Undergraduate Teaching Assistants Can Benefit Everyone
by Kristi Lewis

The use of undergraduates as teaching assistants is not a new concept in higher education. Robert Pruett (1979) discussed the use of undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) back in the 1970s. Yet many universities, like JMU, are not large enough to have graduate programs that provide graduate teaching assistants, so often undergraduate students are tapped to serve in this important role. UTAs are used in many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, mathematics, nursing, and foreign languages (Herrman & Waterhouse, 2009).

The roles of UTAs can vary drastically. Often, UTAs assist instructors in leading class discussion or with in-class activities and group work. UTAs can be especially beneficial in large classes (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). UTAs can also serve as a resource to students, such as providing review sessions prior to an exam. And some UTAs can help instructors by tracking homework, taking attendance, and grading or checking work for correctness (Hogan et al., 2007).

For the last two years, I've had teaching assistants for my undergraduate health statistics course and just recently for my undergraduate epidemiology course. The UTAs attend each class session and assist with in-class activities. For both courses, the UTAs are available every Friday to answer questions regarding the work due that evening and they provide exam review sessions twice a week prior to each exam.

I select students who excelled in my section of the course academically and have an interest in the course content. According to Herrman and Waterhouse (2009), some common criteria for selecting UTAs include: 1) mastery of course material, 2) desire to work with peers, 3) interest in the course, 4) a professional demeanor, and 5) a good working relationship with the instructor.

While the literature on UTAs is limited, research suggests there are benefits of utilizing undergraduates as teaching assistants. Gordon and colleagues (2013) found that the use of UTAs increased student engagement. These benefits extend to the students enrolled in the course, the instructor, and the undergraduate(s) serving in the teaching assistant role.

Benefits for the students in the course include:

- Having a more "enriching learning experience" by offering various opportunities for engagement (Hogan et al., 2007)

- Observing their peers assisting with the learning process (Hogan et al., 2007)

- Being able to interact, ask questions, and seek assistance from a peer who may seem more approachable (Weidert et al., 2012)

Benefits for the course instructor include:

- Receiving feedback on the course ([Fingerson & Culley, 2001](#))

- Allowing a focus on teaching by reducing administrative tasks ([Herrman & Waterhouse, 2009](#))

- Increasing student satisfaction with the course ([Weidert et al., 2012](#))

Benefits for the UTAs include:

- Building a professional relationship with an instructor ([Weidert et al., 2012](#))

- Developing a greater appreciation for the role of an instructor ([Hogan et al., 2007](#))

- Gaining more in-depth understanding of the course content ([Herrman & Waterhouse, 2009](#))

With student enrollment and demands on instructors increasing, the use of UTAs might be an option for many of us. While the roles, expectations, and the selection process may vary based on the instructor, course, department, or college, UTAs benefit all involved, especially the students enrolled in the course.

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