

Undergraduate Teaching Assistantships: Good Practices

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Abstract

This article presents research aimed at developing an understanding of good practices associated with the use of undergraduate teaching assistants and at assessing performance at Renaissance College, University of New Brunswick relative to these good practices. Through a review of the relevant literature and qualitative interviews with undergraduate teaching assistants and faculty members at the College, seven good practices emerged. Results from this study can inform teaching and learning by providing a foundation for faculty members at the College and in other contexts to reflect upon their experiences and enhance their practice.

Introduction

The contemporary higher education context is characterized by reductions in government spending, increases in tuition fees, concerns about institutional accountability, and demands to make education relevant to the workplace. These and other forces have led to growing pressures on post-secondary institutions to attend better to the quality and relevance of their students' experiences and related educational outcomes (Andres & Finlay, 2004; Mount & Bélanger, 2001, 2004; Wellen, 2005). Administrators and faculty members have had to adopt creative instructional strategies that use fewer faculty resources, yet enhance educational quality and student engagement (Cook, 2002). Student engagement reflects the assumption that "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (Astin, 1999, p. 529). Several studies correlate student engagement with student learning and success (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1997, 1998; Scott, 2007). Undergraduate teaching assistants may be a valuable resource for increasing student engagement and improving educational quality. They may decrease faculty-student ratio and increase the potential for faculty-student interaction.

The use of graduate teaching assistants is a well-established practice in higher education in Canada. In recent years there has been growing use of undergraduate students as research assistants (Hogan et al., 2007), but the employment of undergraduate students as teaching assistants has been less common. The literature contains relatively little about undergraduate teaching assistants or the impact of undergraduate teaching assistantships on student learning (Cook, 2002). It is well established, however, that the integration of peer assistants and tutors into courses benefits student learning (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Topping and Ehly, 1998). Typically undergraduate teaching assistants have functioned in limited contexts with little to no formal training (Park, 2004). They may serve many roles from assessing student work, demonstrating laboratories, facilitating tutorials, or helping to manage course attendance and group work.

This article reports on a study designed to examine the use of undergraduate teaching assistants at Renaissance College [RC] at the University of New Brunswick. RC is home to Canada's first and only undergraduate interdisciplinary leadership studies program. The College mission is to provide high quality education for students, educate leaders for the new millennium, and provide an exemplary model of post

secondary education. The program is defined by collaborative teaching, active learning, and explicit learning outcomes. Students follow an intensive and comprehensive curriculum to complete a Bachelor of Philosophy in Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies. Courses and internships offered during two consecutive summers allow student to complete their degree in three years. Students are exposed to a multitude of perspectives, with courses in areas such as: World Views and Religions; Natural Science, Technology and Society; Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Leadership; Images and Insights; Mathematical and Economic Approaches to Problem-Solving; Citizenship and Community Issues; and Integrative Forum. Forty percent of the program's academic credits are electives taken outside the College leading to a minor in a traditional discipline.

RC has been gradually increasing the use of undergraduate teaching assistants to improve student learning by making a greater amount of help available to students than could be provided by faculty members alone; to provide opportunities for senior students to become more engaged in the program and learning more about its content by becoming teachers themselves; and to provide opportunities for students to develop the coaching and mentoring components of leadership. By modestly reducing the number of electives courses, the College has created the resources required to raise the number of undergraduate teaching assistants from 1 in 2005/06, to 11 in 06/07, and 22 in 2007/08. The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of good practices associated with the use of undergraduate teaching assistants and to examine the performance of the College relative to these good practices. RC will use this knowledge to improve practices at the College, develop goals for the use of undergraduate teaching assistants, and to disseminate information on good practices gleaned from both experiences at the College and from the relevant literature.

Methodology

Data for this qualitative research study was gathered through a series of seventeen individual interviews during the Winter 2008 academic term. Participants were self-selected volunteers. Participation was solicited via e-mail to all current and former undergraduate teaching assistants and all faculty members who were currently employing or who had previously employed these assistants. All those who expressed interest in participating were interviewed.

Eleven undergraduate teaching assistants and six faculty members participated. The eleven assistants reported both about their experiences as teaching assistants as well as about their experiences as students having had an assistant in one or more of their courses. Five of the eleven assistants had held more than one assistantship; two had held assistantships in consecutive offerings of a single course with the same faculty member, and three had held assistantships in multiple courses with different faculty members. The six faculty members had various levels of experience facilitating assistantships. One of the faculty members had employed an assistant only once, four had employed assistants both within RC and another context, and the other had employed multiple assistants within RC. Three of these faculty members have also employed graduate teaching assistants.

Throughout the study, the ethical guiding principles outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Government of Canada, 1998) were strictly adhered to ensure that no harm would come to participants. Prior to each interview the purpose and scope of the study was explained, and the participant was asked to read and sign a letter of informed consent indicating his or her willingness to participate.

During the interviews, each of which lasted approximately one hour, participants were asked to reflect on and discuss their experiences with undergraduate teaching assistantships, including any challenges they encountered, how they may have benefited from the experience, and their learning. To ensure confidentiality within the relatively small RC context and to allow individuals to speak freely about their experiences, interviews were not recorded and transcribed. Instead, extensive field notes were written during and after each interview, including direct quotes from participants. Extensive field notes were deemed appropriate for this study as its aim was to obtain abstract conceptualization of good practices rather than detailed description (Glaser, 1998).

Field notes were coded, and the codes compared and grouped into categories. The relationships between the codes and the categories were recorded (Glaser, 1978, 1998). To ensure the study's validity the preliminary analysis was shared with faculty in August 2008 and with the undergraduate teaching assistants early during the Winter 2009 semester. The analysis was found to be consistent with participants' experiences. The analysis of interview data combined with a review of the relevant literature uncovered seven good practices of undergraduate teaching assistantships.

Results

The collection and analysis of interview data combined with a review of relevant literature led to the emergence of the following seven aspects of good practice of undergraduate teaching assistantships:

Good practice...

1. Facilitates a transparent selection process,
2. Negotiates responsibilities of assistantships,
3. Trains and mentors undergraduate teaching assistants,
4. Provides teaching assistants with visibility and opportunities to display competence,
5. Engages teaching assistants in the course and in student learning,
6. Enhances educational quality for all, and
7. Encourages fair compensation.

Good practice facilitates a transparent selection process.

Good practice with undergraduate teaching assistants facilitates a transparent selection process (Park, 2004). Each department or faculty should have a recruitment process and standard selection criteria. The recruitment process should be easy to implement, effective, and efficient. It should not require considerable extra work for faculty members who wish to hire an undergraduate teaching assistant. Selection criteria proposed in the literature include recent outstanding performance in the course, outstanding overall academic performance, subject matter knowledge, relevant teaching or mentoring experience, and written and verbal proficiency (see Cook, 2002; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Park, 2004; Smith, 2008). Park (2004) also recommends that potential teaching assistants have the abilities to cope with stress, set reasonable goals and priorities, conduct productive classroom sessions, and foster student learning. Cook (2002) adds that potential assistants should exhibit a genuine desire to help other students and Smith (2008) asks that potential assistants be able to articulate a strong motivation to assume a teaching assistant position.

When this study began many undergraduate teaching assistants and students felt that the College recruitment processes was, as one student described, “unfair, undemocratic, and not transparent.” Another student added that “people are asked to TA because the teacher likes you and thinks you are smart.” At the time there was not a College-wide recruitment process, individual faculty members recruited students for these positions as they saw fit. Some faculty members would review past performance of students and approach students who they thought might be interested; others would devise a brief job description and solicit interest via e-mail, selecting from those interested. During the interviews a few faculty members indicated that they were aware the recruitment process was problematic but they were hesitant to adopt a formal selection process as it could be time consuming and burdensome. This is illustrated in the quote:

I try not to think about the selection process. I realize that some students feel overlooked but I don't have enough time to deal with it. I know the students and when it comes to choosing a teaching assistant, I select the one that benefits me most.

Selection criteria employed by RC faculty members include: recent outstanding performance in the course, familiarity and competence in the subject matter, interpersonal and rapport-building skills, demonstrated ability to work with the supervising faculty member, self-directedness, availability, and writing ability. In discussing the results of this study the College has already begun revising its recruitment process to increase transparency and ensure that it is fair to all students.

Good practice negotiates responsibilities of assistantships.

Good practice negotiates the tasks and responsibilities of undergraduate teaching assistant positions with students assuming these positions. Being responsive to an assistant's motivation and goals in designing the assistantship may allow the assistant to pursue areas of interest and areas that reflect his or her strengths and abilities. Negotiating the tasks and responsibilities helps to maximize benefits of this experience. For example, a student who is interested in developing his or her leadership abilities may prefer an assistantship with opportunities to facilitate labs or tutorial sessions. In contrast, a student who

would like to gain experience providing constructive feedback or improve his or her writing may be more inclined to assist with assessing student work.

Within RC, there is considerable variation in the extent to which responsibilities of undergraduate teaching assistantships are negotiated. Some faculty members hire assistants to perform well-established roles in their courses; other faculty members negotiate positions by suggesting possible responsibilities or tasks, and having the student select those tasks that appeal to them most. Finally, other faculty members ask assistants what and how they can best contribute to the course and assistantships are designed collaboratively. Believing that assistantship design is solely a responsibility of faculty members, a few individuals indicated that they were initially resistant to employ assistants as they were unsure how to employ them and feared that it would increase their workload. One faculty member who had a difficult experience employing an undergraduate teaching assistant concluded that, "I do not have sufficient time to think about the role that they would occupy and how to use them efficiently. It is more of a pain to employ a teaching assistant and not worth the extra effort."

Many factors can influence the design of assistantships including structural factors such as course structure and schedule, teaching assistant availability, resources allocated to compensation, and guidelines on the number of hours a student can work. As one faculty member explained, "I would have liked my teaching assistant to sit in on the class but scheduling problems prevented this. Their role was marking because that was most needed." One of the assistants interviewed similarly explained how structural factors can impact responsibilities of the position, "A professor may want to have a student do certain things such as lead a class discussion or lecture but the pay available may limit the time to do it." Failing to negotiate the assistantship position can limit benefits of the experience for students who serve as undergraduate teaching assistants: "I want to go into teaching so teaching as part of the assistantship would have been more useful for me than marking, but I was not asked about what I would like to do or how to I could best contribute."

Good practice trains and mentors undergraduate teaching assistants.

Good practice provides training and ongoing mentoring for undergraduate teaching assistants. A growing number of universities offer formal courses or workshops that introduce teaching assistants to different teaching strategies and provide them with ideas for working with students and their supervising faculty member. To complement these courses, informal training also frequently occurs with the supervising faculty member. Faculty members can provide training specific to particular assistantships. Training can help assistants understand their responsibilities, how to perform these responsibilities, how to work with their supervisor, and increase their sense of self-efficacy toward teaching (Prieto & Meyers, 1999).

Informal training usually begins with an initial meeting between the teaching assistant and the supervising faculty member. At this time a written contract should be devised so that students know what they are signing up for. This could be a standard contract with options to individualize for each particular assistantship. The contract should detail the negotiated tasks and responsibilities, the anticipated time required to perform each task, the processes associated with each task (for example if the faculty member and the assistant will divide assessment of student work or if the assistant will provide a primary assessment all student work followed by a secondary assessment by the supervising faculty member), what counts as paid time, how time is logged, and rate of pay. Undergraduate teaching assistants should also be made aware of possible ethical issues they may encounter and how to seek assistance in dealing with these issues or any others that may arise through the assistantship (Hogan et al., 2007). Possible ethical issues include confidentiality, navigating dual relationships of peer and teaching assistant, and student plagiarism and cheating (Smith, 2008). When anticipating the time required to assess student work faculty members should be mindful that it typically takes new teaching assistants longer to assess student work than experienced faculty members (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). Faculty members should not only make a concerted effort to clearly communicate their expectations, but also ensure that assistants understand these expectations. Role ambiguity can be confusing for teaching assistants, reducing their likelihood of success.

On an ongoing basis faculty members need to ensure that assistants are up to date on any changes or variations from the course syllabus and the position as initially negotiated. There may be a

need for faculty members to mentor their teaching assistants to integrate the position into their student life, to learn to make progress in meeting responsibilities of the position, and to deal with any conflicts of interest or ethical dilemmas that arise. Faculty members should try to model behavior that they want their assistants to emulate (Nyquist and Wulff, 1996). Faculty members should also try to provide regular feedback to assistants about their performance that can further their learning and their contribution to the course. Another source of mentoring may be more experienced teaching assistants. If two or more are working together in a course, the more experienced one can provide useful support and guidance to the new assistant (Puccio, 1986).

Although the University of New Brunswick offers a teaching assistant training workshop, few if any assistants from RC participate. Training is provided primarily by supervising faculty members. This training typically occurs through a meeting to review the course syllabus, responsibilities of the position, and the integration of the course schedule with the teaching assistant's student schedule. This may include when assignments are due, marking responsibilities, and whether the assistant can clear time to do the assessing. Some faculty members expressed difficulty helping teaching assistants to understand how much time assessing student work requires. Most faculty members encourage their assistants to seek assistance or clarification from them when necessary, however, ensuring that assistants understand their responsibilities was an ongoing challenge. One faculty member summarized this issue clearly, "The role I want my teaching assistant to occupy is clear to me, but it may not be as clear to them." Role ambiguity was also a key concern of most assistants interviewed. For example, one teaching assistant explained, "I had access to the course syllabus but I had no idea what was going on in the course because I wasn't there. All I knew was when I had to do the marking." RC is not alone; Ferris (1992) suggests that communication issues are a key concern confronting teaching assistants including communication with students, socialization with their peers, and professional relationships with their supervisor.

The extent of ongoing mentoring at RC varies from little to no mentoring perceived by an undergraduate teaching assistant, "I was unsure if I was marking 'right' because I was not provided with any guidance" to faculty members being available to answer any questions teaching assistants had, even providing their home phone numbers. Some faculty members regularly met with their assistants face-to-

face to provide help, advice, and support. These meetings also provide assistants with the opportunity to communicate what is going well and what students in the course and the assistant may be struggling with. Other faculty members relied solely on e-mail to communicate with their teaching assistants. Most faculty members attempt to provide their assistants with feedback and encouragement regularly.

When teaching assistants are not provided with sufficient mentoring they may flounder. One assistant confessed shrugging off office hours because it was not sufficiently clear to her when she was supposed to hold these hours and their purpose. Another expressed a lack of clarity as to what extent she was supposed to share student perspectives with the faculty member. Another assistant indicated that he could have made the commitment better if he really understood the commitment he was making.

Good practice provides teaching assistants with visibility and opportunities to display competence.

Good practice provides teaching assistants with visibility and opportunities to display their competence. Visibility refers to students 'seeing' their undergraduate teaching assistants and knowing their responsibilities in the course. The opportunity to display competence refers to assistants having the chance to demonstrate their abilities and knowledge of the subject matter. Assistants should be visible and able to develop relationships with students in the course in a way that allows students to see their assistant as competent and knowledgeable. This helps to establish credibility, as undergraduate teaching assistants may not be perceived by students as having competence because they are often young and lack the experience and training of full-time faculty members (Cook, 2002). Fingerson & Culley (2001) found that lack of assistant visibility was the most central problem students have with their teaching assistants: "before students recognize the capacity of the UTA [undergraduate teaching assistant] to contribute to the class, this capacity must be visibly demonstrated to the students" (p.311).

Visibility and competence displays can be achieved by having undergraduate teaching assistants micro-teach, meet with students and provide feedback, answer student questions, contribute to class discussions, and facilitate in-class or out-of-class activities. Faculty members can reinforce the perception of competence by referring students to the assistant and demonstrating how the assistant contributes to the course. When teaching assistants are visible and perceived as competent by students, there is a

greater connection between students and their assistant, students are more likely to know how their assistant may be specifically useful to them, and students may be more willing to seek out the assistant for help (Smith, 2008). Giving teaching assistants more visibility in the classroom can encourage students to take a more active role in their learning. When undergraduate teaching assistants lack visibility and opportunities to display competence (which may occur when they have limited interaction with students) and when their responsibilities are limited to taking attendance and passing out handouts, assistants may feel disconnected from the course and student learning.

Visibility and opportunities to display competence vary with each assistantship at RC. Assistants who were integrated into the course and involved in facilitating student learning tended to be highly visible and had many opportunities to display their competence. These assistants reported that their experiences were meaningful, benefitting students, the faculty member, and themselves. To illustrate, one student said, "When the teaching assistant is present in the classroom their role becomes clear, you see a reason for having a teaching assistant and their role becomes useful."

While some assistants participate in the classroom, others do not. This may be a result of scheduling conflicts (an assistant being employed for a course that occurs at the same time as one in which he or she is enrolled as a student), insufficient value placed on in-class participation, or the assumption that the teaching assistant already knows the students in the course given the small size of the College. Insufficient visibility or lack of opportunities to display competence has negative consequences for assistants and students. It can be uncomfortable for assistants, as one explained:

In assessing others work I feel like I'm snooping because I haven't interacted with them much on a personal level and I get to peer into their lives by marking their very personal work in [course name]. I know some students better than they think I know them which can be socially awkward when they don't realize how much you know about them.

Lack of visibility can also limit how students utilize and benefit from the presence of an undergraduate teaching assistant. When students were asked to recall the courses in which they had an assistant, many of them struggled. More than one student indicated that they were not certain: "In first year I had teaching

assistants in some of my courses. There could have been assistants in other courses too but I didn't know because I wasn't aware of their presence". Even if students are aware that they have a teaching assistant, they may not know the assistant's role: "I found out that I could have approached my teaching assistant to read my papers before handing them in. Some students were doing this. But I didn't know." Students can also be surprised and resentful when they discover that another student rather than the professor has been reading their assignments.

Good practice engages teaching assistants in the course and in student learning.

Good practice engages teaching assistants meaningfully in the course and in student learning. Activities that achieve this goal include in-course contributions such as participating and leading class discussions, hosting out of class tutorials or labs, providing valuable feedback on student work, and interacting with students. These activities contrast with less engaging activities such as photocopying, taking attendance, and uploading material onto online course management software.

Having assistants meaningfully engaged may enhance student learning and the assistantship experience. For example, if undergraduate teaching assistants provide students with more contact time with individuals who are delivering the course, students' engagement may be enhanced. Engaging assistants meaningfully may help to develop their skills, further their learning and it may also help them to feel respected and valued (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). Ideally, engagement integrates the assistant with students in the course, other assistants, the supervising faculty member and other faculty members, increasing their sense of community. In negotiating assistantships faculty members should attempt to include a high proportion of highly engaging tasks with other necessary tasks.

Some of the tasks and responsibilities of undergraduate teaching assistants at RC are more engaging than are others. For example, developing course material, hosting a focus group to obtain detailed student feedback on class activities and assignments, and leading class discussions were considered to be highly engaging by assistants. In contrast, providing feedback on student journals that were assigned only a minor percentage of the overall course grade and photocopying were considered minimally engaging. Employing assistants to help in the assessment of student work is a common practice at RC and it received mixed reviews in terms of its level of engagement. Care must be taken

when having assistants assess student work. Assessing must not be a downloading of faculty work to students, and it should add value to the course for both students and the undergraduate teaching assistant. To ensure that assessing work maintains or enhances educational quality several faculty members supervise and review the assessment of student work by assistants before returning it to students. One faculty member explained that she does this because she wants to know how students are performing and because “I want to be ultimately responsible for assessment and grades in the course.”

Engaging activities seem to benefit teaching assistants by fostering relationships between the assistant and students and the supervising faculty member, and by providing them with a sense of belonging and satisfaction. For example, one teaching assistant explained how being involved allowed her to develop a network with the professors in the College and with her supervising professor in particular. Another shared the sense of reward he felt being able to help others through one-on-one coaching and providing feedback on assignments before they would be turned in. This way they could be improved before the final submission. Highly engaging responsibilities also benefited students. One student, for example, commented:

I really appreciated when TAs were participated in class discussions. They brought a fresh perspective and another ‘teacher’ voice. This allowed me to get to know another student in another year of the program and feel more connected and aware of the TA role.

Less engaging activities can leave assistants feeling frustrated and disconnected from the course: “I would get more out of this experience if students got more out of it. Right now the only thing that anyone gets out of it is less faculty workload.” Some assistants, despite not having engaging tasks, took the initiative to develop further connection with the course and student learning: “Although I wasn’t able to attend the class, socially I would talk with them [students] and ask them how they were doing and what I could do to help them out.”

Good practice enhances educational quality for all.

Good practice enhances the educational experience for students, undergraduate teaching assistants and faculty members. Furthermore, designing assistantships so that each of these parties benefit leads to the application of other good practices, and it helps to create an atmosphere where learning is everybody's business (Hogan et al., 2007).

By participating in assistantships students can gain a better understanding of teaching and learning, improve their academic skills, and learn more about teaching as a possible career. Undergraduate teaching assistants may enhance their appreciation for what it means to teach and be a professor, including what it is like to lecture or facilitate a discussion and the time and effort involved in assessing student work (Fingerson & Culley, 2001); they "learn to appreciate all that goes into a course beyond what visibly transpires in the classroom: the planning, paperwork, student difficulties (illness, etc.), grading, and the final evaluation of the course" (Hogan, et al., 2007, p. 289). Assistants may become more engaged in educational processes and in the university community as they form relationships with faculty members and students. Participating in an assistantship may improve assistants' own academic skills in that they may develop an increased appreciation for faculty expectations and what constitutes quality work, they may improve their writing and presentation skills, and reinforce their subject matter knowledge. Assistants may also improve their time management, leadership, and self-confidence. In terms of career, students may explore their interest in teaching and gain experience and a competitive edge for scholarships, graduate school, and/or employment.

Students can benefit from having a teaching assistant in their courses in that they have access to another perspective on their work and learning and improved access to help (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). As an alternative source of assistance, assistants may be able to reach out to students differently than can faculty members, as they are likely to share a common culture and lifestyle. Even if students do not consult their teaching assistant for help, Smith (2008) found that students tend to appreciate their presence and feel that they enhance learning in the course. Undergraduate teaching assistants may also serve as peer role models and increase students' engagement by increasing time spent learning particularly if they facilitate out of class activities.

Faculty members also benefit by employing undergraduate teaching assistants. Assistants may take on curriculum development projects that a faculty member lacks sufficient time to complete. Faculty members may be able to provide more and different types of assessment and more detailed and timely feedback to students in their courses. Faculty can benefit when the assistants become a source of feedback on the course in terms of how well assignments and ideas are communicated, how well students are learning what the faculty member is trying to teach, and how students are experiencing the curriculum (Park, 2004). Assistants can serve as an intermediary between professors and students, helping to translate a faculty member's ideas students and helping the faculty member to understand students' perspectives (Stoecker et al., 1993).

Many undergraduate teaching assistants at RC indicated that they obtained "a better understanding of the professor perspective" through their experience, particularly in terms of all the work and thought that goes into planning and teaching a course, the responsiveness of faculty members to student feedback, and how frustrating it can be to mark assignments when students have not submitted their best work. Assistants spoke of increased engagement, improved connection with faculty members, and an increased likelihood of accessing assistance from assistants in their own courses. Assistants suggested that assessing work of other students enhanced their time management and academic skills. For example one student said, "Marking helps me to see the variety in student work, how different people approach a problem, which helps my own learning and when I go to submit work I can better tell what good work is." Nearly all assistants felt that they benefited in terms of career exploration and there was a general sense that although "it is advantageous on a resume, that's not why I did it."

Students perceived that the presence of undergraduate teaching assistants in their courses either positively contributed or had a neutral impact on educational quality. Students said that assistantships allow them to get to know students in another year of the program and therefore be more engaged in the College community. One student explained how participating in a teaching assistantship facilitated out of class tutorial and benefited his academic work, "I'm glad that I participated. The session helped me to learn more and these kinds of things improve the quality of assignment that the prof eventually sees."

Faculty members were generally pleased with their employment of undergraduate teaching assistants. For example, one faculty person commented that "my teaching assistant did well at assuming

the responsibilities which involved marking and facilitating small group discussions out of class time”; another faculty member commented: “I could rely on them like colleagues”. Only one faculty member expressed having a negative experience in which the assistant did not meet agreed upon deadlines for assessing student work. Specific benefits to faculty members included assistance with curriculum development, reduction in the amount of time necessary to assess student work, and another perspective on what is occurring within a course which was helpful when the faculty member was challenged on his teaching strategies.

Good practice encourages fair compensation.

Good practice encourages fair compensation whether monetary or course credit. The system of payment should be well understood by undergraduate teaching assistants, supervising faculty members, and students. The peer mentors as described by Smith (2008) received academic credit equivalent to one upper-level course rather than payment for their services. If compensation is financial, it should be consistent among teaching assistants with a fixed rate of pay that increases incrementally based on year of academic study and experience. There also needs to be a system for logging time worked. To ensure accountability the time worked should be communicated with the faculty member who signs off before payment is processed. Course credit or monetary compensation could be complemented with a summative assessment of a teaching assistant’s learning and performance at the end of the period of employment. The assistant may later choose to use this assessment as evidence of his or her growth or competency in a learning portfolio, and/or as evidence when applying for further education or employment.

While both students and faculty members were relatively content with the system of compensation at RC, practice could be improved. Currently teaching assistants submit their hours worked to the College’s administrative assistant bi-weekly for processing. They may or may not communicate these hours with supervising faculty members. This has resulted in occasions where faculty members did not know the hours their teaching assistant had submitted and how many hours were therefore remaining to employ the assistant for the rest of the term. Assistants and faculty negotiated the rate of pay using their own discretion, causing some inconsistencies between what different assistants

were being paid for similar work. Furthermore, some of the assistants interviewed had questions about compensation, such as: What counts as paid work? Does being present in the classroom or answering student e-mails count as paid time? How much am I being paid? What is the payment process? These questions suggest the need for improved communication.

Discussion

This study led to the emergence of seven good practices associated with undergraduate teaching assistantships and an assessment of RC's performance relative to these good practices. This study provides baseline information as to how serving as an assistant can impact a student's learning and engagement and how undergraduate teaching assistants impact student learning.

Results from this study are already informing teaching and learning at RC. This study reconfirmed for the College that there needs a clear vision for undergraduate teaching assistantships. Rather than being simply another form of employment, undergraduate teaching assistantships should be a learning experience for assistants and enhance educational quality for students, the teaching assistants and faculty members. There is more that RC can do to create quality teaching assistantships.

There is a need for ongoing exchange of ideas among faculty members, undergraduate teaching assistants and students about assistantships to continue to improve practice at the College. RC has already taken measures to improve the transparency and consistency in teaching assistant recruitment. Beginning in Fall 2008, the College has implemented a standard e-mail advertisement to students to advise them about all available assistantships for the semester. Interested students are then asked to contact the supervising faculty member to apply. As a next step, the College is exploring a more formalized orientation and training for undergraduate teaching assistants. This study also provides the means for faculty members to develop goals for assistantship use and improve practice within the RC context.

In addition to informing teaching and learning at RC this study has relevance for others who work or plan to work with undergraduate teaching assistants. The good practices that emerged in this study provide a foundation for faculty members in other contexts to reflect upon their experience and enhance

their practice. This study demonstrates that undergraduate teaching assistantships can enhance student learning and engagement and that they are a creative means of enhancing educational quality when faced with decreasing resources as is the case in contemporary higher education context. The good practices further the discussion concerning the employment of undergraduate teaching assistants and contribute to a growing body of literature concerning undergraduate teaching assistantships.

Results of this study open up avenues for future research both within the RC context and more generally. It would be highly beneficial to the College to examine how efforts to improve practice impact the experiences and learning of students, teaching assistants, and faculty members. Another study would be to examine the factors that contribute to inhibit the application of good practices, as well as how faculty member learn to employ good practices as they gain experience with undergraduate teaching assistantships.

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