

Three Points of View On Teaching Assistants

1 The Uses and Abuses of the Teaching Assistant —a Faculty Viewpoint of the English Department

by James Sledd

UT Austin's fall 1975 staff directory lists 86 regular faculty-members in the English Department—but also lists 157 graduate students who teach part-time while they work for advanced degrees. The regular faculty teach organized classes for about 2,700 juniors, seniors and graduates. The graduate students (called teaching assistants or TA's), however, teach about 10,000 freshmen and sophomores.

After a year or two, TA's may get a fancier title—assistant instructor or even instructor—but they are still only graduate students, not seasoned professionals. The University pays them a lot less than professors, because they have less experience in the classroom. They teach courses the regular faculty doesn't want to teach and that the administration doesn't want to spend much money to have taught by those better qualified. And they teach freshmen and sophomores in their critical first two years at UT Austin.

In the English Department, TA's (or whatever they may be called) teach over half the organized classes,

over three-fourths of all classes in English composition and almost 90% of the classes in ordinary freshman English—The University's basic writing course.

The English Department isn't alone in its abuse of the TA system. In a survey that I made last spring, some 500 TA's answered a questionnaire about their duties. Of that number, 326 TA's, representing over 40 de-

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partments, said they had full charge of the classes they taught. Most of those classes, but not all, were for freshmen and sophomores. Some (none in English) were for juniors and seniors. And in the faculty Senate on April 8, 1974, Professor James Stice, Director of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness, said that TA's were teaching over 60% of all undergraduate contact hours at UT Austin.

In other words, undergraduates at the State's premier University have

more contact with part-time student-teachers than they have with regular faculty because the faculty is busy with research and publication which earn raises, promotions and prestige. UT assigns its high-priced teachers to the students who least need teaching, not to the freshmen and sophomores who need help the most.

Just how good at teaching are the TA's? Some of them, a few, are quite competent. Nobody denies it and it would be a mistake to abandon the TA system altogether. But it's plain foolish to pretend (as a high administrator recently did) that the TA's are excellent teachers for undergraduates because they're closer to them in age. If that were true, then the faculty would have to abandon its favorite argument that only a good researcher can be a good teacher; and the administration would be honor-bound to fire a lot of professors and give *all* the undergraduate work to the TA's. Administrators and faculty praise TA's when the Legislature gets upset about the number of them teaching undergraduates. But you can get a better idea of the faculty's real opinion by looking at a *Course Schedule* to see who teaches the sugar plum courses—those the faculty enjoys. One such course is English 603, the freshmen course for the elite students of Plan II, the top 10% of the new en-

rollees. Only regular faculty who think of themselves as stars—teach English 603.

The hard truth is that no matter how intelligent and devoted TA's are, The University often doesn't offer them a fair chance to be good teachers. Many have to teach two classes. For example, the average number of classes for a TA in English now is about 1.75. Teaching two classes in English takes a TA over 30 hours a week; UT pays for 20. At the same time, professors have inflated Graduate School enrollment by requiring TA's to *take* not two courses but a minimum full load of three. That requirement brings The University millions for faculty salaries, because the Coordinating Board's formula for funding gives The University a lot more money when it enrolls a graduate then when it enrolls an undergraduate.

This requirement has gravely damaged teaching by TA's. *The Daily Texan* for October 6, 1973, reported that fifteen TA's from Classics said the requirements compromised both undergraduate and graduate education—for years TA's in English have been saying the same thing. Conditions are worse in the College of Humanities than elsewhere; but at least in the Humanities, TA's themselves admit that they are too overburdened to be both good teachers and good students. Even the regular faculty, when its interests are served by frankness, will admit that TA's as a group are not the best of teachers.

During the 70's, the writing ability of entering freshmen declined steadily, as their entrance examinations show. It's true that most of them pass freshmen English, but that's because the TA's get into trouble if they grade

severely. Any freshman who comes to class and refrains from assaulting his teacher can be almost certain of getting at least a C. Judgments are more realistic when such pressure is not applied. In a survey last spring, almost two-thirds of some 1,500 faculty respondents said that their undergraduates write poorly, and nearly 60% of over 1,500 students said that they didn't find freshman English at UT Austin even moderately helpful.

While the students' ability to write has declined, the English faculty's determination not to teach composi-

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tion has held firm. Beginning a bit before 1970, the English Department engineered a reduction in The University's English requirements from 12 hours to 9; and in the zeal of their arguments for that reduction, faculty members made some remarkable admissions. One of the most striking came from the chairman of the English Department himself. He said that his faculty had a “deep-seated detestation” for teaching composition—in plainer words, that English teachers don't want to teach the use of English.

Another spokesman for the reduced requirement said that the re-

duction wasn't an ideal proposal, but that the English program for freshmen and sophomores “had not given the support necessary for quality” and that adequate support for a twelve-hour program could not be expected, because upper-division and graduate programs had priority in “curriculum development, funding, and staffing.” Reducing the English requirement, the spokesman said, should at least cut down the huge number of English TA's (160 in the autumn of 1971), whom the Department could not adequately train. And the TA's did need training.

To translate the academic gobbledegook into plain English: the English Department's TA's often have not studied the subject they teach. They haven't studied rhetoric or composition before they come to UT; most of them don't study it much while they are here and, at least in the early 1970's, the course in supervised teaching which was supposed to prepare them was often a phony. Some TA's got credit for both teaching that course and taking it—at the same time.

The English Department still has one more hurdle for its TA's to get over. It frequently changes the textbooks and syllabi for the courses that the TA's have to teach, so that one year's preparation may not carry over to the next; and (though you'll find this hard to believe) the Department's bureaucrats don't make teaching assignments for the TA's until the weekend before classes start. This fall, for example, most TA's in English learned on the Sunday before Labor Day what courses they would begin to teach on the Tuesday after. A few of them learned still later, since they weren't hired until classes had begun. And that's not unusual in English. Last spring a young man told me that he had learned he'd



teach a composition course the next day. With twenty-four hours to prepare, he might at least have had time to read the textbook—if there had been a textbook; but none had been ordered. Nobody can be comfortable when there is so much evidence that the TA system is abused.

What can be done about it? Certainly the faculty can't be counted on to correct the situation, because—as *The Daily Texan* naively said on October 24, 1975—the TA's "are the core element" of The University as it presently exists. Without them, the faculty would have to change its established ways. The TA's just have to carry a great burden, in the professorial view, because professorial propagandists have seen to it that the criteria for professorial raises and promotions, and the means to a big academic reputation, are research and publication. If the TA's weren't abused, the professors would have to teach more undergraduates and write fewer articles which nobody reads; and then—to hear the professors talk—The University would no longer be first-class.

It is research and publication, the professors say, which give a university its status; the graduate school is the institution's heart. This amounts to saying, in a specific case, that the 300 or 400 registrations in the English Department's graduate courses are more important than the 10,000 registered freshmen and sophomores.

Nobody but a professor defending his academic turf could bring himself to such an unbalanced conclusion. It's plain that constructive action may have to come from outside The University—from decision-makers with power to enforce their decisions and

to frustrate professorial evasions.

Faculty spokesmen have been calling for an investigation of University budget-making, and since present budget-making depends on the widespread use of TA's, a meaningful investigation cannot ignore the TA system. Besides, if abuse is centered in a few departments, like the Department of English, the innocent departments should welcome a chance to see their innocence established.

Prominent members of both houses of the Texas Legislature, liberals and conservatives, have already said they're interested in the TA system as

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well as other determinants of The University's budget. Accordingly, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives Bill Clayton has asked for an investigation of the teaching assistant system at UT.

There is evidence of serious abuse of the TA system on the Austin campus—how widespread it is isn't clear. Their own professional interests prevent the faculty from reforming the system (which can be really useful when it is properly operated). Investigation by the Legislature will establish the facts, allay unjust, suspicious and needless fears, and pave the way for corrective action. If the alumni of the best University in the South and the Southwest believe that a great university, unlike a research

institute, must excel not only in research but in undergraduate education as well, they should make that conviction known to their senators and representatives in Austin. In that way they may insure that whoever teaches Texas' undergraduates, whether professor or TA, will be well-qualified and will have favorable circumstances for his momentous work.

J.S.

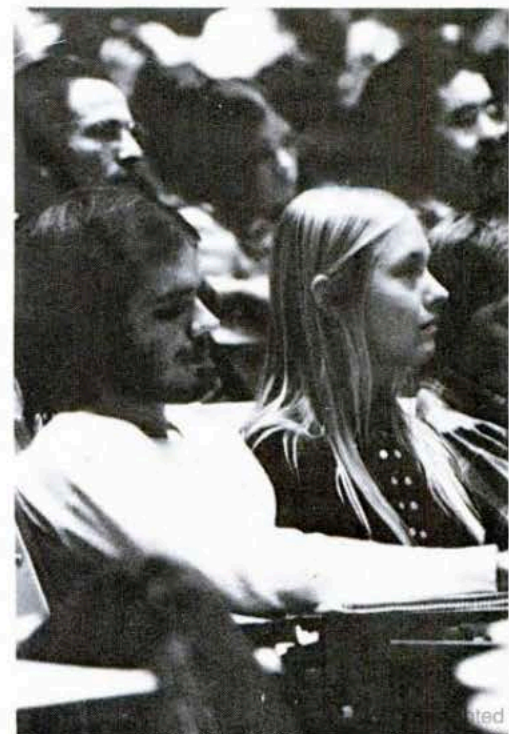
2 In Defense of the Teaching Assistant System

by Irwin C. Lieb

Mr. James Sledd has argued about TA's with force and passion. I think his main arguments are extravagant, that he urges on us an extreme and unreal alternative and that, unfortunately, he obscures the very issues he is most concerned about.

Mr. Sledd starts his argument from "facts" about TA's in the required, elementary courses in English. He says that the TA's in English are *a special case*. But then he leaves aside the most important facts of this special case to argue that TA's generally do not do a good (enough) job in teaching and that the faculty and administration in The University don't really care about undergraduate education.

In making his argument, Mr. Sledd has some of his "facts" wrong. I think his generalization has holes in it, and that his formulations impugn the motives of professors whose



interest in good teaching is as strong and well-tested as his own. This doesn't help to create the collegiality in which our genuine problems about teaching and TA's can be resolved. Let me try to show how this is so.

Mr. Sledd does not say that one of the lower division English courses he mentions is required for students who do not place out of elementary English. Many entering students are well enough prepared in reading and composition to bypass our lowest level course and go directly to the other courses which satisfy The University's requirement in English. Those who are not exempt from an initial remedial course have to take composition, and their work in that course is drill and practice; it requires supervision, review and correction. The TA's who offer it have, in almost all cases, provided good instruction; they are plainly better qualified than those secondary school teachers who did not teach their students enough basic English to let them place out of a remedial course in composition.

In its lower division composition courses, the Department of English provides instruction for students in all branches of The University. There are, as Professor Sledd notes, thousands of these students, and remedial and elementary work has to be arranged on a large scale. Our TA's classes are, I believe, conducted with patience and attentiveness in the greatest number of cases, and I think The University owes credit and appreciation to the TA's who provide that instruction. I regret that Professor Sledd does not note a recent survey of students having taken the elementary courses shows that, in a

very large majority, they have been satisfied and even pleased with their instruction.

Mr. Sledd is right to point out that there are TA's in departments other than English who are responsible for elementary courses. However, he does not point out that those other courses—by contrast with some of the English ones—are neither remedial nor required. They are elementary courses in foreign languages, for example, in mathematics, business, or in one of the social or natural

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sciences. The quality of the instruction in these courses is generally very good. Most TA's have the equivalent or more of a master's degree, and many of them have had prior teaching experience. They are not immature or even inexperienced, though they are, of course, not as experienced in teaching college students as senior members of the faculty. Good efforts are made to insure that only those who are well prepared are appointed to teaching assistantships and to clarify their understanding of the responsibilities involved. It is not true, as Mr. Sledd suggests, that nearly all the TA's in English are appointed at the last moment and that, until the last moment, they do not know what assignments they will

have. The truth is that some TA's are appointed immediately before the term begins because registration is not completed and only then do we know exactly how many classes we will need. Mr. Sledd has misled us by suggesting that what is true of a few cases is true of all the courses to which TA's are assigned.

Mr. Sledd is mistaken in claiming that TA's teach over 60 percent of all undergraduate contact hours. They teach over 60 percent of the contact hours in English, where, again, very large numbers of University students in all disciplines are enrolled in the elementary English courses required for the bachelor's degree. What is true of the Department of English, however, is not true of The University at large. This fall, for example, TA's taught 15.9 percent of the undergraduate student credit hours. Assistant instructors taught 4.4 percent of those credit hours. The remainder, nearly 80.0 percent of the undergraduate student credit hours, were taught by professors, associate professors, assistant professors, lecturers and instructors and, of course, these are the ranks which provide all the graduate and professional instruction as well. The percentages do not show that faculty members fail to teach undergraduates; just the opposite is the case.

It is extreme of Mr. Sledd to argue that professors do not want to teach undergraduates but want instead to devote themselves to research and publication. For Mr. Sledd, there is a harsh opposition between teaching and research; he pictures scholarly professors as not caring about the students who need their help the most. The motives of professors, as Mr. Sledd sets them out, are selfish and irresponsible; this is the venom in Mr. Sledd's argument.



Are there oppositions, is there a strain, between teaching on the one hand and research and publication on the other? For some of our faculty, I think there is. But in the case of many other faculty members there is no strain or the strain is very light. Mr. Sledd tries to frighten us by claiming that our children are dealt with inattentively by faculty members who are mainly concerned, not with teaching, but with securing recognition for their scholarly publications. He thinks, and he wants us to think, that The University of Texas is either a teaching institution or a research institute but not both. He has no patience with the aspiration of The University to teach and sponsor research as well as to be an especially fine teaching institution having major research inform our instruction.

The University of Texas is, without question, committed to fine undergraduate teaching. It is also committed to fine graduate teaching, and it is charged with promoting the growth and development of the arts and sciences. There are colleges whose whole educational mission is to provide undergraduate instruction. There are also a few research institutes—like the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton—that provide no instruction at all but are places where distinguished scholars do further work in their own fields. The University of Texas is not wholly an undergraduate college, nor is it a research institute. It has many missions and in the course of fulfilling them there are, of course, pulls and strains which we have to try to reduce. Some of the strains do concern the TA's, their academic programs, their teaching responsibilities and the conditions and

circumstances of their service. Unfortunately, Mr. Sledd oversimplifies them, and thereby obscures the serious issues about TA's in The University.

Why do we have TA's: We have TA's because we think that graduate students, suitably supervised, can teach certain courses well and because

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we think that the instruction they provide is a contribution to their own scholarly preparation. By teaching, graduate students also learn, and their students learn from them. Then too, TA appointments and fellowships help support graduate students, and we want to support them in order to encourage able young men and women to make careers in college teaching and scholarship.

The most serious issues are to decide how many Teaching Assistants we shall have, how many students and faculty we shall have, what courses are suitable for TA's and for faculty to teach, how TA's should be prepared for and supervised in their teaching, and how their assignments can aid a fine undergraduate program and contribute to their development as teachers and scholars. Mr. Sledd has taken us away from these issues. They are the ones, I think, we should be attending to. Mr. Sledd is exasperated with us. He has tried to appeal to our conscience, but he hasn't helped us to solve our problems or clear our heads.

I.C.L.

(Editor's note: Professor Sledd made this response to Dean Lieb's article.)

Documents justifying each of my assertions have been in the hands of legislative authorities for some time now; I believe I can prove that my charges are substantially correct and that Mr. Lieb's principal rejoinders are either inaccurate (like his repeated assertion that freshman English at UT Austin is "remedial") or irrelevant (like his confusion of contact hours with credit hours—measures as different as ham-bones are from sugar-bowls). But our real disagreement lies much deeper than debate about so many hours of this or that. I believe—but Mr. Lieb doesn't—that faculty and administration are sacrificing real education to the insatiable demands of an insensate research-machine and that their policies, if unchecked by Regents or Legislature, will help to divide the citizens of Texas into an ignorant peasantry, on one hand, and on the other an arrogant technocracy.

—James Sledd
The University of Texas at Austin
January 31, 1976

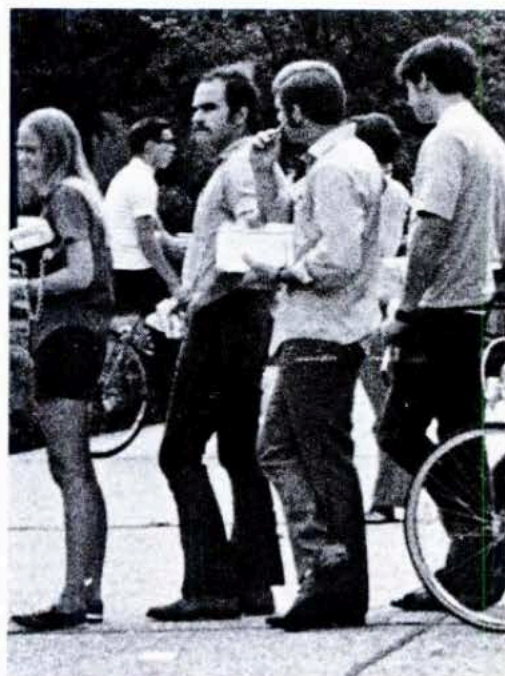
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The View from The Union of Graduate Student Workers

by Michael Rush

The teaching assistant has suddenly been “discovered.” Some argue that TA instruction is a deplorable practice; that TA's are unfit to teach and

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T.A. Cont.

that the faculty is shirking its duty. We disagree. TA's are, by and large, dedicated and skillful teachers who deserve a chance to practice their craft. They have been overutilized as a cheap supply of educational labor for an overgrown institution that's unable to hire enough full-time instructors. We feel the teaching assistant program is vital to The University but that it should change to meet the particular needs of graduate student teaching assistants and the basic goal of The University: to provide a quality education for *all* its students.

The situation TA's face is poorly understood. As both students *and* educational workers, they must complete their graduate education as well as support themselves and their families on a low salary (which starts at \$3,000 a year and approaches \$4,000 after 3-4 years). Technically, this job is half-time, 20 hours a week, but an average of 30 or more hours is not uncommon. Such a heavy workload makes serious graduate study impossible, diluting and delaying the training needed to be competitive in a tight job market. Some make the effort, but at the expense of their teaching. In addition, in many departments, the TA has no job security. A position may be available one semester but not the next. This economic vulnerability, particularly the dependence on the faculty to grant jobs, makes it difficult for TA's to raise criticisms or keep an independent perspective on their work.

The Union of Graduate Student Workers (UGSW) was formed to defend the interests of TA's and to be part of the ongoing process of criticizing University policies and priorities. It formed *as a union* because of the amount of *work* TA's do. They are virtually a hidden junior college faculty within The University doing the front line work: teaching students how to write, to speak a different language, to take notes and exams. Without the TA, The University in its present form would collapse.

The resolution of the TA "problem" goes further than simply requiring the faculty to teach lower division courses. Fundamental changes in University priorities must be made. More money must be available for *teaching* in all its forms, rather than channeled into overelaborate buildings or highly specialized research.

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We feel TA instructors have a part in quality education, because they are closer to students' lives and because an investment in their training benefits future students.

The UGSW feels the following proposals speak to the needs of TA's:

- 1) reduce TA workload to 20 hours a week or less by using more faculty and hiring more TA's
- 2) insure job security for TA's
- 3) insure TA's voice in curriculum development
- 4) allow TA's financed periodic relief teaching
- 5) give financial relief by making teacher retirement optional and waiving all tuition and building use payments. **M.R.**

Michael Rush, a graduate student at UT in the English Department, is completing his dissertation. He is a member of the Executive Committee for UGSW (the Union of Graduate Students).

Dr. James H. Sledd, a professor of English, completed his graduate work at The University of Texas in 1939. After teaching at several institutions, he returned to The University in 1964 to teach and has been a faculty member since that time.

Dr. Irwin C. Lieb, a professor of philosophy, is the former chairman of the Philosophy Department and former associate dean of graduate studies. He now serves as vice president and dean of graduate studies. **A**

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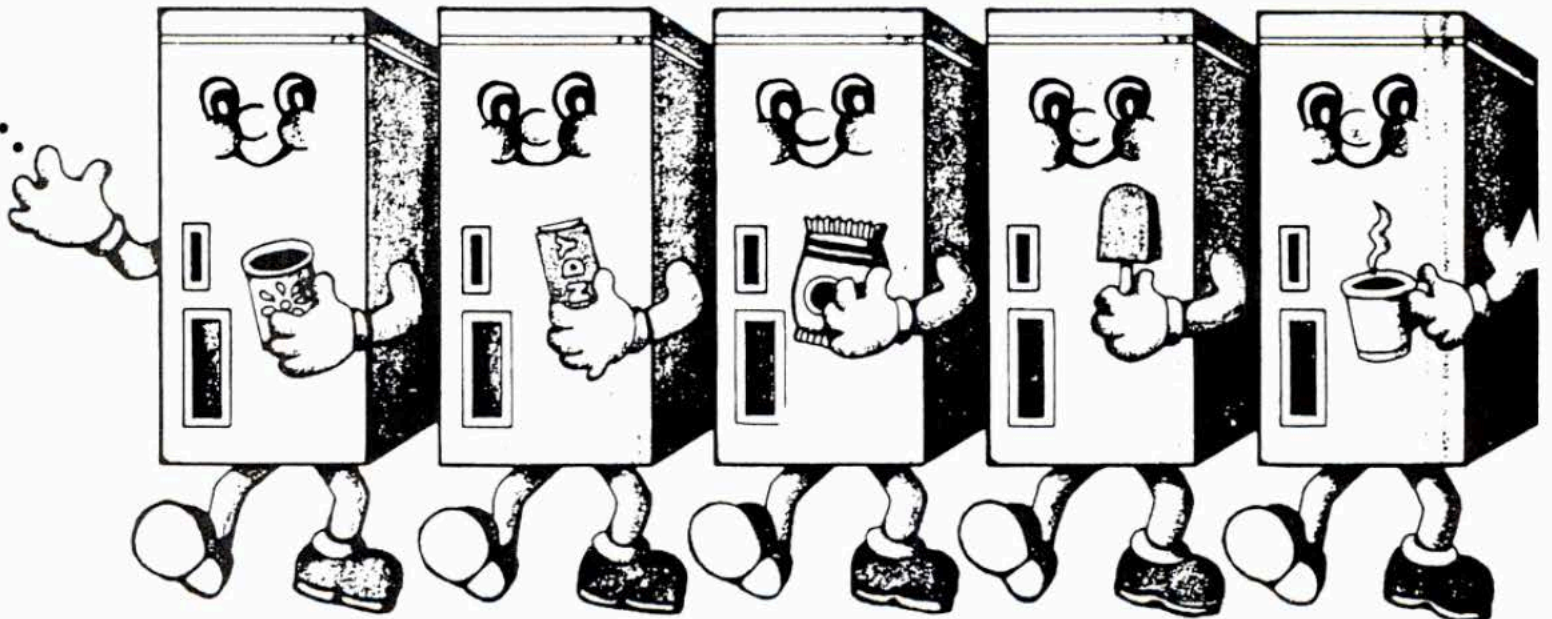
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