GSI Mentoring for Remote Instruction

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Prompt: What steps can faculty take in working with GSIs so that the experience of teaching remotely is a positive one for themselves, their GSIs, and their students?

I try to forge a collaboration with my GSIs from the outset. That means consulting with them early when I can still make adjustments. I try to consult them especially on those items that affect them the most, like assignments (including prompts and deadlines) and grading standards. I benefit from this as well as the GSIs because I get some quality input and we forge a more cohesive team. In this case (Fall 2020), all three of my GSIs taught sections for a lecture course this past spring whereas I only had a seminar. So they understood the challenges better than I did. Their input fed directly into some of my decisions, such as the choice of synchronous rather than asynchronous instruction.

We have had two (Zoom) GSI meetings over the summer plus some consultation via email. We attended one department workshop on remote teaching together, and we had one tailored meeting with a remote teaching consultant for just the four of us. I believe this will improve the quality of our instruction plus our teamwork in the fall.

I have some discretionary funding so I am able to pay the GSIs for the extra time this summer. This is only fair since a fall GSI appointment does not include summer work time. If a professor does not have funding for that, then the department should cover it. And if the department is unable to do so, then the GSIs should be able to deduct the hours from their fall work time. And of course, this extra training should be proposed as a special request, not a requirement.

I discussed student expectations with my GSIs at some length, including flexibility for students who cannot attend all class sessions and rules about activating video during class. We also addressed privacy issues related to recording, including how to disclose to students that we are recording and how to set the recording to show the speaker and not the gallery.

We discussed using a Google bio form to help us get to know the students at the beginning of the semester, and using the time before and after (when ending early) class for social time and informal questions/discussion to connect with the students personally.

With respect to GSI time management, I try to set reasonable expectations for the GSIs while still giving the undergraduates the best possible learning experience. I think the best way to reconcile the inherent tension between those two goals is to discuss pedagogical priorities with the GSIs. I try to be very clear with them about areas where I feel they could save time and areas where I hope they can be more generous with their time. For example, I share strategies for how to grade midterms and finals in an efficient manner, leaving more time to give feedback on the paper assignments. I also tell them that I will post study questions and news articles on the course website so they do not have to do that. And I suggest that creating state-of-the art PowerPoint presentations for sections is less important than having a good lesson plan.

We are still at the planning stage since the semester has not begun, but I expect that we will need to meet more frequently due to remote instruction, although the meetings could be short. We plan to poll the students at the beginning of the semester to understand their technology, time-zone, or personal challenges with remote instruction. And I will encourage the GSIs to conduct midterm evaluations relatively early in the semester to assess how we are doing.