# School of Plant Sciences (SPLS) Teaching Assistantships

Spring 2023

## Rationale

Teaching assistantships serve several purposes, all of which should be considered in offering and assigning Teaching Assistantships:

* Teaching assistantships are a mechanism to provide instructional assistance to faculty who are teaching formal courses.
	+ This can allow these faculty members to increase their class size, use more grading-intensive but more impactful assignments in their classes, and/or use the time they would otherwise devote to grading to partake in professional development opportunities, develop new teaching/curricular materials, or increase instructor-student contact time outside of class.
* Teaching assistantships provide graduate students with training in college-level instruction and help support their acquisition of a deeper, more complete understanding of foundational concepts.
	+ While not all graduate students will want a formal teaching component in their future careers, they may apply what they learned as a teaching assistant to improve their delivery of future research presentations and/or to train junior team members more effectively.
* Teaching assistantships provide financial support for graduate students from a source other than their faculty advisor’s research grants or fellowships to the student.
	+ Our College (CALES) indicates that this should not be a main consideration in offering teaching assistantships, and that teaching assistantships should be viewed primarily as learning opportunities for graduate students. However, our graduate program would not be able to train as many graduate students as we do without the funding supplied by teaching assistantships, due to limitations in research funds and support from other sources.

## Teaching assistant workloads

Teaching assistantships are typically assigned as either 0.25 FTE or 0.5 FTE, for either the Fall or the Spring semester. A 0.25 FTE position has an expectation of completing an average of 10 hours a week of teaching assistant duties for each week of the position, and a 0.5 FTE position has an expectation of completing an average of 20 hours a week of teaching assistant duties for each week of the position.

## Process of assigning teaching assistantships

### Determining graduate student interest in teaching assistantships

Graduate students in the Plant Sciences and Plant Pathology graduate programs are asked to indicate their interest in teaching assistantships for the following academic year (Fall and Spring semesters) each March. This is initiated by the **SPLS Graduate Coordinator** asking graduate students to discuss with their faculty advisor(s) how they will be supported financially for the next academic year. Graduate students should also discuss with their faculty advisor and/or committee when they will complete teaching assistantships that are mandated as part of their training in the graduate program (refer to the current Graduate Handbook to determine how many semesters graduate students are required to serve as a teaching assistant). Interested graduate students indicate to the **Graduate Coordinator** if they want a 0.25 FTE or a 0.5 FTE teaching assistantship. Once the Graduate Coordinator has collected information from the graduate students, they share this information with the **SPLS Business Manager** and the **SPLS Director of Graduate Studies**.

### Determining funds available for teaching assistantships

The **Business Manager** uses their knowledge of SPLS finances and the CALES Graduate Funding Memo (typically received in February or March) to determine how many teaching assistantships the Unit can support in the following academic year. They share this information with the **Graduate Coordinator**, the **Director of Graduate Studies**, and the **SPLS Director**.

### Determining instructional need for teaching assistantships

Around this same time, the **Student Support Coordinator** (who, as of this writing, is also the Graduate Coordinator) compiles a list of all courses/sections that will be taught in the Fall and Spring semesters of the next academic year and which are based in SPLS (*i.e.,* they have a PLS or PLP prefix and, for cross-listed courses, SPLS is the home unit) or are based outside of SPLS but are taught by SPLS faculty. The **Student Support Coordinator** also provides an estimate of the enrollment in those courses/sections, based on historical data and their knowledge of upcoming changes to the course, and provides this information to the **Director** and the **SPLS Associate Director for Academic Programs**.

The **Director** and the **Associate Director for Academic Programs** determine how many teaching assistants (or, total teaching assistant FTE) each upcoming Fall and Spring course/section should receive based on the anticipated enrollment information, and then rank the courses/sections by level of priority for being assigned those teaching assistants. If one instructor teaches multiple sections of a course in the same semester, those sections can be grouped together to determine priority. The following information is considered in determining the number of teaching assistants to assign to a course and the priority ranking:

* Anticipated enrollment
	+ Historically, the rule of thumb has been that a lecture-based course may receive a 0.25 FTE teaching assistant if it is expected to have at least 60 students enrolled and a 0.5 FTE teaching assistant if it is expected to have at least 120 students enrolled. The number of teaching assistants scales as expected course enrollment goes up.
* The type of course: laboratory vs. lecture courses
	+ Laboratory sections in laboratory courses with multiple sections are typically taught by graduate teaching assistants, even though the enrollment is (much) lower than 60 students. To determine the level of teaching assistant support for these courses, the number of hours that the section meets each week, the laboratory preparation and setup/cleanup time, and expected number of office and grading hours are used to determine the FTE needed, using 0.25 FTE = 10 hours a week and 0.5 FTE = 20 hours a week as the basis. For some courses, a teaching assistant may be expected to teach more than one laboratory section.
* The nature of assignments in the course
	+ Some General Education courses are required to be writing intensive, and grading writing assignments is typically more intensive than grading multiple choice exam questions, *etc.*
* The historical use of teaching assistants in the course
	+ Courses where teaching assistants are given mentoring by the instructor and where the teaching assistant duties support the professional development of the graduate student will be prioritized over courses where the teaching assistant has historically been used for more menial grading tasks and where a grader could be used instead.
* Type of course: required, service, or other
	+ Required courses for our academic programs and service courses (those that may be required by academic programs outside our unit) get priority over elective or other courses, if the lack of teaching assistant support would prevent us from offering the course.
* The workload of the instructor(s) teaching the course
	+ Sometimes an instructor might be asked to teach an additional course that would put them over their typical instructional FTE. For example, this could happen when another instructor is not available to teach a core/service course*.* Or, an instructor might be asked to take on additional service, extension, or research duties on a temporary basis, reducing their available time for teaching. In these cases, the **Director** can assign one or more teaching assistants to the instructor to reduce the effort required for them to teach their usual or additional course(s).

The **Director** and the **Associate Director for Academic Programs** also determine a cutoff in the ranking, where course/sections above the cutoff in the list are those that *should* ideally get assigned one or more teaching assistants based on the factors above, and those below it *may* get assigned one or more teaching assistants depending on available funds and graduate student interest in teaching assistantships.

### Reconciling available teaching assistantships and instructional need for teaching assistants

The **Director** and the **Associate Director for Academic Programs** assign the available number of teaching assistantships *based on* *the available funds* to the courses/sections identified above, in order of priority. If the number of teaching assistantships *based on the available funds* exceeds the number of teaching assistants needed to staff the courses/sections that *should* ideally get a teaching assistant, as determined above, then the number of Plant Sciences and Plant Pathology graduate students interested in a teaching assistantship are considered in determining how far below the cutoff in the instructional need priority list teaching assistantships are assigned.

### Offering teaching assistantships to graduate students who are not in the PLS and PLP graduate programs

If there is an insufficient number of Plant Sciences and Plant Pathology graduate students interested in teaching assistantships, in cases where there is funding available and an instructional need for additional teaching assistantships, then the **Graduate Coordinator** sends an email to SPLS faculty asking if they have graduate students in their laboratories from other graduate programs (*e.g.*, BMCB or a GIDP) who are interested in a teaching assistantship.

If there are still insufficient graduate students interested in the available teaching assistantships after advertising to all the graduate students in SPLS laboratories, then the **Graduate Coordinator** and/or the **Director** approach their counterparts in other academic units/programs in CALES to advertise the positions and solicit inquiries from graduate students in those units/programs who are interested in obtaining a teaching assistantship.

### Prioritizing which graduate students get a limited number of teaching assistantships

If the number of graduate students requesting a teaching assistantship exceeds the number of available teaching assistantships, then the **Director** determines which graduate students will be given a teaching assistantship. The **Director** considers:

* [All the graduate students being considered in this case should be in the Plant Sciences or Plant Pathology graduate program, and they must be in good standing in the program.]
* Whether a graduate student has applied for a teaching assistantship primarily to fulfill the teaching assistantship requirement of the graduate program and how close they are to graduation. Students who are close to graduation but who have not yet had a teaching assistantship will be given priority to help them fulfill the requirement.
* Whether a graduate student is interested in teaching as a career. Graduate students with an interest in teaching as a career will be given priority.
* Whether a graduate student has previous teaching assistant experience, with students without previous experience being given priority.
* Equity across faculty members. The Director will aim to first provide a teaching assistantship for one graduate student per interested advisor before funding a second graduate student with that same advisor.

### Matching graduate students to specific course teaching assistantships

For Fall semester courses, this is done in late March, to allow time for contracts to be signed in early May. Teaching assistantships for the Spring semester are arranged in October, with the contracts signed in early December.

Once the number of available teaching assistantships and interested graduate students have been balanced, the graduate students are polled by the **Graduate Coordinator** about their relative interest in being a teaching assistant for the available courses/sections. This is done in the form of a survey where the students rank their top three course/section choices.

The **Director of Graduate Studies** then assigns graduate students to a teaching assistantship in a specific course. This is done by using the survey responses, the Director of Graduate Studies’ knowledge of the graduate student’s skills (*e.g.*, whether they can competently teach a laboratory section or provide high-quality feedback on writing assignments), their knowledge of the graduate student’s career interests (*e.g.*, which teaching assistant ship might provide the most relevant training for that career), and instructor input (*e.g.*, some instructors request specific graduate students for various reasons, including previous experience with that graduate student as their teaching assistant).

Once the **Director of Graduate Studies** has made preliminary assignments, they contact the course/section instructors for input/approval for the assignments and adjust the assignments as necessary. Instructors can choose to ‘interview’ the graduate student(s) being considered for a teaching assistantship in their course before letting the Director of Graduate Studies know of their final decision.

### Offer letters

Once graduate students have been assigned to a specific teaching assistantship opportunity, the **Director of Graduate Studies** conveys this information to the **SPLS Human Resources professional** and the **Business Manager** for them to generate the offer letters for the graduate students.

### Training for graduate students

Graduate students assigned to a teaching assistantship must be FERPA trained. If a graduate student assigned a teaching assistantship has not yet completed the training, the **Graduate Coordinator** directs them to the training, which must be completed prior to the start of the teaching assistantship. We encourage graduate students interested in teaching to attend the TA Workshop (TA 101) held by the Bart Cardon Academy for Teaching Excellence (CATE) in CALES (typically offered each August). Historically, one or more CATE Fellows offer(s) graduate students the opportunity to receive a formal teaching evaluation when their assignments involve active elements of teaching; this helps provide additional training for students and provides a basis for letters of recommendation and award nominations.