

Teaching Assistant Office Hour Challenge Vignettes

1. The (Almost) Overwhelmed TA

Sergei is a second-year TA in the Biology Department. His first year as a TA was successful – he got good feedback from his students that he was helpful and supportive, and he got good feedback from his supervising professor that he was competent and efficient. Although TAing took a lot of time and energy from him, he was able to manage the workload well enough. Word got around to the undergraduates that Sergei was a great TA who was a good listener and provided strong individual support; this year, some students intentionally signed up for the section of the course he is TAing because they wanted to be able to work with him.

In addition to the time that he spends in lab with the students, he has official office hours for two hours per week, and they are pretty well attended. Students usually show up and ask for his help on homework problems that they didn't get correct, and they ask his advice on setting up their lab experiments. In addition to seeking his help during office hours, students send him e-mails with their questions and sometimes, if they see him in the hall, ask him to come into the lab with them to check on how their experiments are running. So far, he's been able to meet all of these requests for help, but he's noticed that the time he's spending on TA-related work is progressively increasing. He doesn't want to let it get out of control because he knows that his own research will wind up suffering as a result, and he does not want that to happen.

- **What, if anything, could Sergei be handling better?**
- **What are some strategies that Sergei might consider to help him manage his TA responsibilities?**

2. The Needy Student

Kathleen is in her first year as a TA in the Economics Department. She is TAing for *Principles of Economics*. It is near the middle of the term, and she notices that one of her students, Thomas, has been doing especially poorly on all of the homework assignments. She is worried that Thomas does not understand basic concepts and that he will struggle even worse later on if he doesn't begin doing better now. On the last homework she gave back to Thomas, Kathleen included a note saying, "Please see me during my office hours." Thomas shows up for office hours and here is how things go:

Kathleen: I'm pleased that you came to see me, Thomas. I've been concerned about your work. You haven't been doing so well on your homeworks, and I wanted to talk with you to figure out what we could do to try to change that.

Thomas: I was glad you asked me to come to see you. I think I know what's going on. It's just that I don't understand anything . . . I don't know what to do . . . I read the book, but I don't understand . . . On top of that, everyone else knows what they're doing, and I don't. I think I'm the only one who doesn't understand. I must be stupid – I know I'm stupid.

Thomas looked sad when he started speaking; by the time he finished, it seemed like he was trying to fight back tears.

If you were Kathleen, what would you say to Thomas?

3. The At-risk Student

Andrew is in his first year as a TA in the History Department. He hadn't expected so much of his work as a TA to involve providing encouragement and motivational support to students, but he has learned how to do it quite well, and his students seem pleased to be working with him.

Near the end of the term, Andrew extended his office hours to manage the extra time that his students seemed to need from him while finishing up their final projects. It is now the day before the students' final projects are due, and some students come to him rather frantically asking for help with finishing up their projects. One student named John seems particularly anxious that he is not going to finish his project on time. John tells Andrew that he's afraid that he's going to fail the class. Andrew reassures him that his project is a strong and solid project and that he only has a little more work to do before it will be finished. John doesn't seem to be listening to Andrew, though, and gets more agitated throughout their conversation. He tells Andrew that he's only studying history because his father encouraged him to do so, and that he doesn't see what the point is to studying history or even what the point to living is. John goes on to say, "I mean, why bother? It would just be a lot easier to end it all now." Andrew freezes up and isn't sure what to do at this point.

- **What would you suggest to Andrew?**
- **What other actions might Andrew take?**

4. The Intellectually Challenging Student

Jyoti is in her first year as a TA in the Psychology Department, and she very much enjoys her work with the students in her section. She has found office hours to be manageable because not many students come to them (so she has time to catch up on her own work). When students do come to her office hours, she is able to offer them the support they need. Recently, though, she has begun dreading office hours because of one student. This student is a non-traditional student – an older female (about 25 years older than Jyoti is) who has come to Clark after a career in education administration to work on a second degree in psychology. The student comes to the office hour well-prepared with an agenda of topics she'd like to discuss, and she usually uses up most of the time Jyoti has for office hours. Usually, the questions she asks Jyoti are related to the course material but extend a bit beyond the scope of the course and are challenging to answer. Jyoti tends to spend her time with this student searching for answers and discussing the issues with the student in order to get a better understanding of them herself. Jyoti fears the day when this student comes to office hours with a question that she truly cannot answer.

Jyoti has considered telling the student that she no longer can continue to provide this type of support to the student, but she is having trouble justifying that course of action.

What would you suggest to Jyoti?