



MEMORANDUM

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To: Patrick Deane

From: Janice Deakin, Chair – TA Consultative Committee

Date: September 11, 2009

Re: Report and recommendations from the committee

Vice Principal Deane,

I am writing on behalf of the members of the TA Consultative Committee A. Leger (CTL), J. Lin (SGPS 09), M. Lombardi (AMS 08/09), E. Power (Faculty), D. Rappaport (SGSR, Acting Chair), S. Tucker (SGPS 08), H. Smith (CDRM), and M. Corbett (SGS Director of Admissions and guest of the committee) to update you on the work of the committee over the past academic cycle. Associate Dean David Rappaport assumed the Chair of this committee. The committee met on October 7, November 19, January 13, February 17, and March 10.

In this session recommendations of the committee regarding an amendment to the TA agreement form, and an amendment to the dispute resolution mechanism for teaching assistants were approved at the January 29, 2009 meeting of Senate.

As was discussed in the report for the academic year 2007/2008 the Committee distributed a questionnaire to all units on campus that employ Teaching Assistants. Much of the activity of the Committee during the 2008/2009 cycle focused on discussion and evaluation of the responses from the questionnaire. This activity is outlined below.

The questionnaire and the accompanying covering letter are attached. A response from every unit on campus was received, and these have been aggregated into attached file.

The discussion of the responses to the questionnaire, was undertaken with an eye toward gaining a deeper understanding of the issues and concerns of the broad constituents that are stake-holders in the activities of TAs, namely:

- the undergraduates who make use of the services of our TAs,
- the course instructors who rely on the support provide by TAs,
- the departments that administer the allocation, and activities of TAs, and
- the TAs themselves.

The Questions

Ten questions were developed and agreed upon by the Committee during the 2007/08 cycle. The responses to the questions will be discussed according to the headings listed below.

Procedure for assigning TAs to graduate students

There is quite a range of variability of how TA positions are advertised and assigned. Most units describe some formulaic process of assigning TAs. The formulae range from the highly specified to ones that have a heavy ad hoc component to them. This may be more of a function of the style of the reporting, rather than the actual practice. Only five units have reported that they have a documented procedure. This is an eye opening finding as one of the perceived areas of discontent amongst TAs is the fact that they do not understand how their units make the TA assignments. Furthermore, as stated in the Senate Policy on Teaching Assistants at Queen's, section VIII,

“Units must provide their TAs with written guidelines which explain the principles for defining eligibility for and the allocation of teaching assistantships.”

We recommend that the Committee focus on means to ensure that all departments incorporate into their TA document the method that they use when deciding TA assigning and allocation, following best practices as recommended in the Policy.

TA training and evaluation

All departments are doing some form of TA training. What is variable is the content of the training, the extent of the training, and who does the training. There is widespread agreement that the Centre for Teaching and Learning is best equipped to perform the function of TA training. The TA day that is mounted every fall is a huge success. It draws upon the expertise of a broad swath of faculty and staff that are concerned with and expert in matters of pedagogy. The University should consider the possibility of expanding these invaluable CTL TA training activities.

As an important component of their assignment, TAs provide feedback to students. It is somewhat surprising that TAs themselves are not universally offered a similar type of feedback on how they are performing their duties. It should be pointed out that in some units there is an exemplary practice of instructors providing immediate and tangible feedback to their TAs. However, due primarily to resource issues this is not the norm, and the majority of TAs get little to no feedback, although the Policy does recommend that written feedback be given to TAs by their course instructors.

We discussed some of the options available to provide TAs with feedback. Our discussions were far from conclusive but there was some move toward instituting, possibly as a pilot project, a means of TA evaluation.

Process and procedure documents, TA agreement, departmental TA policies

Responses to our questionnaire revealed that there were a number of units on campus that were not aware of the mandate requiring the use of the TA agreement. An effect of the questionnaire was to raise awareness regarding the TA agreement. Most units responded that they would move toward using the TA agreement or in some cases they would tailor an agreement of their own to better suit the needs of their constituents. It will be important for the TA Committee or TA Committee Chair to follow-up on this matter and determine whether compliance has improved.

Lessons Learned

The questionnaire provided an insight into the activities at Queen's as they pertain to Teaching Assistants. Drawing anything but some broadly stated conclusions from the responses would be irresponsible. The questions as posed were designed by the Committee, and in the interest of providing a confirmation of some anecdotes regarding the treatment of TAs on campus. However, there is no formal basis to the method in which questions were designed, or responses analyzed. Furthermore, obtaining quantifiable data such as numbers of TAs or hours worked have not been verified. We were not able to find any correlation of the TA treatment based on size of the department and/or TA pool or discipline. The varying administration of TA assignment and TA training, and documented procedure seems to be a

function of the individual unit, and its unique local culture.

The outcomes from the findings of the questionnaire are summarized below:

- All units employing TAs should publish their procedure for assigning TA positions.
- The possibility of expanding the current TA training provided by the CTL and whether some type of mechanism can be incorporated to provide feedback to TAs on their performance and effectiveness will be considered.
- In the coming cycle we will contemplate issuing a follow-up questionnaire to determine how behaviour has evolved over the passing months. Alternatively, we will consider means in which to institute an effective and efficient auditing process to determine the practices of units and to verify whether they are following mandated procedures. The Committee is responsible reviewing the procedures as set out by the policy, however, ensuring compliance is a separate matter, and should be a faculty responsibility.
- The issue of compliance with the Policy has been a recurring theme at Committee meetings. The responses reveal that there are gaps between policy and practice. Although the Committee is aware of these gaps, we are ill equipped to assure adherence to the Policy. We recommend that the faculties should take a more active involvement on matters of compliance with the stated Policy goals and procedures.

I trust that I have represented the work of the committee and their recommendations accurately and would be available to discuss any matters arising from the report with you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kerri Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.