Creating and Implementing a Departmental Teaching Assistant Policy

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Heather Petcovic

2014-15 Academic Leadership Academy Project

The Problem
The 2015-18 Teaching Assistant Union (TAU) Contract calls for greater transparency about graduate teaching assistant (TA) appointments. Specifically, hiring units are responsible for:

- Making information available on websites about teaching assistantships, including the application and selection process, desired and required qualifications, and application due dates
- Listing on websites all courses that typically have TAs, and updating lists regularly to include other teaching opportunities that become available (such as summer teaching)
- Providing to all TAs a copy of its policies, and communicate any new policies or changes in policies
- Making available to TAs information relevant to the courses that TAs are teaching (including syllabi, textbook information, exams, and course policies
- Annual evaluation of TAs (encouraged but not required)

As of 2014-15, the Department of Geosciences lacked a formal policy governing the hiring and evaluation of TAs.

The Solution
As departmental Graduate Advisor, I chose to develop and implement a Departmental TA Policy as my Academic Leadership Academy project. My goals were to develop a policy that would:

- Bring us into compliance with the TAU contract
- Provide our TAs with greater clarity on our hiring procedures and performance expectations
- Include a mechanism for evaluation of TA performance that would be easy for faculty to implement yet effective in giving formative feedback that TAs could use to improve their performance.

I implemented this project in three phases. First, during the Spring 2015 semester, due to the immediate need to bring our departmental website into compliance with the TAU contract, I developed an initial set of policy guidelines describing the hiring and evaluation of TAs.

In that semester, I started the second project phase by drafting initial language that describes our policies in greater detail. This detailed policy would be included in the Graduate Student Handbook. Over the summer, I also develop a rubric that faculty could use to evaluate TA performance.

To communicate these policies more clearly to students, in the third phase I held a departmental TA meeting on September 3, 2015. Attendance was required of all current TAs.

The Process

1. Review TAU Contract and Graduate College appointment information to understand what specific information would be required in the department policy

2. Develop draft language for (a) website and (b) policy document

3a. Review draft website with department chair and faculty during a faculty meeting

3b. Review draft policy document with department chair and faculty during a (separate) faculty meeting

4a. Revise website to include faculty and department chair comments

4b. Revise policy document to include faculty and department chair comments

5a. Post website

5b. Finalize policy with input from department chair

6. Include finalized policy statement and copy of the website in the Graduate Student Handbook

7. Hold a departmental TA meeting to introduce employees to the new policy and address any questions or concerns

Documents Produced

Departmental Webpage

Policy Document

TA Evaluation Form

Next Steps
Work on this project will continue into the 2015-16 academic year and will include:

- Meeting with faculty course supervisors and head TAs to review implementation of the evaluation procedures
- Collecting evaluation data and writing teaching evaluation letters for all TAs at the end of academic semesters
- Re-evaluation and modification (if needed) of policies and practices after the first year of implementation
- Institutionalization of policy and procedures as part of the regular duties of the departmental Graduate Advisor

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