

# **TEACHING ASSISTANT STATEMENT**

## **Department of Ethnic Studies**

### **Department of Ethnic Studies Statement on Undergraduate Instruction**

Undergraduate instruction plays an important role in the activities of the Ethnic Studies Department. We are committed to offering substantive and challenging courses based on the best research in our field to our undergraduate students. As representatives of the department, we expect teaching assistants to conduct themselves responsibly and professionally, to advance the pedagogical aims of supervising instructors, and to hold students to high standards of behavior and performance.

As instructors of record, supervising professors take responsibility for determining the content of lectures, the nature of reading and writing assignments, and the establishment of grading standards. The first responsibility of teaching assistants is to carry out the assignments of the supervising professor. Teaching assistants must attend all lectures and communicate the goals, methods, and content of the course to students by their leadership of classroom discussions, their comments on written assignments, and their grades. Teaching assistants must set and keep scheduled office hours and try to equip students with the skills and information they need to do well in the course.

Lower division courses in ethnic studies attract students in their first quarters of college work, as well as advanced upper division students. We enroll students who will take only one ethnic studies course during their entire college career as well as students who will major in ethnic studies. Some students enter our courses with a particular attachment to or a particular defensiveness about their ethnic identity or the identities of others. All these facets of the course can make teaching difficult. At the same time, our courses generally generate great enthusiasm and often exceptional student work because the things we teach help people better understand the world in which they live, because we raise issues often overlooked by other departments, and because we present a challenging range of readings, lectures, and assignments.

Precisely because so much is at stake in our courses, it is essential to maintain a respectful, professional, and scholarly atmosphere. Students may want to air opinions and perspectives outside the purview of the lectures and readings. They need to see that we are engaged in scholarly inquiry, not running an all-purpose public forum for venting unsubstantiated opinions. We need constantly to steer student discussions back to the lectures, readings, and assignments, to teach students the skills required for scholarly analysis and argument, to base their oral and written arguments on evidence, analysis, and logic. Our classes work best when we make it clear that we know more together as a group than we do as individuals, when we view different perspectives as valuable resources but at the same time demonstrate respect for the common enterprise in which we are engaged. We welcome principled and respectful

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disagreements; we think everyone has the potential to teach us something. We are not afraid of the truth. But we are not interested in antagonisms that will not help us say true and useful things about our research objects.

We respect first-person voices and exploration of suppressed perspectives, but the nature of scholarly inquiry requires us to see things from both “close-up” and “far away.” It is not our responsibility to “convert” our students to any opinion, but we are responsible for exposing our students to methods and practices that value complex and critical thinking, that promote disciplined reading and research. We are trying to create a culture of work and achievement, a culture of curiosity and courtesy.

Teaching can be a difficult job. You are exposed and vulnerable as an individual when you teach in unique ways. Yet the more you think of yourself as isolated, the harder it will be to do your job. Scholarship is often conducted in solitude, but never in isolation. Your job as a teaching assistant is to serve as a go-between connecting the students with the instructor of record. You can play a valuable role in teaching the students how to read in mature and productive ways. Students often think that our job is to teach them “what” we know, but a more valuable endeavor is teaching them “how” we know.

Scholarship is a social and collective activity. As a teaching assistant you face the surveillance of your supervising professor and department, and you are very visible to the students in your discussion sections; sometimes you are the only “faculty” member with whom they have direct contact, you become the university to them; you get evaluated by both your students and your supervising professor; you receive complaints from students about their grades; twice a week you are in front of a classroom trying to instigate a productive discussion. All of this may make you feel very visible. But in truth, the most important things you do as a teacher will be invisible to most people. You are planting seeds that will blossom far down the road. The ultimate test of the course is not whether each class section is active or enjoyable, not whether students get the grades they desire, and not whether you cover “x” number of ideas and issues. The final product of the course is the conversation and the impact it has on our lives, the lives of our students, and the lives of people who never make it onto a university campus. Your job is to push the conversation along in the best way you can so that all of us will be changed for the better by what happens in the course.

# TEACHING ASSISTANT GUIDELINES

## Department of Ethnic Studies

### Practical Issues

1. Know the location and layout of the room where your section will meet before the first day of class.
2. Learn your students' names. Hand out index cards for their names, majors, year in school, home town, and special interests.
3. Announce your office location, office hours, and contact information. Use UCSD e-mail only.
4. Keep a class roster in alphabetical order. Make a back-up copy. Record attendance, contributions to class discussions, and incidents of disruptive behavior in lecture or discussion in your records.
5. Don't give up on anybody. All students are entitled to be treated with respect, to receive information on how they can improve even if they are doing badly in the course.
6. Encourage students to get to know each other by having them work in groups some of the time.
7. Require students to come to class when it starts and stay until the end.
8. Remind students that they are not invisible in lectures, that talking, passing notes, playing video games on laptops, and reading newspapers is not acceptable lecture behavior.
9. Make very clear procedures for evaluation and grading.
10. Hold your office hours in your assigned office, not elsewhere on campus.
11. Create a positive and courteous atmosphere. Don't allow students to display contempt for one another.
12. Attend weekly teaching assistant meetings, participate in shaping the course.

### Pedagogical Issues

1. Do the job you were hired to do.
2. Teach the people who are actually in your class.
3. Teach "how" you know, not "what" you know.
4. Try not to let each class be an atomized unit, maintain continuity by referring to previously discussed concepts and information.
5. Don't be afraid of thought, reflection, and silence. Students who talk the most or talk the fastest are not necessarily learning or teaching anything of value.
6. Avoid assumptive teaching, i.e. speaking to the two or three good students who seem to be getting it and ignoring the rest, simply "assuming" that if a few students are learning that everyone is learning.
7. Hand back student work as rapidly as possible. Provide as many helpful comments as possible.
8. Use a variety of techniques
9. Try to get everyone used to participating in discussions. You can insist that everyone talks once before anyone talks twice. You can call on people who have not raised their hands. You can assign small groups of students to make presentations to serve as the basis for discussions.
10. Don't feed answers to the students. They will learn best what they learn to see for themselves.

## **CAMPUS RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS**

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- TAs should become familiar with the UCSD **Principles of Community**, as well as campus policies on sexual harassment and confidentiality of student records. These are available on the web at <http://ctd.ucsd.edu>. The University Guide for dealing with academic dishonesty, which outlines the principles and procedures set up by the UCSD Academic Senate, is on the web at <http://ugr8.ucsd.edu/judicial/ad-guide.html>
- TA, Reader, and Associate positions are covered by a collective bargaining agreement between the University and the UAW. The agreement, including applicable benefits, may be found at:  
[http://atyourservice.ucop.edu/employees/policies\\_employee\\_labor\\_relations/collective\\_bargaining\\_units/academicstudentemployees\\_bx/complete\\_contract.pdf](http://atyourservice.ucop.edu/employees/policies_employee_labor_relations/collective_bargaining_units/academicstudentemployees_bx/complete_contract.pdf)
- **The Center for Teaching Development (CTD)** gives each new TA a complimentary copy of their **Graduate Teaching Assistant Handbook**. It contains important and useful suggestions for improving teaching skills, grading procedures, etc. New TAs are required to attend orientation meetings held at the start of the Fall quarter. CTD has a very friendly and helpful staff who can suggest teaching techniques and offer useful advice. It is a UCSD requirement that a CTD consultant contact every new TA to make arrangements to observe you teach and to meet with you to suggest ways in which you can improve your teaching. TAs should take advantage of this useful service! Also, the Senior TA is always available for questions and problem-solving. The TA who taught your same course from last year can also be a most helpful contact.