Executive Summary Report on the 2008-2013 Teaching Assistant Surveys

The facts:

- Response rates have been somewhat variable across the eight TA surveys conducted (ranging from 65% S13 to 80% F07), with somewhat of a downward trend across surveys, reversing in S13.

- TAs have reported a very similar average number of hours per week that they work across the eight surveys (range 10-12 hours across F07 to S13). The # of hours spent on TA duties for TAs in the Humanities is consistently higher than the # of hours in the Social and Physical Sciences. In S13, the average # hours per week in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Physical Sciences was 10.4, 10.0, and 9.3, respectively. [Q7]

- A high percentage of TAs continue to report that they either strongly (58% F10, 61% S11, 53% S12, 52% S13) or somewhat agree (20% F10, 25% S11, 25% S12, 29% S13) that they expect teaching to play an important role in their long-term career plans. These numbers are higher for the humanities than other areas. [Q16]

The good news (sum of students who agreed with statement either strongly or somewhat) is that across all eight surveys:

- A relatively high percentage of TAs indicated they were satisfied with the TA opportunities available at Washington University (range 67% to 77%). [Q16]

- A relatively high percentage of TAs indicated they felt that the TA experience contributed to their training and education (range 71% to 78%). [Q16]

- Nearly all of the TAs felt prepared to respond to student work (range 94% to 96%). [Q22]

- The majority of TAs felt prepared to prepare teaching materials (range 83% to 94%). [Q22]

- The majority of TAs felt prepared to develop effective teaching methods (range 81% to 86%). [Q22]

- The majority of TAs felt prepared to mentor and advise undergraduates (range 78% to 91%). [Q22]

- The majority of TAs felt prepared to teach a discussion, lab or recitation section (range 80% to 92%). [Q22]

- The majority of TAs felt that their supervision by faculty was adequate (range 75% to 87%). [Q29] In the four most recent surveys, approximately half of the TAs reported meeting weekly with instructors or supervisors. [Q26]

- In the last six surveys, the majority of the TAs were aware of the workshops offered by the Teaching Center (89% F08, 91% S09, 89% F10, 91% S11, 96% S12, and 95% S13), which are higher percentages than either F07 (83%) or S08 (82%). [Q19]

  - Note: These high numbers indicate that the Teacher Center’s advertising approaches to ensuring awareness are continuing to be effective. They may also reflect the prominent role of the Teaching Center workshops into departmental requirements to fulfill the graduate school teaching requirement.

- The number of students who felt prepared to prevent and respond to Academic Integrity violations has been nearly constant, with a high of 78% in F10 and a low of 76% in both S12 and S13.

  - This suggests effectiveness of the Teaching Center’s enhanced coverage of Academic Integrity and Discrimination topics via the yearly TA orientation and workshops offered throughout the year. [Q22]

- The number of graduate students who need to use Telesis or Blackboard and still feel unprepared to do so dropped substantially from S12 to S13 (Telesis S12 = 29%, Blackboard S12 = 49%; Telesis S13 = 24%, Blackboard S13 = 17%). [Q23]

  - Note: The Lieberman Fellows supervised by the Teaching Center is running a number of Blackboard training opportunities specifically for graduate students. These sessions and the putatively greater ease of Blackboard seems to be helping graduate students use these tools.
Areas to consider:

- Across the first five surveys, approximately ¼ of the TAs continue to feel that the TA experience impeded their progress towards their degree (agreed with statement either strongly or somewhat; 26% F07; 25% S08; 24% F08; 26% S09; 27% F10). In S11 only 19% felt this way. However, in S12, 26% again felt that the TA experience impeded their progress, but that percentage dropped to 22% in S13. [Q16]
  - Note: The number of students reported that they feel that the TA experience impeded their progress is highest in the physical sciences, which actually have slightly less TA requirements. However, this may reflect the norms of the discipline.

- Across the first eight surveys, the percentage of TAs who reported that they were unaware of the Teaching Citation was relatively high (range 32% to 47%). Across the last four surveys (the only surveys in which the question was asked), a relatively small percentage of individuals reported participating in the Teaching Citation (18% F10, 16% S11, 15% S12, and 20% in S13), though it is not clear that we should expect a higher percentage in a research focused university. [Q19]
  - Note: Departments and the University do a good job with orientation of TAs and informing them about the Teaching Center, but we can do a better job informing the TAs about the Teaching Citation.

- Across all eight surveys, over 28% of TAs did not feel prepared to prevent and respond to discrimination and harassment. [Q22]
  - Note: The Teaching Center and Departments will need to continue to evaluate ways in which to enhance coverage of Academic Integrity and Discrimination topics via the yearly TA orientation and workshops offered throughout the year. However, it may also simply be reality that TAs do not feel prepared to handle such situations until they encounter them.

- Common survey comments in S13 [Q30, 31, 32] include:
  - The survey is a good idea, but why aren’t the TAs given feedback?
    - Note: The representatives on the Graduate Council are encouraged to distribute the executive summaries to the TAs and faculty in the departments. In addition, the e-mail inviting the TAs to participate in this survey includes a link to the executive summary from the previous survey.
  - There is not sufficient feedback from the course master to the TAs, both during the semester and at the end of the semester.
    - Note: TAs should be given feedback from the course instructors and the departments on a regular basis.
  - When TAs are overworked or treated unfairly, there is not a clear route for the TAs to vent their frustrations.
    - Note: It should be made clear to the TAs the multiple resources that are available to them if they have trouble with course instructors. These resources include the Director of Graduate Studies of the Department, the Chair of the Department, and the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School. There is the issue of anonymity and fear of retribution, however, when TAs do complain about a specific course instructor.