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Help Rooms
The Mathematics Department maintains two Help Rooms, established as places for providing one-on-one and small group sessions to undergraduates who seek assistance with difficult academic content that may arise in their mathematics course(s). These Help Rooms are staffed by both undergraduate and graduate Teaching Assistants.

Hours of Operation
- **Barnard Help Room – 333 Milbank (Walk-in only) – Calculus I to III and lower Math**
  - Mon – Thurs: 10 am to 10 pm
  - Fri: 10 am to 4 pm

- **Columbia Help Room – 406 Math (Walk-in only) – Calculus IV and higher Math**
  - Mon – Thurs: 9 am to 6 pm
  - Fri: 9 am to 4 pm

Teaching Assistant Duties
Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) are hired on a part-time, semester by semester basis. Continued employment of TAs is contingent upon a positive performance evaluation, attendance record, and punctuality during the previous semester.

Individual duties required from each TA will vary depending on many factors, such as the course level, size, and instructor’s needs. Typically, an Undergraduate TA position involves an average of 5 hours per week.

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

1. **Weekly Office Hours in the help room (2 hours/week), and**
2. **Homework grading (3 hours/week, on average)**

Qualifications
Applicants must meet the following criteria to be considered for employment:

1. **Must be CURRENTLY ENROLLED as a student of Columbia College (CC), Continuing Education (CE), General Studies (GS) or the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS).** Due to University restrictions, we cannot hire students from Barnard, Teacher’s College, or other schools.

2. **Successful completion of the class s/he wishes to support with a grade of A (or higher).** A recent copy of the student’s **unofficial transcript** must be submitted as verification. An unofficial transcript may be printed from your SSOL account at any time.

3. **The names and contact information of two academic references that are familiar with the applicant’s academic and/or teaching skill.**
Hiring Process

Submission of Applications

All applications must be submitted to the Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant in Room 410 Math. Applications will be accepted any time, 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. Applicants who meet the minimum criteria and can fulfill a need for the department will be contacted for an interview.
4. Those not selected will be notified that their application has been placed on hold or rejected.

Interviews

Interviews will be conducted by the Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant. At the interview, a brief overview of the program will be given. Pay rate, scheduling, and expectations regarding time and attendance will be discussed. In addition, the interviewer will look for the applicant’s ability to communicate effectively and clearly.

Hiring Decisions

Applicants will be evaluated for hire based on the following criteria:

- Applicability of prior experience to the position
- Grade in the course(s) they would like to TA for
- Interpersonal skills / ability to communicate effectively
- Scheduling and hours of availability (the Department prefers to hire TAs who are able to work a single 2-hour stretch in the Help Room each week, as opposed to small blocks of time throughout the day)

After consideration of the above criteria, as well as department and instructor needs, a final decision will be made. Possible outcomes will consist of an offer of employment, holding the application on file for future consideration, or rejection of the application. Students who are rejected are welcome to apply again for employment in subsequent semesters.

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

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1 To download and complete an application, please visit: [http://www.math.columbia.edu/programs-math/undergraduate-program/teaching-assistant-resources/](http://www.math.columbia.edu/programs-math/undergraduate-program/teaching-assistant-resources/)
Continuing Appointments

The Mathematics Department expects to re-hire TAs where possible, provided the TA has received a positive performance evaluation and has consistently demonstrated good attendance and punctuality. This encourages a mix of both experienced and new TAs.

To be re-hired, current TAs must submit an unofficial transcript to the Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant in Room 410 after final grades are released each semester:
- To be rehired for the Fall, submit your transcript in late May
- To be rehired for the Spring, submit your transcript in late December

Evaluations

The Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant will prepare a brief evaluation concerning areas such as weekly attendance and work attitude. S/he also gathers feedback and performance evaluations from course instructors and Courseworks for each TA for both recordkeeping and rehiring purposes. TAs who fail to meet the standards outlined in this handbook may not be renewed for future semesters.

Weekly Attendance Sheets

TAs must use the weekly attendance sheet to ensure that the Mathematics Departments Administrators know which TAs are showing up at their scheduled Help Room hours and the number of students served at a specific time.

TAs also need to remember, and should remind students at the start of each session, to write their names, course(s) tutored and signatures on the weekly attendance sheets for each walk-in session.

**Example:** A student stays for two consecutive hours, the first session at 1:00 pm and the second session at 2:00 pm – the student must write his/her name, course(s) and sign for both hours on the weekly attendance sheet column in order to ensure accurate recordkeeping for the help room.

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 level 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 if you accept another position on campus.

Currently, undergraduate TAs receive $1,800 a semester. This is paid out on a semi-monthly schedule (on the 15th and the last day of each month) over the duration of the appointment (Sept 1 – Dec 31 for Fall appointments, and Jan 1 – May 31 for Spring appointments). TAs are strongly encouraged to enroll in direct deposit as the preferred method for receiving their paychecks.

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 the payroll.
**Expectations**

**A Teaching Assistant position is a serious job!** As an employee of the Mathematics Department and Columbia University, you are expected to uphold the standards and integrity of the policies and procedures which come with being a representative of the University.

Refer to the *Faculty Handbook* ([http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/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 his/her TA, and therefore have the right to expect each TA to be present, punctual, and fully attentive during 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 the course instructor).

  If you accept a TA position, you are expected to have sufficient time (5 hours per week) during each term of your appointment. If you have additional commitments, you must prioritize and make sure that you have enough time to commit to this position. Furthermore, TA availability should match the needs of their course, since roughly half of the duties involve helping students in the Help Rooms.

  Students who experience a drastic change in availability during the course of the semester and can no longer meet the position’s time requirement should consult with the Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant immediately.

- **Course Planning:** Instructors usually contact TAs the week before classes start, or in some instances, they may wait until the first week of classes to have an organizational meeting. If you have not heard from the instructor for whom you are assigned to TA by the first week of classes, please email them and alert the Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant.

- **Staff Meetings:** Many classes hold occasional staff meetings with their instructor and TAs. All TAs (graduate and undergraduate) are expected to be present during these staff meetings, unless excused with the permission of the course instructor. These meetings are important for organizing, planning, and sharing teaching tips and other critical course information.

- **Textbooks:** The Mathematics Department has a limited number of available textbooks, compared to the number of TAs. The department is unable to provide free textbooks to everyone. TAs of the same course are encouraged to share or borrow textbooks from other TAs, or from the course instructor.

- **Help Room Hours:** Undergraduate TAs are required to staff the Math Help Rooms 2 hours per week. These help room hours are held in 333 Milbank Hall (Barnard), and Math 406 (Columbia). On or before the first week of classes, TAs should discuss their help room hours with the course instructor for whom they are assigned to TA.
If multiple TAs are assigned to the same class, please coordinate your help room hours with the course instructor and other TAs to avoid overlapping schedules in order to better accommodate student needs.

- **TAs Absence/Tardiness:** Students depend on their Teaching Assistants (TAs) to be available according to the posted schedules; absences and tardiness disrupt the learning environment. As a result, attendance is carefully monitored. A consistent pattern of absence, tardiness or negative work ethic may result in termination of employment.

TAs are expected to be present for all their scheduled Help Room hours. If another commitment conflicts with your Help Room hours, you must tell the course instructor and Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant at least a week in advance, and find another TA to cover for you. In case of illness or other emergency, you must tell the course instructor and Undergraduate Program Administrative Assistant as soon as possible about the unexpected absence, and may be asked to provide documentation of the illness or emergency.

- **Communication:** TAs are **required** to check their email regularly and respond to the course instructor, other TAs, the Math department staff, or student inquiries in a timely manner---generally within one or two business days.

- **Conflicts of Interest:** TAs are expected to inform the course instructor of 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.

- **Student Records Confidentiality:** TAs have access to personal and academic records in order to perform their duties. Per Department and University policy and Federal law, TAs must actively protect student’s privacy and confidentiality at all times.

**Best Practices**
The following is a list of useful tips and guidelines, which have been shared by previous Teaching Assistants and faculty members:

- **Be Prepared.** Reviewing the sections in the textbook and the homework assignments for your assigned course/section is essential to answering student questions efficiently. While students from other courses and sections will attend your help room hours and ask you questions, be especially well prepared to answer questions from your assigned course and section.

- **Be Consistently Present.** Being consistently present during your help room hours is an essential part of the TA job. Instructors, other TAs, and students appreciate when they can rely on you.
Be On Time. Show up on time for your help room hours, and grade your assigned homework in a timely manner. This ensures that students can get quick feedback on their work. If the amount of grading proves to be too much in any given week, the TA should discuss this with the instructor and formulate an agreed upon plan (slightly longer time to finish grading, grade only a certain subset of problems, etc.).

Be Fully Attentive. When you are working in the help room, you are expected to be fully attentive. You are there for students who need help. You should not create the perception of “detached unapproachability” by reading a book, working on your computer, talking on your cellphone, or working on your own assignment, as it makes students feel awkward and hesitant to disturb you. Being attentive is a courtesy to the students, and a reflection of the professionalism with which you handle yourself and with which you represent the department and the University.

Demonstrate Time Management: Being a good TA requires balancing your job with your personal and academic life and other commitments. This is not easy; but by accepting a TA job, you are committing to put in enough time to perform your duties. Work around your scheduled help room hours. Cancelling or not showing up during your help room hours because you have an assignment to do or event / seminar / interview to attend are not acceptable excuses. Students count on you to be present and visible during your help room hours, as you are their first line of contact when it comes to mastering their course content.

Demonstrate Professionalism. TAs must dress appropriately for professional interactions, and maintain a professional distance from making physical contact with students. Having open conversations or making negative comments about any student’s abilities is inappropriate.

Direct Policy Questions to the Instructor. You are solely there to help with mathematics, not procedural questions. Unless your instructor has said otherwise, this includes any grade complaints, including homework that you graded. Students can also address questions to the Calculus Director or the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

Help Students Answer Their Own Questions. Try to ask leading questions, rather than telling students how to solve problems, and always avoid just giving answers. Try to work problems similar to homework problems, but not the homework problems themselves. After you help a student with a problem, suggest a similar problem for the student to do on his/her own.

Divide Your Attention Between Students. If more than one student is present, go around helping each student for a brief period—-one question, say—-and then give him/her something to work on while you talk to other students. Come back later and see how he/she did, and what other questions he/she might have. Make sure all students have a chance to discuss their questions, and try not to keep any waiting too long.

Take Initiative: Be alert to problems that you see around you, and take the initiative to identify other struggling students from different courses – not simply being closed to any students other than the ones from the course you are assigned to. You can take the initiative to notify the
course instructor if you notice that there are a lot of students having a hard time understanding specific course content so that it can be explained in greater detail in class.

- **Mentor other TAs:** A good TA mentors other TAs (new or continuing). Experienced TAs should help other TAs by sharing tips about how to handle difficult concepts or difficult students.

- **Be positive:** You are likely a TA because you like Math, you like teaching and learning, and you enjoy helping other students learn. Enjoy your TA work, be positive, and share your enthusiasm for learning and for the field! Be supportive of the students, textbook, instructor, and other TAs: students learn better and enjoy the courses more when they see that everyone is on the same side. Try explaining the material in more than one way, and in different ways from the textbook and class. Different explanations resonate with different students. One of the most exciting parts of mathematics—especially introductory mathematics—is the many different correct paths to an answer.
Important Contacts

Undergraduate Administrative Assistant

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