



Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching

# Graduate Teaching Fellow Handbook

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## Graduate Teaching Fellow Handbook

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Note: This handbook presents characteristics of successful teachers, guidelines for handling various situations, the relationship between TFs and their course supervisors, and many other items. It is not a source of official policy; the department and college of the TF set these policies.

# The Role of the Graduate Teaching Fellow

## Introduction

As a graduate Teaching Fellow (TF) you'll have many responsibilities. You'll be taking classes, working with faculty on research projects, starting to develop your own research agenda, and trying to manage all of the other responsibilities in your lives: staying connected with family and friends, managing the many home/life tasks that require time (laundry, cooking) and can't be ignored (paying bills). On top of all of that, you'll also be teaching. The trick in the TF role (and with all jobs) is to find the right balance.

Teaching well as a TF is important for two very practical reasons. First, students are paying in money and time for the privilege of being in your class, so you owe students a good learning experience and the foundation knowledge that will help them to succeed in their lives. Second, most faculty appointments require that you teach – but even if you don't plan on an academic career, learning how to plan and organize yourself and your materials, communicate information, and lead discussion are universal skills that will be beneficial for any job. Teaching well is also very personally rewarding. After all, you're excited enough about your field that you want to pursue a higher degree, so you'll enjoy seeing your students get excited about the ideas you're excited about.

If you do choose an academic career, teaching well as a TF may help you land your first faculty position. Most colleges and universities seek new faculty who can hit the ground running both with their teaching and research. So your TF teaching can be an important stepping stone to a successful academic career.

As a TF you're responsible for a variety of activities, including preparing materials and lectures/discussions, grading, and student advising and coaching. You may also be responsible for collaborating with faculty and TF colleagues to develop course materials and teaching plans. This Handbook provides some information about Boston University Policies as well as some tips for how to get started and be successful in the classroom.

## Basic Responsibilities of Teaching Fellows

Most Graduate Teaching Fellows are teaching either laboratory or discussion sections and performing the related duties of grading, holding office hours, proctoring exams and generally working with the students in the class. You should speak with the supervising faculty member for more detailed descriptions of duties as class activities are discipline-, department-, and course-specific.

### ***Grading***

Office hours and attendance at lectures are usually required

- Evaluate student performance on problem sets, quizzes, or essay exams.
- Maintain accurate grade records.

### ***Teaching Laboratory Sections***

- There are usually multiple sections per week, depending on duration of session.
- Office hours and attendance at lectures are usually required.
- Teaching a laboratory section usually involves:

- Maintaining accurate attendance and laboratory grade records.
- Introducing the concepts, materials used, and safety procedures for the lab.
- Actively monitoring student activities.
- Summarizing the day's objectives.
- Evaluating student performance on assignments such as homework, quizzes, tests, and papers.

### ***Leading Discussion Sections***

- There are usually multiple sections per week.
- Office hours and attendance at lectures are usually required.
- Teaching a laboratory section usually involves:
  - Maintaining accurate attendance and laboratory grade records.
  - Leading problem-solving sessions or discussions of primary literature, concepts, etc.
  - Evaluating student performance on homework, discussion section quizzes, and lecture exams.

In addition to your primary teaching assignment, your teaching duties may also include:

### ***Office Hours***

The number of office hours required will be determined by your faculty supervisor, but is usually at least two hours per week. You should:

- Choose times that are convenient to most of your students.
- Give students your undivided attention during office hours.
- Be consistently present and on time for your office hours.
- Help students arrive at the answers to their questions themselves instead of giving them the answers.

### ***Proctoring***

The number of proctor sessions required is determined by the faculty supervisor. When proctoring, you should:

- Arrive at least 10 minutes early.
- Assist the faculty member in distributing and collecting exams.
- Check BU IDs when students return completed exams, if the faculty supervisor sets this as a policy.
- Vigilantly watch students throughout exam for wandering eyes and use of inappropriate materials.
- Ensure students' course materials are put away during the exam.
- Inform faculty member immediately of suspicious or inappropriate exam behavior.

## What It Takes to be an Effective Teacher

### The Big Picture

Some people are born teachers, but most are not. Even if you're a terrific teacher, the needs of students change over time, so you need to continuously adapt and improve. Here are some tips for getting off to a good start.

1. Be yourself.  
To be an effective teacher you need to know yourself. What is your style? How do you naturally interact with people? It's always helpful to observe strong teachers and learn from them, but remember that you want to adapt teaching "tricks" from others – not "adopt" them wholesale. You also need to adapt your style to your audience. For example, students majoring in physics may well approach an introductory course very differently than students who have to take a science requirement and chose Intro Physics.
2. Be respectful of students.  
Boston University students come from very diverse backgrounds and are learning about life while they're learning about the content of their courses. A good teacher listens to students and respectfully helps them to build their knowledge base and perspectives.
3. Be organized.  
Students appreciate a well-organized class; it helps them to approach the course content systematically and it also helps them to plan their study schedules.
  - Carefully plan and prepare your lecture notes, case plan, and how you'll conduct class exercises before you get to the classroom.
  - It's likely that you'll teach course content more than once in your career, so prepare your notes and materials so that you can use them again (you'll update them, but a good foundation helps reduce the prep each time you teach that material).
  - Have an agenda for each class (it's a good idea to put this on the board so students see where you're going during the session).
  - Try to anticipate the questions students will ask and be ready with answers that address their questions from more than one angle.
  - Hand out as many materials/assignments as possible at the start of the term – and don't change them unless absolutely necessary!
  - Develop a good filing system (electronic and/or paper) for your notes.
4. Set high expectations.
  - Be friendly, but be clear about who's in charge.
  - Be clear about your grading criteria. Always provide a breakdown of the components of the course grade and consider providing a grading rubric for papers and essays so that students understand the difference between what you'd consider an A paper and a C paper.
  - Think about your goals and plan/implement tactics in the first class (particularly for class participation).
    - "Cold calling."
    - Depth of analysis behind responses.
  - Be tougher with grading early in the term; it's easier to curve up than down!

5. Teach, don't tell.

Remember that we learn and remember after one month...

- 14% of what we hear.
- 22% of what we see.
- 30% of what we watch others do – demonstrations.
- 42% of sensory redundancy - classroom rituals that repeat seeing, hearing, and doing important skills or concepts.
- 72% of “movies of the mind” - learning that is linked to remembered or imagined life experiences of the learner.
- 83% of performance of a life-challenging activity - first-time or demanding action that applies the new learning.
- 92% of what we teach others!

(Robinson R. 1994. *Helping Adults Learn and Change*. West Ben, Wisconsin: Omnibook Co)

6. Be Accessible and Responsive.

- Offer reasonable office hours.
- Use technology to communicate with your students.
  - E-mail.
  - Course support software.
- Solicit feedback early in the term.
  - Use a method that provides actionable information. Ask students what they would like you to START doing, STOP doing and CONTINUE doing.
  - Be clear about what you are willing – and not willing – to change.

7. Be Fair

- Plan assignments to make it possible for students with strengths in different areas to be successful (papers, exams, class participation) - and to minimize the risk of cheating.
- Grade thoughtfully - and make it your practice not to change grades (unless, of course, you made a mistake).
- Remember students are taking other classes, too!
- Don't burden students with busywork.

8. Reinforce!

- “Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them.”
- Use a class agenda.
- Summarize key points of your lecture/discussion at end of class (you can do this or ask a student to do the summary).
- Connect the class content to other classes.
- Connect to the class content to the “real world.”

Here are some additional tips for becoming an effective teacher.

- Observe other teachers. When you observe effective teachers, you'll start to pick up some ideas you can incorporate into your own teaching. When you observe not-so-effective teachers, you can learn what not to do.
- Have other teachers observe you and provide constructive feedback.
- Reflect on what makes a class great – or mediocre.

- Listen to your students.
- Take the time to develop good materials – so you can use them again and again.
- “Mix it up” in the classroom. Change the pace. Change the pedagogy.
- Be aware of the rhythms of the semester.
- Give your students your best.

## Fundamentals

Big picture concepts related to effective teaching are important, but there are some important fundamentals that must also be addressed if a course – and teacher – are to be successful.

### 1. The Syllabus

Every syllabus should include the following elements:

- Your name, office address, office phone number, and e-mail address.
- Your office hours. You should plan on at least three hours per week, not all on the same day or at the same time slot. If you’re teaching a course for part-time students, you may choose to have more limited office hours and instead meet with students by appointment.
- Contact information and office hours of teaching assistants or other instructors.
- A list of required and recommended course materials (books, course packets, articles, etc.) and where they can be purchased.
- The url for the course website and what students can find there.
- Criteria for grading.
- A list of class meeting dates, times and locations. Include:
  - A detailed schedule of class topics, assigned readings, discussions, laboratories, etc. Do your best not to change this as the semester progresses, but if you think that some topics may “slip” or change, be sure to state that the schedules and topics are subject to change and how changes will be announced (in class, on the website, by e-mail, etc.)
  - The dates, times and locations of any special events (field trips, lab sessions, speaker events) students are expected to attend.
  - Dates, times and locations of exams.
- Also useful to include are:
  - How you prefer to be contacted (phone, e-mail, office hours) and what student may expect for response time (will you answer e-mails within a day? Three days?)
  - Course pre-requisites.
  - Your policy regarding absences (be specific: absences from lectures, from labs, etc.), missed work, make-up exams, etc.
  - Your policy regarding work that is handed in late.
  - Your expectations regarding independence of work.
  - A reminder about student responsibility to know and understand your school’s Academic Conduct Code.

### 2. The First Day

The first day of class is your opportunity to get the semester off to a good start. Here are a few tips for making the most of that opportunity:

- Take time for introductions.
  - Tell students about you.

- Give them an opportunity to learn about each other.
- Review the syllabus. Make sure students are clear about the course goals, grading criteria, and anything else you want to emphasize about the course.
- Show the course website (if you have one). Make sure students know where to find any material you may be posting.
- Talk about expectations:
  - Theirs.
  - Yours!
  - Attendance.
  - Being on time for class.
  - Being on time with assignments.
  - Missing exams.
  - Academic misconduct.
  - Also ... class participation, openness and respect, laptops in the classroom, cell phone use, etc.
  - If you engage them in the discussion of these expectations up front, you reduce difficulties later.
- Introduce some course content.
- Don't expect much prep – even if you gave a pre-assignment.
- Consider an exercise or group discussion.
- Remember that student perceptions of instructors within the first few minutes of the first class correlate very highly with their final perceptions – so plan the first class carefully. Show a bit of who you are as a person. Take your class seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously.
- And remember to smile at least a little! 😊

### 3. Engaging Students in Active Learning

Active, engaged learning is more fun and is more likely to be retained and remembered. Some of the ways you can engage students are:

- Show your interest in the material and the students.
- Demonstrate enthusiasm, preparedness, thoughtfulness, organization, and flexibility in your presentation.
- Learn students' names early in the semester.
- Use humor (but not constantly – and never off-color).
- Challenge students ("I bet none of you can figure out the answer to this question in three minutes!").
- Use analogies and examples that relate to their lives.
- Give attendance/participation credit that is pedagogically meaningful.
  - Discussion credit that gives feedback on students' participation performance
  - Daily/weekly one-question quizzes on homework material or previous day's content.
- Use an agenda.
- Organize class time:
  - Intro; material; summary.
  - Divide lecture material into segments; spend 1-2 minutes summarizing the segment
- Use activities to engage students



- Think-pair-share: pose a question, give students a moment to think about it, then ask them to pair up with a student neighbor and discuss the answer. This gives them a chance to formulate their responses and “warms them up” for a more general discussion.
- Three-minute summary. Have a student summarize the learning for the day in three minutes at the end of class.
- The Teaser. Ask stimulating questions like, “What profession would [a historical figure or character] have today?”, “Where would we be today if we did not know the structure of DNA?”, “How does this topic relate to the current events?”
- Engage students in debates.
- Take votes on issues or questions to see how perceptions vary in the class. This can be done by a show of hands or having students use student response systems (“clickers”).
- Distribute props that the students can handle and manipulate.
- Use active exercises/simulations.
- Play devil's advocate - have students discuss what the opposite outcome would mean
- Use case studies.

#### 4. Grading

Students care about their grades so it’s important that you are fair and consistent in your grading. Some questions to address are:

- Is the exam/quiz/paper representative? Are the questions in proportion to the time spent or emphasis placed?
- Are exam questions (or paper expectations) clear and unambiguous?
- Can you develop an objective grading scheme that will enable you to explain to students exactly how points were awarded (or deducted)?
- Fundamentals: Grading
- Did you get what you expected?
  - Was the exam/paper assignment as clear as you thought?
  - Are students preparing appropriately? If not, how can you help them to prepare more fully?
  - Are your expectations reasonable for the students you’re teaching?

#### 5. Reviewing Grades

Students may want to see you to go over their assignment grade. Some are sincerely interested in self-improvement; some are concerned about the numbers! Here are some tips.

- First step: be consistent and fair
  - Use a grading template.
  - Note how many points you award (or deduct) for particular answers.
  - Grade one question (or a page of questions) for the entire class, rather than grading exams start-to-finish for each individual student.
- If you're confident you've been fair, be firm.  
Of course, it's always possible that you made an error in grading (or adding!) and you should make adjustments to grades when that happens.

The issue may be the grade, or it may be about self-image.

- Emphasize that grades don't necessarily always reflect what a student knows; anyone can have a bad moment on an exam or not express a thought as clearly as intended.

- We're not all right all the time – and we're still "okay." That's as important a lesson as the content of any course. Learning how to recognize our own mistakes, how to face them and to come up with ways to make fewer in the future is an important part of learning and of life.

#### 6. Getting Feedback from Students

Around the semester midpoint, solicit feedback from students about how the course is going.

Mid-semester feedback:

- Provides an opportunity to show that you're open to feedback.
- Provides an opportunity for you to refocus, if necessary.

Asking "how's it going?" doesn't usually get much concrete, actionable feedback. Asking three focused questions is more likely to give you focused answers:

- What should I start doing?
- What should I stop doing?
- What should I continue doing?

Collect the responses, organize them, and discuss with your students.

## **Boston University Policies**

In addition to learning about how to be an effective teacher, you also need to be familiar with some basic Boston University policies about safety, student privacy, sexual harassment and academic integrity.

### **General Safety**

Nothing is more important than safety. To ensure safety for you and your students you should:

- Know the locations of safety features in and near your classroom, including
  - Fire extinguisher.
  - Safety shower and eye wash (if working in a teaching or research lab).
  - Emergency telephone.
  - Emergency contact person.
- Memorize the phone number of the BU police: 617-353-2121 (3-2121 from a campus phone).
- Admit to your classroom only students officially registered in your class.
- Plan how you and your students or fellow researchers will exit the building quickly in an emergency.

### **Lab Safety**

Anyone teaching or performing research in a laboratory setting needs to be aware of safety issues. In some subjects, for example chemistry and biology, such personnel must attend federal mandated laboratory safety training on a yearly basis, held through our campus Office of Environmental Health and Safety. Your department will inform you as to what safety training you need.

- Dress appropriately for laboratory activities
  - Wear a long skirt or pants, no shorts
  - Wear closed-toed shoes, no sandals
  - Wear a lab coat
  - Wear appropriate protective eye-wear
  - Wear protective gloves appropriate for the task
- Keep laboratory materials inside the lab; take off lab gloves if leaving the lab room
- Wash your hands before you leave the laboratory
- No food, drink (even water), or gum is allowed in a teaching or research laboratory
- Know the health and fire hazards associated with your laboratory activities
- Inform students and/or fellow researchers working near you of the hazards of the laboratory activities

### **Student Privacy**

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ensures confidentiality of student educational records and restricts disclosure to or access by third parties, except as authorized by law.

- Keep accurate records of each student's grades and attendance.

- Keep student records in a secure place.
- Print the grade sheets frequently (or back-up on a removable medium) and store in a safe place to guard against compute disk failures.
- Keep students' personal concerns private, even from their friends and families as well as your friends, including grades, family issues, and health problems.
- Do not allow students to see grades of other students.
- Return graded assignments to each student personally.
- Do not post grades by BU ID or SSN. Use random codes or use grade management software like WebCT.
- You may decide to distribute model papers, but:
  - Obtain the writer's permission before making copies for the class
  - Obscure the writer's personal information before making copies

For more on student privacy issues, see: <http://www.bu.edu/reg/information/ferpainformation.html>

## Sexual Harassment

“Sexual harassment is defined as sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and any other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, whether intentional or unintentional, where:

- an individual's submission to or rejection of the conduct is made, either explicitly or implicitly, a term or condition of employment or of status in a course, program or activity, or is used as a basis for an employment or academic decision; or,
- the conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance, academic performance, or educational experience, or of creating an intimidating, hostile, humiliating or offensive working, educational or living environment.”

Here are some important tips for avoiding issues with sexual harassment:

- Be friendly, but not friends, with your students.
- ***Do not date your students.***
- Attend only university-sanctioned events; avoid private social events hosted by your students.
- Grade all students' assignments based upon the objectives of the assignment and the criteria stated for the class.

See also: <http://www.bu.edu/faculty/handbook/policies/hr/harassment.html>

## Academic Integrity/Academic Misconduct

At Boston University, Academic Misconduct is defined as the misrepresentation of a student's work or impeding the ability of the instructor to fairly judge the work of other students. This may include, among other acts:

- Turning in the work of another student.
- Allowing another student to use your work.
- Stealing a test.

- Unauthorized collaboration.
- Falsification of data.
- Forging grade records.
- Submitting the same piece of work for a grade in more than one course.

Boston University takes Academic Honesty very seriously, so the sanctions are very steep. However, they differ for undergraduates and graduate students. As both a graduate student at Boston University and a teacher of undergraduates, you should familiarize yourself with the Academic Conduct Code both of your graduate school and of the undergraduate college in which you teach.

Web pages containing academic conduct codes at Boston University:

College of Arts and Sciences:

Undergraduate: <http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/undergrad-resources/code/>

Graduate: <http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/grad-resources/forms/discipline/>

College of Engineering

Undergraduate: <http://www.bu.edu/eng/handbook/documents/ugrad-handbook-ch09-academic-conduct.pdf>

Graduate: <http://www.bu.edu/eng/grad/conduct/>

You can reduce the chances of academic misconduct by:

- Having multiple smaller assignments rather than a smaller number of larger ones.
- Creating checkpoints for the major assignments, including outlines, rough drafts, and individual conferences.
- Making multiple versions of a test.
- Having students sit in every other seat during a test, if there is sufficient room.
- Watching students carefully while they take a test; making eye contact with those whose eyes start to wander.
- Showing students how to properly acknowledge collaborations and others' ideas.
- Having students submit their papers electronically. Consider using phrase detection software like Google or Turnitin.com. The latter should be done through the lead instructor, who needs to set up an account. Information for doing this can be found at: <http://www.bu.edu/ceit/class/plagiarism.html>

### **University Policies on Computer Use**

Whether you are using a computer in the library, research lab, teaching lab, or office, you are required to abide by the regulations of computer use at Boston University.

Some Computer Ethics guidelines:

- Use Boston University computers and the Campus Network only for authorized work-related use, not personal or commercial purposes.
- Do not give anyone access to your BU computer accounts. Keep your passwords private and change them often.
- Do not use BU computers to send chain mail or offensive material, unauthorized mailings, or unsolicited advertising.

For more on BU policies on computing ethics, see: <http://www.bu.edu/computing/policies/ethics.html>

## **Useful Resources for Your Students**

Students will come to you as their instructor for help learning the material for your course – but they also may seek help on learning in general. The Educational Resource Center (<http://www.bu.edu/erc/>) is an excellent free resource for students. The ERC offers peer tutoring, workshops, writing support and other services. The ERC staff is available to meet with students individually to help them develop a personalized plan for academic success and/or to help them develop specific skills.

Students may also come to you for general guidance. Two resources that may be helpful are:

Student Health Services: <http://www.bu.edu/shs/>

Psychological Services Center: <http://www.bu.edu/psc/>

## **The Boston University Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching (CEIT)**

The Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching was established in 2001 (as the Center for Excellence in Teaching) to promote and support exemplary teaching, to facilitate the continued professional development of faculty as teachers, and to introduce new faculty to the culture of excellence in teaching at Boston University. CEIT provides a forum for the discussion of the knowledge, tools, and the spirit of inquiry that are central to teaching and learning processes. CEIT also cultivates teachers able to transmit their own passion for an area of inquiry and curiosity about what remains to be discovered. It encourages teachers to motivate students to participate actively in their own education and to guide them on their way to becoming life-long learners.

The CEIT offers a range of resources to enhance faculty teaching. Workshops, seminars, and technological support, as well as a collection of audio, video, and print materials are available for all teaching faculty. Find more about the CEIT at: <http://www.bu.edu/ceit/about/mission/index.html>