.

**Mandatory GTA Orientation**

GTAs are required to attend all GTA orientation sessions scheduled at the beginning of every semester, including Summer semester. Vacation, work, internship plans, etc. are not excuses for nonattendance. Nonattendance can result in revoking an assistantship.

**Graduate Program Officer (GPO) & Basic Course Director**

As outlined in the Graduate Student Policy manual, the graduate program is overseen by the Graduate Program Officer. The Graduate Program Officer works closely with the COMM 1000/Basic Course Director with the goal of maintaining the highest pedagogical standards for GTAs teaching COMM 1000 (or assisting with other Departmental courses) while at the same time striving to attain the highest educational standards for undergraduates enrolled in departmental courses. The GPO, aided by the Basic Course Director, is responsible for planning the graduate course rotation, assisting in departmental graduate student orientations, tendering GTA offers, overseeing the assigning of GTA sections assignments and service assignments, and monitoring graduate student and GTA adherence to Departmental and Graduate School GTA policies.

Generally, the Basic Course Director (BCD) oversees all teaching related duties associated with COMM 1000, including teaching orientations, GTA assignments and reassignments, evaluations, and other related duties. Questions regarding teaching should be directed first to the BCD, then to the GPO if the Director is unavailable.

**Enrollment Related Policies**

**Registering for Courses**

Due to the popularity of our CMJN courses and to maximize the odds of getting your choice of classes, you should register for classes as soon as registration opens each semester. As a GTA, you must be enrolled in nine hours of classes each semester in order to retain your assistantship. Any enrollment holds, etc. are the responsibility of the student and should be addressed immediately.

**GTA Minimum Course Enrollment**

A GTA will immediately lose his/her assistantship if the GTA withdraws from a course during a semester and his/her total number of graduate course hours drops below a total of nine (9). Once the GTA assistantship is rescinded, the Graduate School will withdraw the university paid tuition
and the graduate student will be responsible for all tuition charges for that semester. This rule is in effect until the last day of classes for each semester.

**GTA Service Assignments**

In addition to teaching duties, GTAs also provide five (5) hours of research/service assistance to departmental faculty each week of the semester (approximately 45 hours over the entire semester). On rare occasions, you may be assigned to special service projects requiring more than five (5) hours weekly. In such circumstances, your teaching duties will be reduced to adjust for this additional service time. You will receive your service assignment the first week of the semester. You should contact your professor immediately upon receiving your assignment. Delaying contact will not reduce your weekly assignment. Throughout the semester it is important that you finish tasks in a timely manner and that you are proactive in contacting your professor. Your service will be evaluated at the end of the semester and the evaluation is submitted to the GPO to be included in your departmental file. These evaluations are used when making decisions regarding continued funding of your Assistantship for the next semester and when assessing Summer semester teaching eligibility.

**GTA Funding & Compensation**

*General Information*

Graduate assistantships provide a nine month stipend plus University-Paid Tuition (GTAs must pay semester fees, books, etc.). GTAs assist in a variety of courses.

Graduate Teaching Assistants are awarded on a semester-by-semester basis and reappointments are not guaranteed. The longstanding university policy on graduate assistantships states that: “Graduate teaching assistant appointments are temporary. Continuation for future terms depends upon availability of funds, levels of enrollment, and teaching needs.”

The BCD is responsible for conducting and reviewing midsemester and end of semester teaching evaluations of GTAs and Instructors. Good evaluations are necessary for continued appointment.

Your overall performance will be evaluated by the Graduate Program Officer at the end of each semester. You will be considered for reappointment at that time. Evaluations are based on both graduate teaching and service assignments, as well as performance in the courses you take. You will receive notification from the GPO prior to the end of final exams regarding your status. First year GTAs must also successfully complete qualifying exams in order to continue their appointments into their second year (see Graduate Student Manual).
Factors Affecting GTA Continuation/Funding

A number of situations may lead to the loss of your Graduate Assistantship. A brief list is presented below:

- Lack of funding for the position. All GTA appointments are contingent upon final approval of the budget.
- Enrollment in fewer than nine (9) graduate class hours.
- Dropping a class during the semester resulting in less than nine (9) class hours.
- Missing the mandatory pre-semester orientation session.
- Violation of stated graduate student or graduate teaching assistant policies.
- Failure to maintain the minimum 3.0 GGPA.
- Failure to receive favorable teaching and/or service evaluations.
- Failure to successfully fulfill other departmental assignments.
- Ineffective/inappropriate communication with undergraduate students in a classroom setting.
- Engaging in inappropriate personal relationships with undergraduate students.
- Failure to adhere to the COMM 1000 common syllabus and related COMM 1000 guidelines.

Funding While Working on Thesis/Internship

The GTA must enroll in a minimum of nine (9) graduate credit course hours, unless the student is in her or his final semester and taking Research and Thesis or Non-Thesis credits. Failure to maintain good progress toward program completion, such as failing qualifying exams or taking course loads of less than nine (9) credit hours, also will result in loss of the assistantship.

Funding Time Limitations

Typically, GTA funding is for four semesters, excluding Summer semester. Only in the rarest of circumstances may funding be extended, and then for only one semester. GTAs seeking a one semester extension of their funding should speak with the GPO at the beginning of the semester prior to the semester for which s/he is seeking the additional funding (e.g., at the beginning of Spring semester if seeking funding for Fall semester). Funding is provided based on availability. Preference is given to new incoming qualified GTA applicants.

Summer GTA Funding

Limited summer funding for GTAs is available. Summer teaching is not guaranteed. Summer teaching is competitive, based on eligibility: successful completion of 18 hours of CMJN graduate coursework (with a C or better), and excellent teaching and research evaluations. Summer teaching is determined by several criteria including budget, availability, demand, grades, service work, performance, and behavior. There is no service work in the summer. Students awarded a Summer GTA will typically teach one, sometimes two, class sections.
Summer GTAs are required to take at one Departmental course (3 credit hours) (instead of the 9 hours normally required) during Fall and Spring semester). The GPO will determine the summer class offering in which GTAs will enroll.

**GTA Communication**

*Mailboxes*

All GTAs must check their departmental mailboxes at least twice per week during the official university semesters in which they are employed. The mailing address is Department of Communication and Journalism, 217 Tichenor Hall, Auburn University, AL 36849-5211.

*Email*

Email is the University’s official form of communication. You are expected to check your email daily during the semester. You should respond to emails concerning your teaching and research assignments by the next business day.

*Social Media*

The variety and ease of communicating with faculty, fellow graduate students, and others is expanding every day. You should carefully consider what comments, photographs, etc. you post. Off handed remarks about students, classes you are enrolled in, and inappropriate photos may reflect badly on you and/or the graduate program, the department, and the university. You should avoid interacting with students via social media (e.g., FaceBook, Linkedin, Twitter, etc.) *Do not “Friend” your students*.

**GTA Office Hours**

GTAs are required to keep a minimum of three (3) office hours each week of the semester in the GTA office. The GTA is required to give their office hours schedule to their students, the BCD and GPO, and the departmental administrative staff. Office hours should be publicly posted on your office door by the first day of classes. Permission to hold office hours in another location should be cleared with the Basic Course Director and the GPO and the departmental administrative staff should be notified by email.

**GTA Office Assignments**

The Department supplies GTAs with a communal office, telephone, and PC computers with Internet service. Whenever possible all GTAs will be assigned their own desk or cubical space. However, in any given semester, some or all GTAs may have to share desk or cubical space. In these cases, the Basic Course Director will make all assignments. The office space, phone, and computer should only be used in appropriate ways and all GTAs are expected to share these
resources with one another and make allowances for each other’s use. The office space should be kept clean and tidy so as to project a professional environment. If required, the GPO or BCD will assign cleaning duties to the GTAs in order to keep the area neat and appropriate for business use. The GTA office is only for GTAs and no other student, faculty, or staff is allowed to share the office space. GTAs should answer the phone in an appropriate manner and take phone messages for their colleagues who are out of the office.

Maintaining and Securing Office Facilities

Auburn University is very concerned about protecting its buildings during after hours, holidays, and weekends (especially football game days and weekends). In the past many acts of vandalism have plagued the university. Because of this, the university requires that all employees with keys keep all doors locked when the buildings are closed, and that they do not allow unauthorized people into campus buildings. GTAs are expected to check all doors and windows to be sure that they are locked when they enter or leave a closed building, office, or lab. Likewise, GTAs are restricted from allowing non-university employees into buildings when they are closed. The university may hold a GTA responsible for damage in a closed building if that GTA was careless in keeping the space secure. Similarly, the GTA office should be kept locked anytime no one is in the office to supervise the space. In addition, undergraduates should not be allowed in the GTA office or lab unsupervised.

GTA Reprimands and Dismissals

All GTA infractions of University and Department policies should be referred to the appropriate individual, usually the Department Chair or GPO. The GPO will issue reprimands in accordance with University and Department policies. These reprimands may take the form of verbal reprimands or written reprimands. The Chair and the GPO may immediately dismiss a GTA from his/her position for inappropriate behavior that warrants dismissal. University and graduate school policy requires GTAs dismissed during the semester to repay all tuition remitted.

GTA Behavior Policies

General Policy

The Department of Communication and Journalism recognizes the importance of both reflecting and teaching diversity. Departmental policies are intended to be inclusive of all underrepresented and minority groups whatever their race, religion, national origin, gender, age, ability or sexual orientation.

As a student and graduate teaching assistant, you are expected to abide by the University’s Code of Student Discipline. The Code is also designed to protect you when your rights have been violated. You should familiarize yourself with this document as well as others outlined in the AU student Handbook, Student Policy eHandbook. The Office of Student Conduct (OSC) is
responsible for the administration of the AU Code of Student Discipline.

GTAs will also abide by University policy’s regarding harassment. As defined by AU policy, “harassment in academic settings and in the employment arena where students are involved is defined as: Conduct (physical, verbal, graphic, written, or electronic) that is (1) unwelcome; (2) discriminatory on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation, or disability; (3) directed at an individual or group in one of the protected classes outlined in this policy; and (4) so severe or pervasive and objectively offensive that it unreasonably interferes with the victim’s ability to participate in or to realize the intended benefits of an institutional activity, opportunity, or resource, unreasonably interferes with the victim’s work or living environment, or deprives the victim of some other protected right.”

AU policy also notes that “Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination and is prohibited by federal regulation. Sexual harassment in academic settings and in the employment area where students are involved is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, graphic or physical conduct of a sexual nature when (1) submission to such conduct may be explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a student’s academic success or employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct may be used as the basis for employment or academic decisions affecting the student and the student’s total educational and/or work experience, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with a student’s employment or academic performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work or educational environment that is severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive.

Beyond following all University and Department policies, **GTAs should always conduct themselves in a professional manner.** GTAs must maintain the highest level of professional behavior while in the classroom and the Department. A GTA is in the employment of Auburn University whether he/she is assisting a professor/instructor or solo teaching a course. Therefore, the GTA must adhere to all University policies. Breaches of University policy can result in a variety of consequences ranging from a reprimand to dismissal. Beyond the University policies, GTAs must maintain professional behavior in all classes. If a GTA is assisting a professor/instructor, then the GTA is expected to perform all tasks assigned by the professor in a timely and professional manner. Further, the GTA should be attentive in the professor’s class, take notes, and offer substantive remarks when appropriate. The GTA should not read or do work unrelated to the class during the class meeting. This type of disinterested behavior reflects poorly on the GTA and is disrespectful to the professor. Moreover, it communicates to undergraduates in the course that the course material is unimportant. GTAs are role models for undergraduates and as such should be attentive and professional in the classroom. Failure to do so will result in a reprimand. Reprimands can result in losing the GTA position. See also Appendix: B: Tips for Stimulating Student Thinking.

You should be proactive. If you have concerns or questions regarding the appropriateness of your own or another’s behavior, you should contact the GPO, BCD or Department Chair immediately. These individuals, rather than your peers (i.e., other graduate students/GTAs), are most qualified to help you address these questions/concerns.
**Interacting with Students**

Many of you are friends with, date or have family members that are undergraduates at this university. While we do not wish to be involved in your personal affairs, there are instances where you should make this information known to the graduate program officer, COMM 1000 director and instructor you are working with. If a roommate, personal friend or family member is taking a COMM 1000 course or a course you are assisting in, please inform the GPO, COMM 1000 program director and instructor of the class. It is better to err on the side of caution here and inform the department so there will be no confusion regarding your impact on that person's grade. If a family member, roommate, close friend or significant other is registered for a class you teach, notify the graduate program officer and COMM 1000 program director *immediately*. In such cases, the student will be moved to another section.

It is also best to discuss with the GPO or BCD specific involvement with large groups of undergraduate students outside of class. (i.e. fraternities, sororities, undergraduate clubs, etc.).

*You will not date or involve yourself in romantic or intimate relationships with students.*

See also Appendix A: *Tips for Maintaining a Professional Distance/Relationship with Students.*

**Interacting with Faculty & Staff**

You are expected to treat office administrative courteously and respectfully. Their primary role is to assist faculty and other university personnel and direct undergraduate students.

You are considered an employee of the University and like all faculty and university personnel must adhere to all policies including policies concerning sexual harassment and romantic relationships. Inappropriate behavior will elicit Department reprimands and could result in the loss of the GTA position. At the same time, you should also be treated with respect by faculty and other university personnel.

**Handling Problems**

As seen above, when interacting with students, peers, faculty, and other university personnel, you should be respectful of them as they should be respectful of you. NOTE: *All* personnel must adhere to University policies including policies concerning harassment and romantic relationships. If you are having problems interacting with a student, colleague, faculty member, or other university personnel or if you feel your rights have been violated, you should contact the GPO or Department Chair immediately, follow the directions outlined in the [Code of Student Discipline](#), and contact the Office of Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity in 317 James E. Foy Hall, or call (334) 844-4794 between 7:45 a.m. and 4:45 p.m., Monday through Friday. *If you feel your safety is threatened, you should contact law enforcement immediately.*

Finally, it is important that you be proactive. *Any questions or concerns regarding the appropriateness of your own or another’s behavior should be directed to the GPO, BCD or Department Chair immediately.* These individuals, rather than your peers (i.e., other graduate students/GTAs) are most qualified to help you.
**Professional Appearance**

As you accept the responsibilities of your new Graduate Teaching Assistant positions, it is important to understand the need for dressing professionally in the classroom and during office hours. Many of you are very close in age to the students you will be teaching. Dressing professionally helps establish your classroom credibility, setting you apart from undergraduate students. We suggest business casual as a minimum standard when interacting with students. While more casual dress (e.g., blue jeans, etc.) is acceptable when attending the classes you are enrolled in, please keep in mind that while on campus, in your office, or in Tichenor, you will be interacting with students. Overly casual dress should be avoided.

Whatever you decide to wear, always consider how you want others to perceive you. Keep in mind, the majority of research in impression formation and teaching supports claims that good personal hygiene and professional dress will help you establish credibility with your students in a variety of areas, including conflict management, classroom behavior management, perceptions of organization, subject mastery, etc. Dressing professionally is just one of many steps you will take as you begin taking on your roles as Graduate Teaching Assistants. In the unlikely case you wear something that is inappropriate for class, please note that you may receive a communication to this effect (usually from the BCD or GPO). This is not done to embarrass you, but to help you develop an understanding of what is appropriate dress for GTAs in the classroom context.

**Guidelines for Handling Exams and Student Papers**

**Handling Exams**

The following guidelines were developed to help prevent leakage of exams. The term “leakage” is used to refer to any unauthorized sharing of tests, test questions, test answers, or testing materials with students before, during or after the testing period. This sharing can be intentional, unintentional, or accidental.

Since there has been a history of problems in the department related to mishandling of tests, test questions, answers, and testing materials, generally first year GTAs should not handle or administer exams unsupervised. Whenever possible, student questions about exam items should be answered by the instructor or professor of the course.

Second year GTAs who are solo teaching should take special care to avoid exam leakage. All old exams should be stored in the Basic Course Director’s office or should be given to the GPO. Mishandling exams, leaking questions, etc. can be grounds for losing your assistantship and/or academic misconduct charges.
Handling Student Papers

Second year GTAs who solo teach, like other COMM 1000 instructors, should make every effort to return student assignments in a timely way, typically within one week after the assignment has been turned in. If the student is not in class on the day assignments are returned, every effort should be made to return the assignment during the course of the semester. *In cases where this does not occur, you are obligated to hold them for 12 months and 1 day.* Students who graduate or leave the program prior to this time must leave all materials, including class attendance lists, outlines, papers, etc. with the GPO.
Appendix A: Tips for Maintaining a Professional Distance/Relationship with Students*

1. Have students address you as Ms./Mr._____; introduce yourself on the first day as Mr. Smith and stick to it from the first day to the last. Also, when referring to other instructors, use their title (i.e., Professor Jones, Mr. or Ms. Smith, Dr. Williams, etc.).

2. Do not over-self-disclose about your personal life. If you tell them about yourself, do it sparingly and keep it at a surface level. Be polite and friendly, but don't go into detail about your personal/private life.

3. Do not spend time with your students outside of class -- unless it is class related. If you see your students out at a bar, restaurant, party, etc., say a polite hello and keep moving. You're entitled to a social life and you don't have to avoid them, but remember that you are not their peer or their pal so keep your physical distance.

4. Treat all of your students the same. Even if you like one student over another, treat them identically -- if you smile and say hello to the one you like, you must smile and say hello to the one you don't like. BE CONSISTENT with all of your students. If you allow one student to do something "against the rules" you must allow all of them the same opportunity (which becomes taxing on your time) -- IN ORDER TO AVOID THIS PROBLEM, ALWAYS FOLLOW THE RULES.

5. Take responsibility for your actions and mistakes. If you do or say something incorrect, own up to it and make appropriate amends with your students -- they will respect you for your honesty and for being human.

6. Always maintain a professional demeanor. If you're having a bad day outside of class, DO NOT TAKE IT INTO THE CLASSROOM. What happens outside of the class stays outside of class.

7. If you have a problem with a student, talk to him/her in private -- do it with a calm, rational demeanor. If you cannot be calm and rational, reschedule your appointment with your student.

8. Again and again and again, always follow departmental and university policies and rules -- if you aren't sure what they are, ASK YOUR SUPERVISOR/DEPARTMENT CHAIR before you promise a student something that is against the rules or policies. Also, enforce syllabus policies. If you are wishy-washy, it will only make them angry. Be consistent -- be clear about your expectations of their behaviors and responsibilities and be clear about their expectations of your behaviors and responsibilities. Don't be ambiguous about policies and procedures. Stick to the rules.

9. If you are team teaching or working as a Teaching Assistant DO NOT comment on the instructor’s grading, etc. You do not want to undermine his or her authority in the classroom. You can give the impression that you are aligning yourself with the students and against the professor of record. You should present a united front with the teacher of the course.

10. Dress the part. Professional dress will reinforce to your students that you are not “one of them.”

* Thanks to Dr. Rhonda Buckley formerly of the Auburn University Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning.
Appendix B

Graduate Teaching Assistant Policy Manual Acknowledgment

Name: __________________________________________________________ (printed)

Student Identification Number: __________________________

_I have read and understood the policies stated in the Auburn University Department of Communication and Journalism Graduate Teaching Assistant Policy Manual and agree to abide by them._

Signed: ___________________________ Date: ___________________