

Teaching Assistant Handbook for Undergraduates

Department of Mathematics
Columbia University in the City of New York

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Help Rooms

The Mathematics Department maintains two Help Rooms, established as spaces for providing one-on-one and small group sessions to undergraduates who seek assistance in mathematics. Help Rooms are staffed concurrently by undergraduate and graduate Teaching Assistants throughout semester.

Hours of Operation

❖ **Barnard Help Room – 502 Milstein Center for Teaching and Learning**

Mon – Thurs: 10 am to 10 pm

Fri: 10 am to 4 pm

For help with: College Algebra, Calculus I, Calculus II, and Calculus III

❖ **Columbia Help Room – 406 Math**

Mon – Thurs: 9 am to 6 pm

Fri: 9 am to 4 pm

For help with: Calculus IV and higher Math

Teaching Assistant Duties

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) are hired on a part-time, semester by semester basis. Continued employment depends on performance, attendance, and punctuality.

Individual duties required from each TA will vary depending on many factors, such as the course level, size, and instructor needs. Undergraduate TA positions involve, on average, *5 hours per week* of effort.

There are three main duties of Undergraduate TAs in the Mathematics Department:

1. Weekly Office Hours in the help room (2 hours/week, fixed)
2. Grading homework (2 hours/week, on average)*
3. Answering emails and communicating with students and instructor (1 hour/week, on average)*

**Note that actual hours may vary from week to week. Some weeks TAs may have no grading, followed by a week of 4 to 5 hours of grading. The above average is based on the total number of hours spent over the duration of a semester.*

Qualifications

Applicants must meet the following criteria to be considered for a TA position:

1. Must be a **CURRENTLY ENROLLED, FULL TIME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT** of Columbia College (CC), School of Professional Studies (SPS), General Studies (GS) or the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS). Due to University policy, we regretfully cannot hire students from Barnard, Teacher's College, or other schools.

2. Successful completion of the class s/he wishes to support with a minimum grade of “A”. The most recent copy of a student’s **unofficial transcript** should be submitted as verification along with an application form. An unofficial transcript may be printed from your [SSOL](#) account.
3. A printout of your **Academic Profile** from SSOL indicating “full time” enrollment status for the semester of desired employment. Part time and half time students are not eligible to TA.
4. The names and contact information of two academic references that are familiar with the applicant’s academic work and/or teaching skill.

Hiring Process

Application ¹

All applications must be submitted to the Academic Coordinator in Room 410 Math. Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis, but are reviewed in the following manner:

1. A pool of potential TAs will be identified before the beginning of each semester, once grades from the previous term are released. This occurs:
 - a. For Fall appointments, in late May
 - b. For Spring appointments, in late December
2. Applicants will be informed of the completeness of their submission or, if necessary, advised as to which pieces of documentation are missing.
3. Qualified applicants who can fulfill a need for the department will be contacted for an interview.
4. Applications that are not selected for a TA position will be kept for consideration in future semesters.

Screening

A brief screening will be conducted by the Academic Coordinator. At the screening, a brief overview of the program will be given. Pay rate, scheduling, and expectations regarding time and attendance will be provided. In addition, the department will look to ensure that the potential TA can communicate clearly and effectively.

Hiring

Applicants will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- ❖ Grade in the course(s) for which the applicant requests to work
- ❖ Interpersonal skills / ability to communicate effectively
- ❖ Prior teaching or similar experience
- ❖ Schedule and hours of availability

A final decision will be made after careful consideration of the application, screening, and instructional needs of the department. Students who are not selected are welcome to apply again for employment in subsequent semesters, as the department’s needs change each semester.

¹ To download and complete an application, please visit:
<http://www.math.columbia.edu/programs-math/undergraduate-program/teaching-assistant-resources/>

The hiring process can often extend into the first or second week of the academic semester, so please be patient while final decisions are reached by the department.

Continuing Appointments

The Department prefers to re-hire TAs when possible, provided the TA has demonstrated acceptable performance. To be re-hired, current TAs need only submit an **unofficial transcript** and **enrollment status verification** (for full time student status) to the Academic Coordinator in Room 410 after final grades are released each semester:

- ❖ To be rehired for the Fall, submit your transcript/enrollment in late May
- ❖ To be rehired for the Spring, submit your transcript/enrollment in late December

Evaluations

TAs are evaluated at the end of each semester as part of the course evaluation process. Student comments are combined with instructor and staff feedback to determine if any potential problems exist that would prevent rehiring in subsequent semesters.

Attendance

All TAs must sign in for their scheduled Help Room hours each week, using the materials provided. Continued tardiness or absence from Help Room hours may be grounds for dismissal.

Appointment Details

Undergraduates who are hired by the Department receive an official University appointment as a “Teaching Assistant III”. This is a part-time (5 hours/week), Student Officer position. You may receive compensation from other departments on campus, provided that your total workload does not exceed 20 hours per week. This will generally be paid to you as “additional compensation”. Please notify the department IMMEDIATELY if you accept another position on campus, or if you are already employed with another department at the time of hiring.

All new Undergraduate TAs are required to fill out a hiring packet with the Department’s Human Resources Manager in Room 509 Math in order to be placed on payroll. **Required paperwork must be completed within two weeks of the start of your TA work, or you will not be allowed to continue.** Exceptions will only be made in unusual circumstances, and are handled on a case-by-case basis.

Undergraduate TAs receive a salary of \$1,800 per semester (\$3,600 for the academic year). This is paid on a semi-monthly schedule (15th and the last day of each month) over the duration of the appointment (Sept 1 - May 31 for academic year appointments, Sept 1 – Dec 31 for Fall only appointments, or Jan 1 – May 31 for Spring only appointments). TAs are strongly encouraged to enroll in [direct deposit](#) as the preferred method for receiving paychecks.

If the department determines that a TA fails to meet the demands of the course or instructor, or the TA experiences a change in personal circumstances that prevents continued employment, the department may seek to replace a TA at any point during the semester.

Expectations

Students should refer to the *Faculty Handbook* (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/handbook/>) for information on University employment. Students are held to the same standards as faculty officers of instruction and research with regards to University policies and procedures.

- ❖ **Availability:** Students have limited time to work with TAs, and therefore expect each TA to be present, punctual, and fully attentive during scheduled help room hours. Undergraduate students with significant time restrictions should not accept TA offers. TAs must be present on campus by the first day of classes, and must not leave at the end of the semester until all their TA responsibilities are fulfilled (unless they have been given explicit permission by their course instructor).

If you accept a TA position, you are expected to devote sufficient time (5 hours per week, on average) during each term of your appointment. Additional academic or personal activities are certainly encouraged, but should not detract from the hours required to TA. Furthermore, TA availability should match the needs of their assigned course, since roughly half of the duties involve assisting students in the Help Rooms.

TAs who experience a change in availability during the course of a semester and can no longer meet the time requirement should consult with the Academic Coordinator immediately.

- ❖ **Grading:** Instructors and students expect that TAs grade assigned work in a timely manner. If the amount of grading proves to be too much in any given week, the TA should discuss this with the instructor to find a solution (for example, grade only a certain subset of problems, etc.).
- ❖ **Help Room Hours:** Undergraduate TAs are scheduled for 2 hours per week in one of the Help Rooms. During the first week of classes, TAs should discuss their help room hours with their course instructor and notify the department's Academic Coordinator of the hours they would like to work. The department will attempt to accommodate the needs of the majority of students; however, it is expected that the Help Rooms are staffed continuously and thus some students may be scheduled for hours other than initially requested.
- ❖ **Course Planning:** TAs should expect to meet with the course instructor within the first week or two of a semester to discuss expectations and duties. In some cases, instructors will ask TAs to attend a class session for introductions. If you do not receive any information from your assigned instructor by the end of the add/drop period, please notify the department.
- ❖ **Staff Meetings:** Some instructors may hold occasional staff meetings with TAs. These meetings are important for organizing, planning, and sharing teaching tips and other critical course information. If requested, attendance at such meetings with the instructor is required.
- ❖ **Textbooks:** The Department has a limited number of course textbooks available for TAs, but unfortunately cannot provide textbooks to everyone. TAs of the same course are encouraged to

share or borrow textbooks from other TAs, or from the course instructor.

- ❖ **Absence/Tardiness:** Absences and tardiness disrupt the learning environment for other students. A consistent pattern of absence or tardiness may result in termination of employment.

TAs are required to be present for their scheduled Help Room hours. If another commitment conflicts with your Help Room hours, notify the course instructor *and* Academic Coordinator at least one week in advance. In case of illness or other emergency, provide as much advance notice as possible. If there is a planned absence, days or hours can be swapped with another TA. If you make such an arrangement, please notify your course instructor and Academic Coordinator of the temporary schedule.

- ❖ **Communication:** TAs are required to check email regularly and respond to the course instructor, department staff, or student inquiries in a timely manner -- generally within one or two business days. Consistent delays in responding put students at a disadvantage for learning course material and will not be tolerated.

- ❖ **Conflicts of Interest:** TAs are expected to disclose any possible conflicts of interest due to previous or present personal relationships with students in the course, and should never accept money or personal gifts from other students.

TAs should not grade the work of anyone they are closely related to, or with whom they have a close personal relationship. If you are assigned to TA a course with students whom you know well, please notify the instructor immediately. Instructors can set up procedures, such as having other TAs grade the student's work, in order to safeguard all parties.

- ❖ **Confidentiality:** By necessity, TAs have limited access to academic information of other students. Academic information should only be discussed with the individual student or course instructor. Sharing information protected under [FERPA](#) to any outside parties will result in serious consequences.

Important Contacts

Academic Coordinator

- ❖ Shay Bailey
410 Mathematics
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212-854-2432

Human Resources Manager

- ❖ Abby Dove
509 Mathematics
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Director of Undergraduate Studies

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