

GTA Training in the Psychology Department at Auburn University

John L. Clifton, Jared W. Keeley, and Amber M. Henslee, Auburn University

Auburn University, a land grant institution located in East Alabama, is the largest university in Alabama. It enrolls approximately 22,000 students from all 50 states and nearly 100 countries. Of these students, approximately 600 are psychology majors. Auburn enrolls approximately 4,000 graduate and professional students, of which 42 are currently in one of the Psychology Department's three doctoral programs: Clinical, Experimental, and Industrial/Organizational Psychology. During the spring 2004 semester, the Psychology Department provided 32 Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA), 15 assistantships to the Clinical program, 14 to the Experimental program, and 3 to the I/O program. Auburn's Carnegie classification is Doctoral/Research Extensive.

The Teaching of Psychology Course

In their first year in graduate school, all GTAs are required to take a course called the Teaching of Psychology. This course serves the dual purpose of (a) providing students with the basic principles of good teaching through a variety of media and (b) establishing a supportive environment for the GTAs' first teaching experiences.

The first goal is met through several course assignments. Students complete readings from classic teaching books, such as McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* (2002), and from primary sources in the teaching literature. These readings provide a foundation for thinking about the key components of teaching, such as how to prepare for a class, methods of presenting information, how to deal with problem students, and so on.

Second, students compile a teaching portfolio. The teaching portfolio provides both a summative experience for students and provides a useful resource for applying for future academic positions. The teaching portfolio includes copies of each GTA's statement of

teaching philosophy, student evaluations, examples of class demonstrations, student work, and whatever else the GTA may wish to include.

Third, GTAs are introduced to the broader teaching community by joining the STP PsychTeacher™ electronic discussion list

<<http://list.kennesaw.edu/archives/psychteacher.html>>. Students keep up with the ongoing discussions and post questions, comments, and so on at least once a semester.

Students also write an essay on a teaching-related topic of their choice. This assignment requires students to become familiar with some of the scholarship on teaching by searching and reading relevant portions of the teaching literature.

Finally, students give presentations to the class on any topic in psychology (approximately equivalent to a lecture given in an introductory class), which the course instructor critiques according to presentation style, communication skills, stimulation of critical thinking, avoidance of common mistakes, and so on. This activity gives students experience and feedback that can be translated directly into improved classroom performance.

The second purpose of the class is to provide a supportive environment for GTAs as they embark on their initial teaching experiences. It establishes a forum for GTAs for expressing their concerns or worries and an opportunity to reflect publicly on their early teaching experiences. Class discussions model the process all teachers must use to solve the everyday problems that arise in the classroom. Additional supportive course activities include viva writing and revision, writing test items, and creating a syllabus.

Recently, the Psychology Department has begun offering advanced seminars in the teaching of psychology for those students who have already completed the initial teaching course. The seminars are designed around a specific topic, such as critical thinking. The course begins with readings and discussion of the topic to be addressed and continues with students presenting various methods and activities for producing the desired student outcomes, which can be used immediately in the classroom.

Teaching Fellows Program

At the end of the 2003-2004 academic year, the Psychology Department implemented a Teaching Fellows program for GTAs. This program targets individuals with an interest in college teaching and furthers their training through participation in advanced courses on teaching and providing an opportunity to teach an undergraduate course as teacher of record. This regimen gives GTAs additional teaching experience, which is valuable in beginning an academic career. Students who complete the program are recognized in a special award ceremony held during the Psychology Department's annual Teaching Festival, a half-day long celebration of the teaching of psychology held for both graduate students and faculty.

Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFF)

AU's Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning was established in 2003. It is dedicated to equipping faculty and GTAs with the resources and skills they need in order to provide high quality education to undergraduates. As part of its mission, the Biggio Center administers AU's version of the Preparing Future Faculty program. Modeled on the national program of the same title, the PFF program provides a year-long series of seminars and academic courses in teaching, as well as a variety of teaching-related experiences at neighboring colleges and universities. These experiences are intended to provide familiarity with job skills needed at higher academic levels.

Conclusion

The teacher training program in AU's Psychology Department is a source of pride for graduate students and faculty alike. More than one graduate student chooses Auburn over other schools because of this emphasis on teaching. Unlike the archetypal graduate student, handed a text on Monday and teaching on Tuesday, GTAs at Auburn are shepherded through their early teaching experiences in a way that builds their confidence, helps them avoid pitfalls, and prepares them for successful academic careers.

References

Auburn University. (2004). Enrollment data retrieved April 26, 2004 from

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McKeachie, W. A. (2002). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (11th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.