

# Episode 138: Bridging academia: Inside the role of teaching assistants

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UMN teaching assistants describe the joy and inevitable hurdles inherent in their positions.

**MICHAEL OFORI:** One of the greatest things anybody can do is to share knowledge and teaching provides you that opportunity to learn, sift through chunks of information, weave a kind of a consistent narrative and then distribute or share that knowledge to other people.

**ELISE TRAVIS:** Welcome to In the Know, the podcast brought to you by the Minnesota Daily. I'm Elise Travis and that was Michael Ofori, a graduate student and teaching assistant in the Hubbard School of Journalism which is today's topic: an inside look into the world of teaching assistants. We hear about TA's all the time, but unless you've been one, their world is as mysterious to you as it is to me. Sociology graduate student and TA for the last nine years, Ethan Johnson, says there is no clear outline that TAs can follow.

**ETHAN JOHNSON:** I mean, there's a lot of, I don't really know what I'm doing grading and I had a miserable experience because I didn't know what I was doing yet situations. Yeah, I would say, I mean it's been explained to me several different models for how to do this and it never none of them stuck. I just had to figure it out.

**TRAVIS:** Being a teaching assistant isn't just about grading papers and holding office hours; it's also about learning how to best teach others new information while also being a student yourself. It's about the impacts you can have in a student's life.

**JOHNSON:** For me, the best memories are always, not so much that happen in, with the bounds of the class, but it's students who reach out either in person at the end of the class, or through email saying that, you know, just say, hey, I really appreciate. I enjoyed my time. I thought you were a good instructor.

Can I come to office hours? You know, I'm not in your class anymore. But can I talk to you about this thing I've been thinking about? And so a lot of it is just anything that, you know, students reaching out and trying to build a connection that they're not forced to make. That's when you know that And again, being humble enough to know that, you know, you're not going to be everyone's best friend and it's not going to be like a situation where everyone is like a transformative experience for everyone in the class. But if you have just a few of those a semester, two or three of those a semester, it's really good for morale.

**TRAVIS:** However, there is still plenty of work to be done, as Isa Arriagada, a graduate student in Sociology, who was previously a lawyer in Chile and served as a teaching assistant for several law professors, says that their contracted 20 hours a week can

sometimes become 30. In addition to these teaching hours, juggling another 20 hours dedicated to research for personal projects poses its own set of challenges for TA's.

**ISA ARRIAGADA:** And so, yeah, before my experience at the U, I was a harsh grader. I was very judgmental. I would get upset with students who wouldn't comply because that was the law school environment in which I was, like, trained.

I've learned how to develop, for example, what I want from students. What are my learning outcomes? When I'm grading, I'm trying to grade in good faith, is that this student did the work. What happened here that, um, does the student deserve a second chance?

**TRAVIS:** When a teaching assistant takes on the role of the professor, students can expect a unique perspective on their learning experience. Although, depending on previous experiences, mastering the role of an instructor may not be something that clicks right away. As with everything, learning what works with students and what doesn't is essential in the teaching profession.

**JOHNSON:** So over several semesters, you kind of get a feel for, all right, the professor is saying that they want this. So for the students, this means I'm not going to tell them exactly what the professor said a lot of the time because that's going to confuse them.

It's too much information or something like that. So I'm trying to boil it down. All right, for this paper, for this exam, focus on these three things. Or you know, if you need to talk about your paper, do it in these two ways. You want to just be really clear and straightforward.

**TRAVIS:** If you are a first-time TA or considering becoming one, the most important takeaway is to remember that there is no singular formula for success in this role. It's not an equation where you can plug in A and B to get the answer. There are numerous variables that can change the formula at any given moment, so being flexible is important.

**ARRIAGADA:** I've learned to talk to different people, to not assume that everybody has a laptop or stable internet connection. That students come from very different backgrounds and you have to be very attentive, very thoughtful because otherwise you can, for example, give an assignment that half of the class understands, but the other half doesn't have the tools or don't come from the same privileged background. So you have to make an extra effort to bring everybody on board.

It's very hard because you have top notch, high quality students that did everything at the same minute. But others it takes for others you can take longer and it's not that they're not smart. It's only that nobody has thought in this way before. So I think that what I've learned is to try to strike a balance between being demanding and wanting students to learn and also being compassionate and have empathy and go baby steps with some of them.

**TRAVIS:** Students should feel comfortable talking to their TAs about their concerns during the semester especially since TAs have their own semester evaluations, too. Your feedback is always welcomed. Ofori says that he accounts for the student evaluations at the end of the semester and adapts each time.

**OFORI:** And so once you get evaluated, you know what these students said about you when you, when you talk to them and how that can also influence or shape your teaching going further. And so, I would say that my teaching experiences like keep growing from time to time.

**TRAVIS:** If you want to consider teaching as a career or a teaching assistant role, reach out to your department about opportunities or the TA in your next class. Many programs at the University of Minnesota like the College of Biological Sciences have slots for undergraduate and graduate students alike. I also spoke with Sarah Malmquist, Director of Undergraduate Studies and a professor in Biology, Teaching and Learning about the TA hiring process within her department.

**SARAH MALMQUIST:** So in biology, teaching and learning, we have a common hiring process that we came up with that we hope would increase equity and accessibility of being a TA. So there's one application for all of our courses.

So you don't have to know someone. You don't have to have a great relationship with the professor. You don't even have to have taken a specific class. You apply to this common pool, select kind of what your interest might be, and then a whole bunch of instructors will review the applications and try to make a position work for undergrad TAs at least based on their interests.

**TRAVIS:** Regardless of the course, the experiences and lessons of working as a teaching assistant at the U can extend beyond the classroom. Malmquist mentioned TAs in their department also have direct access to school supplies and snacks as a little bonus!

**MALMQUIST:** So I would encourage people, especially undergrads, if they're interested in teaching to give it a shot or to look into it more. And for grad students, um, A lot of them have to do it as part of the way to pay the bills, but there's always opportunities to do more teaching. And I would encourage people to check into it if it's something they enjoy or they're interested in a career in teaching.

**TRAVIS:** Every year, a number of students set their sights on becoming faculty members or working as professors, maybe to the surprise of some of their peers. The College of Biological Sciences is just one opportunity of many where students at the U can gain experience, pursue a degree, and learn from professors on the job about careers in education. It's a stepping stone, being the middle person between the student and the professor according to Johnson.

**JOHNSON:** Being a teaching assistant is how I learned how to teach in the first place. Right. So, it's probably a bit different now, but back when I started, um, teaching intro to sociology, we have a like a discussion section or a lab or whatever you want to say. And it's very much, you show up to an orientation day, which is mostly just the things you're supposed to do from a legalistic perspective. But then it's just like, all right. Have at it. Here's your classroom. Go figure out how to teach.

**TRAVIS:** This episode was written by Elise Travis and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening and feel free to leave us an email at [podcasting@mndaily.com](mailto:podcasting@mndaily.com) with comments or questions. I'm Elise and this is In the Know.