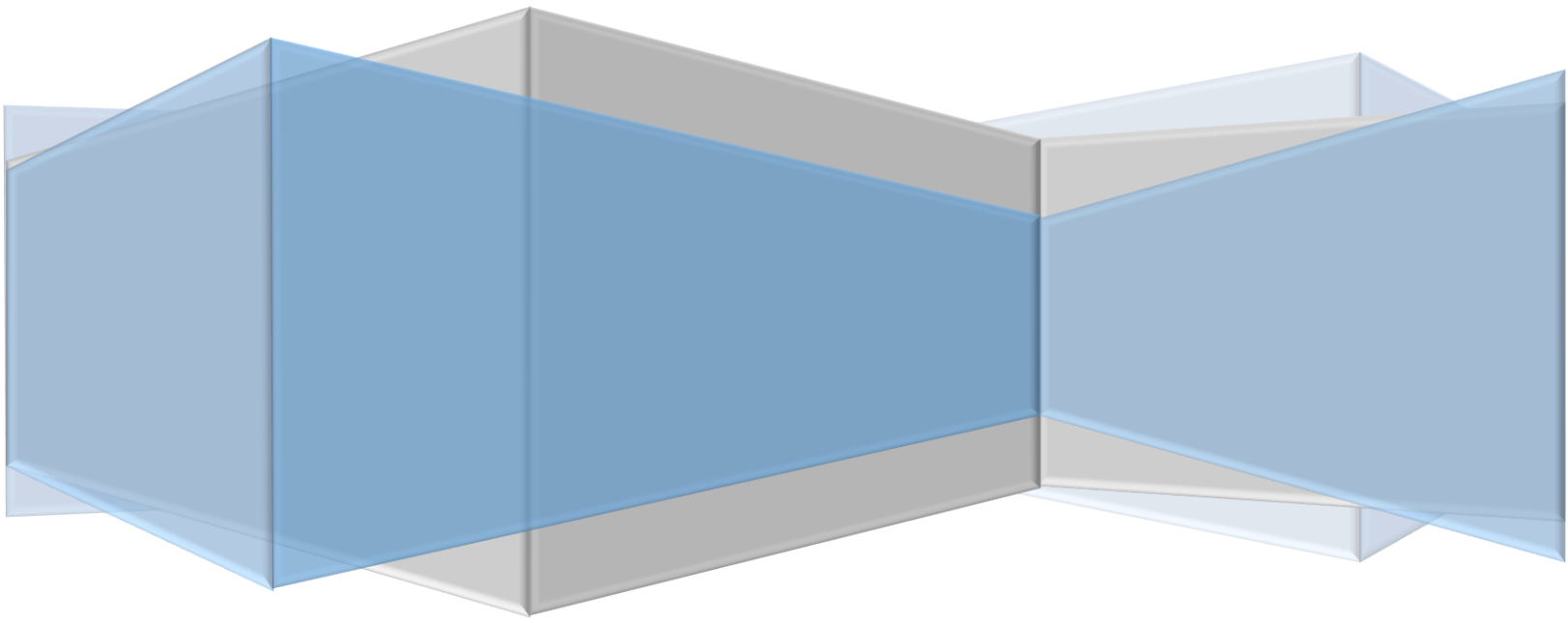
TEACHING ASSISTANT HANDBOOK

Department of Mathematics

Columbia University



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CONTENTS

Qualifications 3

Teaching Assistant Duties 3

Hiring Process 3

- Application 3
- Hire 4
- Re-Hire 5

Evaluations 5

Appointment Details 5

- Title 5
- Salary & Payroll 5
- Additional Campus Jobs & Hours Limitation 6
- Union 6

Duties & Expectations 6

- Help Room 6
- Grading 6
- Course Planning 7
- Textbooks 7
- Time & Attendance 7
- Communication 7
- Conflicts of Interest 7
- Confidentiality 8
- Termination, Grievances, and Escalation Procedure 8
- Getting Help 8

Department Contacts 9

DISCLAIMER: The term *Teaching Assistant* (TA) is used in this handbook broadly to define a student who is providing instructional support, and encompasses a number of different positions and titles. This handbook is for all undergraduate and master's students. PhD students in Mathematics should refer to the department's PhD Student Handbook instead.

QUALIFICATIONS

In general, to be eligible for a Teaching Assistant position in Mathematics:

1. Must be a **CURRENTLY ENROLLED, FULL TIME STUDENT IN A DEGREE GRANTING PROGRAM** at Columbia College (CC), School of Professional Studies (SPS), General Studies (GS), School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS), Graduate School of Arts & Sciences (GSAS), Barnard College (BC), or Teacher's College (TC). In certain cases and with prior approval, part-time graduate students may be eligible for hire.

2. Must document **SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION** of relevant coursework, with a minimum grade of "A". Coursework must generally be completed at Columbia University. Graduate students may substitute proof of a similar course taken at another University by submitting an unofficial transcript from the outside institution. In some cases, an instructor may request or vouch for a particular student's ability to effectively TA for a course without a student having completed that particular course.

TEACHING ASSISTANT DUTIES

Undergraduate TA positions typically involve, on average, ***5 hours per week*** of effort*:

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

Graduate TA positions typically involve, on average, ***8 hours per week*** of effort:

1. **Weekly Office Hours** in the Help Room (3 hours/week, fixed)
2. **Grading homework/assignments/exams** (4 hours/week, on average)
3. **Answering emails** and communicating with students and instructors (1 hour/week, on average)

****Actual hours worked will vary from week to week**. *Some weeks TAs may have no grading, followed by a week of intensive grading. The above average is based on the total number of hours spent over the duration of a semester.*

HIRING PROCESS

APPLICATION

Interested students may apply for a Teaching Assistant position by submitting the Department's online application. Near the beginning of each semester, instructional needs are assessed based on current enrollments. Qualified applicants who can fulfill a need for the department will be contacted regarding available opportunities.

Deadlines: Applications are accepted year-round. Priority will be given to applications that are received by:

- **July 15** (for fall assignments)
- **December 30** (for spring assignments)
- **January 31** (for summer assignments)

As part of the application process, proof of full-time enrollment must be provided. This must be a screenshot or print out of the *Enrollment History* tab in Vergil. If enrollment status is NOT full time or grades have not been released for a preferred course assignment, **the department strongly recommends waiting to apply** until this information is available. Otherwise, you may be asked to re-apply after grades or enrollment are available. Verification must include 1) your name, 2) UNI, and 3) status for semester you are applying to work (see **Figure 1**).

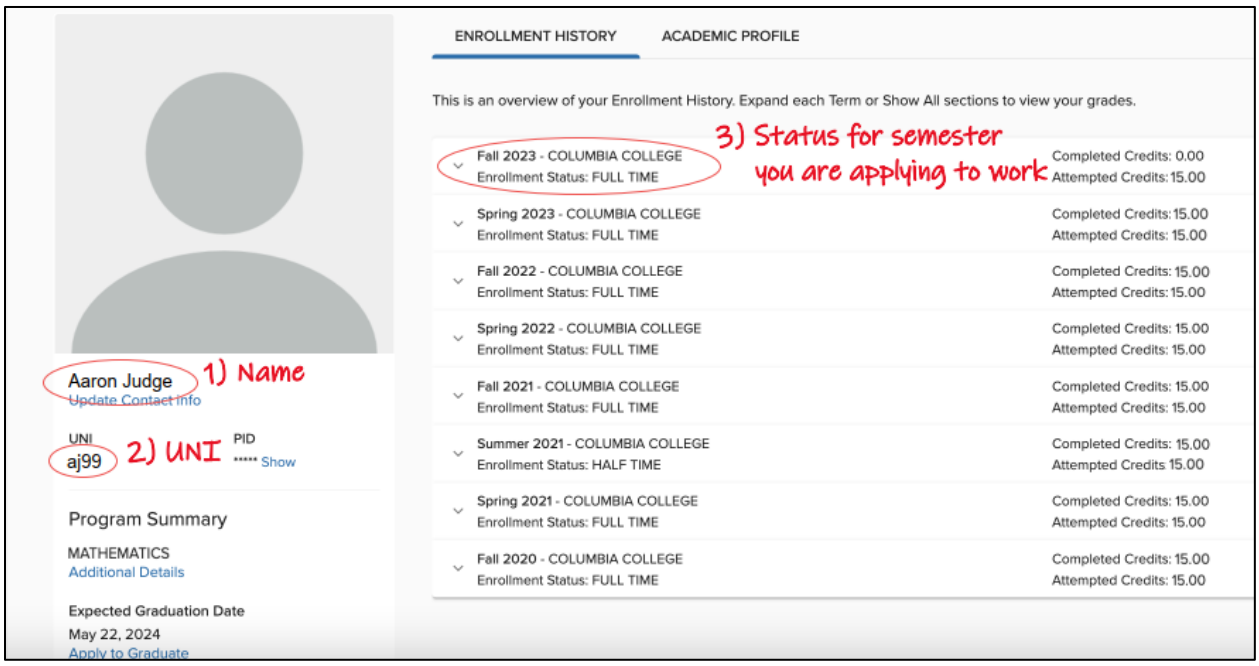

Figure 1

Applications not selected for a TA position will be kept on file in case of an emergency vacancy during the semester, or for consideration the following semester.

HIRE

Applicants are evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Grade in the course(s) for which the applicant requests to work (or instructor recommendation)
- Prior tutoring, teaching, or similar experience
- Interpersonal skills and ability to communicate effectively

The department receives a high volume of applications and regrettably not all applicants will be hired. Students who are not selected are encouraged to apply again for a position in subsequent semesters, as the department's needs and available positions naturally vary each term.

The hiring process often extends into the first two or three weeks of the academic semester, so please be patient while decisions are finalized.

RE-HIRE

The Department will re-hire TAs from year to year, provided the TA receives positive evaluations and feedback from instructors. To be re-hired, current TAs must notify the department of their interest to continue by submitting the brief re-hire online application.

EVALUATIONS

TAs are evaluated at the end of each semester as part of the standard course evaluation process. Additional feedback is provided by instructors directly to the department. Students with positive evaluations receive priority consideration for re-hire and course assignment. Students with poor evaluations or demonstrated problems with timely grading, communication issues, and/or reliability are not likely to be rehired.

In addition, the department regularly receives feedback regarding TA performance from enrolled students throughout the semester. Students frequently report concerns (and compliments!) using the online feedback tool or by contacting instructors and/or staff directly.

APPOINTMENT DETAILS

TITLE

TAs should refer to the *Faculty Handbook* for information that governs all University wide employment policies and regulations. Generally, undergraduate TAs are hired as a "**Teaching Assistant III**", graduate students are hired as a "**Reader**", and Barnard students are hired as an "**Associate III**". **TA III** and **Reader** appointments fall under the category of "Student Officers", while **Associate III**s are considered non-student "Officers of Instruction". There are other titles described in the Faculty Handbook that may be used in other, less common situations.

All new teaching assistants are required to complete new hire paperwork with the department's Business Manager. Please note that you may not begin work until a valid I-9 Employment Verification has been certified (parts 1 and 2 must be complete). It is important to **complete required paperwork by the deadline specified in the appointment letter.** Extensions may be granted in special circumstances, and are handled on a case-by-case basis.

SALARY & PAYROLL

Details regarding salary will be provided in an appointment letter and email notification at the beginning of the appointment. Payroll is processed on a semi-monthly schedule (15th and last day of each month); *checks are typically disbursed 5-10 days after the conclusion of each pay period*. Dates for appointments are generally:

- Sept 1 - May 31 for academic year appointments
- Sept 1 – Dec 31 for Fall only appointments
- Jan 1 – May 31 for Spring only appointments

Students hired at the beginning of the fall term receive an appointment letter for the academic year, unless the TA is not eligible to work after December; visa expiration dates may require earlier appointment end dates.

**** New hires are strongly encouraged to enroll in direct deposit** after the appointment has been processed. Questions or concerns regarding payroll should be directed to the department's Business Manager and/or DAAF.

ADDITIONAL CAMPUS JOBS & HOURS LIMITATION

You may simultaneously work for and receive compensation from other departments on campus, provided that the total combined workload does not exceed **20 hours per week *across all campus jobs combined***. Other employment will generally be paid to you as "Additional Compensation" on the same paychecks you receive from the Mathematics department.

Currently employed TAs must notify the department's Business Manager and DAAF IMMEDIATELY if accepting another position on campus, or if you are currently employed with another department at the time you receive an offer from Mathematics. *Please be aware that Additional Compensation is taxed at a significantly higher rate than regular earnings*. The department is unable to advise on individual tax questions/concerns.

UNION

Students who are hired as a **Teaching Assistant III**, **Reader**, or another Student Officer capacity are covered by a collective bargaining agreement between the University and the Student Workers of Columbia SWC-UAW. The most recent agreement can be found at: https://studentbenefits.provost.columbia.edu/documents. In cases where there is a discrepancy in policy between the Union contract and this handbook, the terms of the Union contract will generally apply.

DUTIES & EXPECTATIONS

HELP ROOM

The Mathematics Department maintains two Help Rooms for students enrolled in Mathematics courses. Help Rooms are staffed concurrently by undergraduate and graduate Teaching Assistants.

- **502 Milstein Center - Salmasi Computational Science/Math Collaboration Space**
  Subjects: College Algebra, Calculus I, Calculus II, and Calculus III

- **406 Math - Columbia Math Help Room**
  Subjects: Calculus IV and all higher Math

While in the Help Room, **it is expected that TAs will assist all students they are qualified to help**, even if the student is from a different section. TAs should use a nametag or nameplate, so that students can easily identify who to ask for help. Actions such as hiding behind a laptop or book, refusing to visibly identify one's self as a TA, or declining to assist students are not appropriate.

During the first week of classes, TAs should discuss help room hours with their course instructor and will receive instructions to sign up for the hours they would like to work. To avoid congestion, a maximum of three TAs will generally be scheduled during any given hour. Scheduling is handled on a first-come, first-served basis.

GRADING

TAs must complete assigned grading by the instructor's deadlines. If the amount of grading proves difficult, the TA should notify the instructor so a solution can be found (for example, grading only a certain subset of problems, extending the deadline, etc.). Instructors cannot help if they do not know there is a problem!

If necessary, TAs may check out a key to the homework drop-off boxes from the Academic Coordinator in room 410 Math. Homework boxes are located on the 4th floor of the Mathematics Building. Assignments that are ready to grade should be picked up based on the instructor's schedule. A $5.00 cash replacement fee will be required if a homework box key is lost.

COURSE PLANNING

TAs should expect to meet with their course instructor at the beginning of the semester to discuss expectations. In some cases, instructors may ask TAs to attend an initial class session for introductions. If you do not receive any information from the instructor by the end of add/drop period, notify the department's Academic Coordinator.

Some instructors may hold occasional staff meetings with their TAs throughout the semester. These meetings are important for organization, planning, and dissemination of teaching tips and critical course information. If scheduled by the instructor, attendance at such meetings is required.

TEXTBOOKS

Course textbooks may be checked out from the department's Academic Coordinator. The Department has a limited number of textbooks available for TAs, but unfortunately not enough for everyone. TAs of the same course may be asked to share or borrow textbooks from other TAs, or coordinate with the course instructor.

TIME & ATTENDANCE

TAs must be present on campus by the first day of classes, and must not leave at the end of the semester until **all responsibilities are discharged** (this includes grading of final exams, if required for graduate TAs).

Applicants with significant time restrictions should not accept a position. TAs who experience a significant change in availability during the course of a semester and can no longer meet the requirements or time commitment should consult the Academic Coordinator and/or course instructor as soon as possible.

Attendance during scheduled Help Room hours is mandatory. Although time sheets are not required for Student Officer positions, all TAs are expected to sign in for their scheduled Help Room hours each week. This is necessary for the department to ensure Help Rooms are operating effectively. Failure to sign in may be considered the same as an absence. Repeated tardiness and/or absences (including failures to sign in) may be grounds for dismissal.

If another commitment conflicts with your regular 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 to ensure the Help Room remains staffed. Students do not need prior approval from the department to swap occasional office hours. However, any changes to regularly scheduled hours should be communicated in writing to the course instructor and Academic Coordinator. Repeated deviations from scheduled hours may result in a request to modify the regular hours. Frequent schedule changes - attempts to reduce or circumvent scheduled hours - are not acceptable and may be considered grounds for dismissal.

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 two business days. Repeated failure to answer emails or other correspondence may lead to dismissal.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

TAs are expected to disclose any conflicts of interest due to current or previous personal relationships with students in their assigned 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 (e.g., close friend, significant other, family member). If you are assigned to TA for a course with students whom you know well, please notify the instructor immediately. Instructors can set up alternate procedures, such as having other TAs grade the student's work, in order to safeguard all parties.

CONFIDENTIALITY

By necessity of the job, TAs will have limited access to some academic information (e.g., some homework or exam grades) 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 be reported to the University, and carries significant consequences.

TERMINATION, GRIEVANCES, AND ESCALATION PROCEDURE

If the department determines that a TA is failing to meet the expectations of the course or instructor, or the TA experiences a dramatic change in availability, a position may be terminated at any point during the semester by request of either party. Such circumstances and actions shall be communicated clearly in writing between the department, TA, and instructor.

On rare occasion, a TA may wish to register a complaint (e.g., another student's behavior, the required workload is too much, etc.). The complaint should initially be directed to the course instructor. If this does not resolve the problem, or the problem involves the instructor, the TA may escalate an issue by notifying both the Academic Coordinator and Director of Undergraduate Studies or Director of Calculus. Issues that cannot be resolved at this stage may be referred to the Department Chair and DAAF, or the student's Academic Advisor, as appropriate.

GETTING HELP

TAs who are feeling confused, overwhelmed, etc. are encouraged to contact their instructor and/or any of the department contacts listed in this handbook. Teaching Assistant provide vital support to our courses and instructors, we are here to help make sure you succeed!

DEPARTMENT CONTACTS

DIRECTOR OF CALCULUS

- Professor George Dragomir
  525 Mathematics
  dragomir@math.columbia.edu
  212-854-2849

DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

- Professor Julien Dubedat
  601 Mathematics
  dubedat@math.columbia.edu
  212-854-8806

ACADEMIC COORDINATOR

- TBD

BUSINESS MANAGER

- Deniz Macleod
  509 Mathematics
  dm3111@math.columbia.edu
  212-854-6366

DIRECTOR, ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION & FINANCE

- Nathan Schweer
  509 Mathematics
  schweer@math.columbia.edu
  212-854-6365