

The Graduate Student Teaching Association

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for November 2004.)

Most of us know the nervousness and uncertainty that can come with teaching one’s first class, an experience that can be both exciting and anxiety-provoking (McKeachie, 2002). Although the intensity of these initial emotions is often ephemeral in nature, graduate student teachers eventually face the equally (or more) daunting task of searching for a job. Thus, graduate students in the teaching of psychology can benefit from a support network that provides teaching resources and information helpful for the academic job hunt. The Graduate Student Teaching Association (GSTA) is one such network that hopes to assist graduate students in their present teaching endeavors as well as provide support as they pursue careers in the teaching of psychology and elsewhere. Now in its 3rd year, the GSTA is the graduate student organization of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), Division 2 of the American Psychological Association (APA). The purpose of this essay is to introduce readers to the GSTA and provide an overview of the organization’s goals, which include (a) increasing the GSTA’s visibility, (b) emphasizing the importance of graduate student teacher training, (c) maintaining the organization’s Web site, and (d) developing a mentoring program for graduate student teachers.

Increasing GSTA’s Visibility

Many psychology graduate students are likely unaware of the GSTA. Therefore, increased visibility will allow the GSTA to reach and assist more of these students. In order to accomplish this goal, the GSTA hopes to increase its representation at various regional APA conferences. Establishing a network of “at-large representatives” will serve as an important recruiting and informational tool.

The GSTA also hopes to expand its conference-related activities. For example, at the 2004 APA conference in Hawaii, the GSTA sponsored a symposium on scholarship in the teaching of psychology. At future conferences, the GSTA will sponsor and organize symposia and workshops relevant to the training and advancement of graduate student teachers. In addition, several established teachers of psychology have volunteered to give presentations designed to help graduate students find jobs at liberal arts colleges. This is a crucial issue for graduate students, because the majority of academic jobs are at smaller schools.

A further purpose of the GSTA is to act as an advocate at the national level for the interests of graduate students. In this capacity, the chair of the GSTA has an active presence in the executive committee of STP and acts as a voting member, ensuring that the interests of graduate students are represented in the policies of the division.

Emphasizing the Importance of Graduate Student Teacher Training

Another focus of the GSTA in the coming years will be to emphasize the importance of providing graduate students with quality training, support, and supervision in the teaching of psychology. This is important for two reasons. First, many schools have graduate students working as teaching assistants (TA), who hold office hours, grade papers and exams, lead review sessions or labs, and even give lectures (Mueller, Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1997). Because TAs are intimately involved in the workings of most universities, it is imperative that they be adequately trained in these roles. However, many graduate TAs are not adequately prepared for their first teaching experience (Meyers, 2001; Prieto & Meyers, 2001). In fact, many graduate student teachers do not receive any TA training before undertaking their teaching duties (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002; Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Lumsden, Grosslight, Loveland, & Williams, 1988; Meyers & Prieto, 2000; Mueller et al., 1997).

A lack of adequate training can have negative consequences for both teachers and students. For instance, graduate students who do not receive adequate training in the teaching of psychology may lose interest in pursuing a teaching career because of a lack of guidance and resources when difficulties are encountered in the classroom (Prieto, 1995, 2001). In addition, the students of inadequately trained TAs may have suboptimal classroom experiences, making it less likely that they will be prepared for more advanced coursework (Prieto, 2003).

For graduate students who do receive formal training, the most common methods for training new teachers include (a) having them observe more experienced teaching faculty, (b) using student evaluations as feedback, and (c) holding pre-semester orientations on effective teaching (Mueller et al., 1997). However, formal coursework on teaching and direct faculty supervision of student teachers are still relatively rare (Mueller et al., 1997). As such, the GSTA is interested in promoting the increased use of direct supervision and coursework as means of training new psychology teachers.

A second reason for providing graduate students with quality training in the teaching of psychology is that teaching experience is important as it pertains to obtaining an academic position. Despite their apparent lack of training, many graduate students searching for academic jobs seek teaching positions. In a survey of former job applicants, Perlman, Konop, McFadden, and McCann (1996) found that most applicants had a strong interest in teaching and rated teaching opportunities as more important than research opportunities when choosing an academic position. Moreover, search committees view previous teaching experience as vitally important when choosing among applicants. Benson and Buskist (in press) surveyed search committees hiring new faculty members and found that exhibited excellence in teaching was a key factor when deciding which candidate(s) to hire. As such, Benson and Buskist suggested that getting as much teaching experience as possible is pertinent for graduate students seeking academic positions.

Maintaining and Upgrading the GSTA Web Site

The GSTA maintains a Web site <<http://www.uakron.edu/gsta>> designed to provide helpful resources for graduate student teachers. Graduate student teachers who need to find information for their courses, such as lists of class activities or sample syllabi, can turn to the Web site for assistance. Currently, the Web site features links to sites on classroom assessment, the history of psychology, and personality activities and demonstrations. Furthermore, in the future, the Web site will contain helpful career information, such as how to build a curriculum vitae. In addition to providing resources for graduate students, the GSTA Web site also serves as a centralized location where various types of information can be stored and easily accessed. In short, the GSTA's Web site is helpful because graduate students can benefit by having access to a single site that contains a collection of useful teaching-related information.

Developing a Graduate Student Mentoring Program

The GSTA is hoping to develop a faculty-graduate student mentoring program in the teaching of psychology. The typical mentoring relationship, which usually focuses on research skills, provides many benefits for graduate students—acculturation into academia, assistance in defining career aspirations, and access to professional networking opportunities, to name a few (Baiocco & DeWaters, 1998). Because many faculty research advisors place more emphasis on research than teaching, they may be less supportive of a teaching career. In addition, many faculty research advisors may be unable to adequately advise their students in pursuing teaching-related interests or may receive few rewards for serving as a teaching mentor. Consequently, they may approach this role with relative indifference (Erickson & Strommer, 1991). However, many graduate students wish for such a relationship. Kalivoda, Sorrell, and Simpson (1994) found that new faculty listed seeking advice from a teaching mentor as the second most common approach to solving teaching-related problems. Also, the esteemed Dr. Charles Brewer noted that receiving exposure to different teaching styles and, in particular, connecting with an effective teaching mentor are excellent ways to develop a personal teaching identity (Saville, 2001). Thus, a mentoring program in the teaching of psychology would be beneficial to many graduate students. The GSTA is currently considering inviting several established teachers of psychology to be temporary members of the GSTA Internet discussion list and to serve as faculty mentors, thereby giving graduate students access to knowledgeable and experienced teachers. Finally, the GSTA is sponsoring a roundtable discussion on excellence in faculty-student mentoring at the 2005 APA convention in Washington, DC.

Conclusion

Despite being a relatively young organization, the GSTA is establishing itself as a prime resource for graduate students. Ultimately, the GSTA hopes to become a nationwide network of interested and motivated graduate students dedicated to advancing the teaching of psychology. The GSTA is currently developing its infrastructure to serve its members more efficiently by creating an executive committee. The executive committee will consist of a treasurer, a communications editor, and possibly a secretary as well. Joining the GSTA is

simple: Any graduate student belonging to STP is eligible to join. In sum, we hope that the GSTA can provide useful information for students new to the teaching of psychology as well as students who are more established and on the verge of embarking on a teaching career. In addition, we hope the GSTA can provide information for faculty with students who may be interested in learning more about the teaching of psychology.

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