



The Graduate Assistant Survey 2006 Report

Introduction and Background

The Graduate Assistant Survey was developed in order to examine the kinds of duties employed graduate students have and the amount of time spent on these job-related tasks. Administrators were also interested in how the experiences of graduate assistants may vary across University departments. Through the survey, administrators intend to gather data on the “worklife” of employed graduate students as it pertains to the completion of their academic responsibilities. By gaining an overall view of the graduate assistant experience, campus administrators plan to influence institutional policies and practices to ultimately improve or encourage degree completion.

Staff members in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning drafted items for the survey with input and feedback from the Interim Dean of Graduate Studies and her staff. Three different versions of the survey were developed: one was given to Administrative Assistants, another to Research Assistants, and a final version targeted Teaching Assistants. Select questions were repeated on all versions of the survey, while other unique items were included only on a specific survey, depending on job-related responsibilities.

The full population of full-time graduate assistants with 20 hour appointments was contacted to take part in the assessment project (N = 2872). Participation in the web survey was solicited via email notification. Two follow-up emails were also sent to non-respondents. Participants were asked to select the appropriate survey based on their job description, as Teaching Assistants and Administrative Assistants are coded identically in the University database. The survey remained open for a period of two weeks, and a final response rate of 42.4% was achieved (n = 1216).

Demographic Section

Each full-time graduate assistant on campus was invited to participate in the survey. During its administration, the survey was unable to capture this entire population; instead, 1216 students out of an anticipated 2872 completed the survey. Having captured 42.4% of the intended population, the randomness and representativeness of this “sample” is first addressed. It is possible that certain groups of students are under- or over-represented in the sample relative to their representation in the population, as individual groups may have responded with unequal response rates. The make-up of the “sample” can be examined statistically to determine its representativeness. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test compares observed sample proportions to known population proportions in order to determine the significance of the differences between the observed frequencies in the sample and expected frequencies based on the population values. All statistical tests were conducted at the .05 level.

The representation of Graduate Assistants and Research Assistants in the sample is not significantly different than their respective representations in the population. Females are more heavily represented in the sample than they are in the population. There were slightly fewer Returning Doctoral students and slightly more New Masters students in the sample than expected, suggesting that the length of time a student has been in a program may impact how likely they are to complete the survey. The most striking difference between the make-up of the sample and that of the population was found when testing a race/citizenship variable. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Sample and Population Race/Citizenship

	Sample		Population	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
American Indian:U.S.	3	0.2	6	0.2
Asian:US	57	4.7	120	4.2
Black/African-American:U.S.	48	3.9	124	4.3
Foreign	431	35.4	1179	41.1
Hispanic:U.S.	29	2.4	65	2.3
Unknown:U.S.	58	4.8	136	4.7
White:U.S.	590	48.5	1242	43.2
Total	1216		2872	

A significant chi-square statistic was obtained in the test of fit for observed race/citizenship frequencies to the known make-up of the population. Based on an examination of the residuals, White students of U.S. citizenship appear to be over-represented in the sample, while Foreign students, especially, do not make up as much of the sample as would have been expected given their representation in the population. Based on the population, approximately 70 more Foreign respondents would have been expected in the sample. American Indian students of U.S. citizenship were excluded from the analysis, as their cell count was too small to allow for statistical comparisons.

Table 2. Job Title by Gender, Citizenship, and Program Level

	Administrative Assistant	Research Assistant	Teaching Assistant
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Male (n=593)	12	55	34
Female (n=623)	28	25	47
U.S. Citizen (n=785)	25	30	46
Foreign (n=431)	12	57	31
Master's (n=292)	44	24	32
Doctoral (n=923)	13	44	43

A series of further tests reveal that male respondents were significantly more likely to be Research Assistants and females were more likely to be Teaching Assistants. Foreign respondents were more likely to be Research Assistants, to a statistically significant degree, while U.S. Citizens were more likely to be Teaching Assistants. Master's level respondents were more likely to be Administrative Assistants, and those at the doctoral level were more likely to be Research or Teaching Assistants. Finally, White respondents were more likely to be TA's and less likely to be RA's, while Black/African American respondents were more likely to be Administrative Assistants. This finding may help be explained by the fact that the College of Education houses the majors of almost half of the Administrative Assistants in the sample, and over one-third of Black/African American assistants have majors in EDUC.

The Administrative Assistant Experience

A total of 245 Administrative Assistants responded to the survey. The most frequent division assignments for AA's were in VPSA (19%), EDUC (14%), and ARHU (12%) throughout the Fall 2005 semester. The remaining 56% of AA respondents had assignments across the other ten colleges and various support divisions.

Respondents were asked to indicate the average number of hours they worked per week during different phases of their fall appointment. Respondents were asked specifically about the three time periods before the start of classes from August 17th to August 30th, during the semester between the first day of classes on August 30th and the last day of exams on December 21st, and during winter break between January 3rd and January 15th. AA's were asked not to include any hours worked on overload for winter term courses in their estimations. The results are displayed below in Table 3.

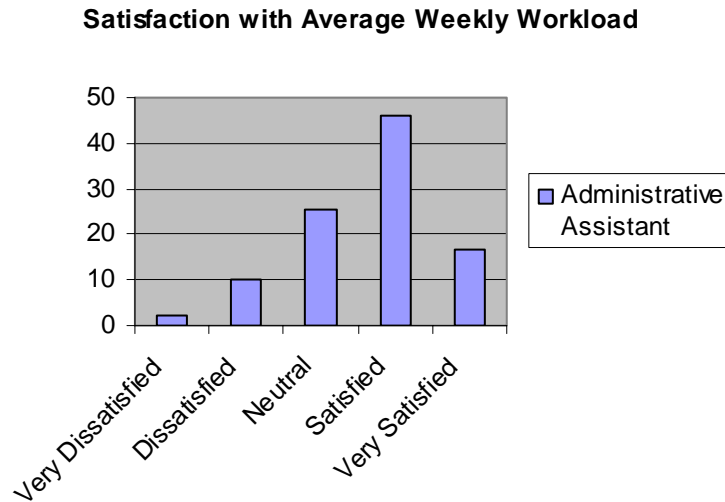
Table 3. Hours Worked

	Before the Semester	During the Semester	During Winter Break
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Zero Hours	5	0	12
Fewer than 10 Hours	6	1	11
Between 10 and 20 Hours	14	12	24
About 20 Hours	44	66	37
More than 20 Hours	31	21	16

A sizable proportion (31%) of Administrative Assistants was working 20 or more hours before the start of classes. During the semester, however, this number dropped, and two-thirds (66%) of TA's were working about 20 hours per week. When asked to describe their average hourly workload over the entire fall appointment, 69% said they worked approximately 20 hours on average, whereas 9% said they worked less than 20 hours, and 22% said they worked more than 20 hours.

Respondents were also asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the average number of hours per week they worked along a 5-point continuum. The results are displayed in Chart 1.

Chart 1.



Almost two-thirds of AA respondents were either “satisfied” (46%) or “very satisfied” (17%) with their average weekly workload. A small proportion of the administrative assistants was “dissatisfied” (10%) or “very dissatisfied” (2%).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in their department if, hypothetically, they felt they were being asked to spend too much time on their AA experience or were being treated unfairly in some way. Around two-thirds of the respondents (60%) said that they would know where to turn for help within their department. Similarly, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in the Graduate School if, hypothetically, they felt they were being treated unfairly. In this case, only a fourth of respondents (25%) answered “Yes.”

The Research Assistant Experience

A total of 479 Research Assistants responded to the survey. The majority of the RA respondents had division assignments in ENGR (38%), CMPS (31%), BSOS (11%), AGNR (8%), and CLFS (7%) throughout the Fall 2005 semester.

Research assistants were asked how many hours they spent per week working on research that was directly related to their own thesis or dissertation work. On average, respondents indicated that they spent 31 hours per week on this task. When asked how much time per week was devoted to research unrelated to their own thesis or dissertation, the average response was 14 hours. Combined, the average number of hours spent each week on research by the typical RA is just over 45 hours. Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which their assignments as an RA contributed to their own thesis or dissertation work. The results are displayed in Table 4.

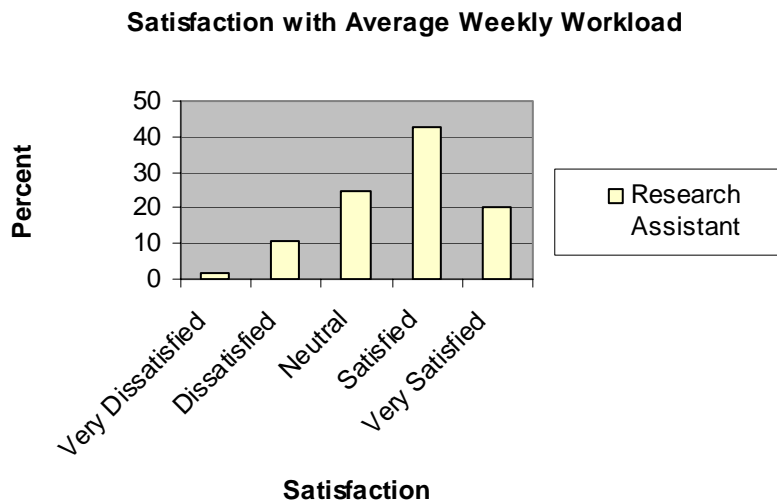
Table 4. Hours Worked

	Percent
How much did your research assignment as an RA contribute to your own thesis or dissertation research?	
Not at all	12
Somewhat	23
Significantly	65

Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) indicated that their research assignments contributed “significantly” to their own thesis or dissertation research. Only a small proportion of students (12%) felt that their work as an RA did not contribute to their own research. The response patterns for this item were comparable across Master’s and Doctoral level students. However, when enrollment type was considered, returning graduate students were more likely to answer “significantly” than new graduate students ($\alpha = .05$).

Respondents were also asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the average number of hours per week they worked along a 5-point continuum. The results are displayed below in Chart 2.

Chart 2.



Approximately two-thirds of RA respondents were either “satisfied” (43%) or “very satisfied” (21%) with their average weekly workload. A relatively small proportion of the research assistants was “dissatisfied” (11%) or “very dissatisfied” (2%).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in their department if, hypothetically, they felt they were being asked to spend too much time on their RA experience or were being treated unfairly in some way. Around half of the respondents (55%) said that they would know where to turn for help within their department. Similarly, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in the Graduate School if, hypothetically,

they felt they were being treated unfairly. In this case, only a fourth of respondents (28%) answered “Yes.”

The Teaching Assistant Experience

A total of 492 Teaching Assistants responded to the survey. The majority of the TA respondents had division assignments in ARHU (32%), CLFS (18%), CMPS (14%), and BSOS (14%), and EDUC (6%) throughout the Fall 2005 semester.

Respondents were asked to indicate the average number of hours they worked per week during different phases of their fall appointment. Respondents were asked specifically about the three time periods before the start of classes from August 17th to August 30th, during the semester between the first day of classes on August 30th and the last day of exams on December 21st, and during winter break between January 3rd and January 15th. TA’s were asked not to include any hours worked on overload for winter term courses in their estimations. The results are displayed below in Table 5.

Table 5. Hours Worked

	Before the Start of Classes	During the Semester	During Winter Break
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Zero Hours	18	0	37
Fewer than 10 Hours	32	3	32
Between 10 and 20 Hours	17	23	13
About 20 Hours	18	34	9
More than 20 Hours	15	40	9

The response patterns indicate that Teaching Assistants were working more hours on average during the semester than they were before and after fall classes. Forty percent (40%) of TA’s reported an average workload of more than 20 hours per week during the semester. When asked to describe their average hourly workload over the entire fall appointment, 43% said they worked approximately 20 hours on average, whereas 21% said they worked less than 20 hours, and 36% said they worked more than 20 hours.

Prior to their teaching assistantship in Fall 2005, one-third of respondents (33%) indicated they had never been assigned as a TA in previous semesters. Another third (31%) had been previously assigned as a TA for one or two semesters, and the final third of respondents (36%) had three or more semesters of prior teaching assistant experience.

The teaching assistants were also asked how many sections they served as a TA for during their Fall 2005 appointment. Twenty-seven percent (27%) were responsible for one section, while 41% were the TA for two sections, and the remaining 32% were a TA for three or more sections. Respondents were further asked to indicate their primary role for each of the sections. The results are displayed in the following table.

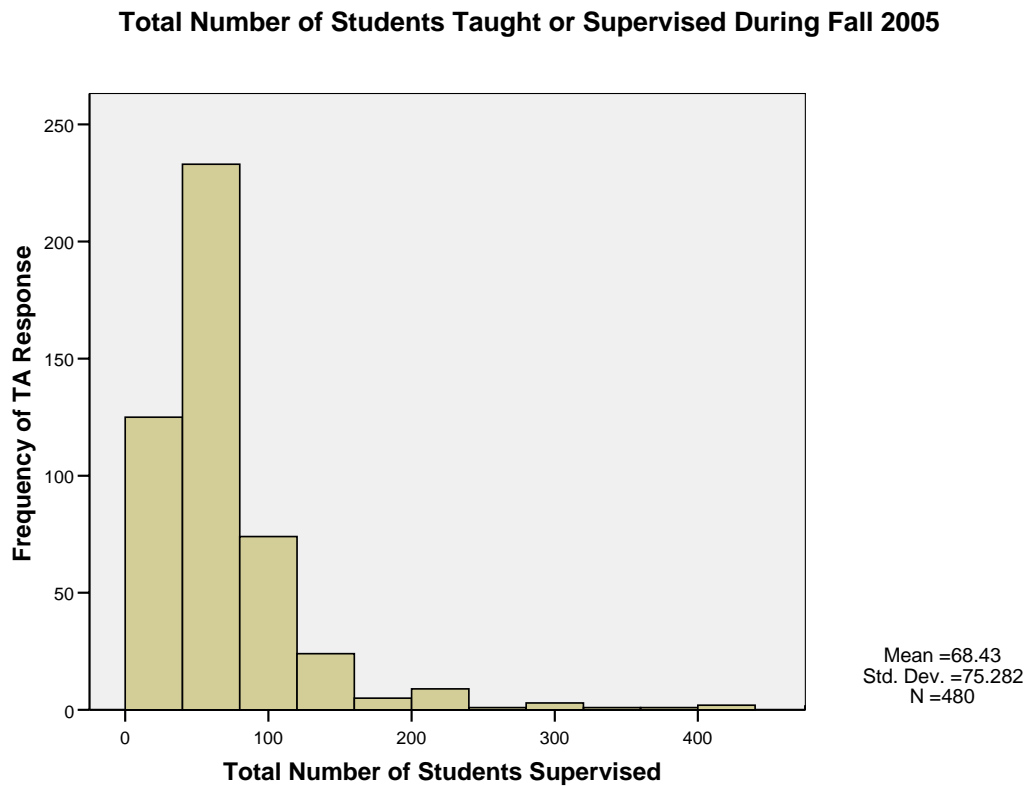
Table 6. Primary Role

Primary role	One Section	Two Sections	Three or More Sections
	Percent	Percent	Percent
lead instructor/lecturer (n=312)	45	37	19
discussion section leader (n=265)	28	28	45
lab section leader (n=173)	33	51	16
grader or other support (n=191)	40	33	27

Of those respondents with a lead instructor/lecturer role, the majority (82%) were responsible for one or two sections during the fall semester. Half (51%) of those assigned as a lab section leader served three or more sections. Respondents were fairly evenly spread along one, two, or three-plus sections for which they were leading discussion sections or grading/providing other support.

Respondents indicated that they were teaching or supporting an average of 68 students total during the Fall 2005 semester when all of their courses were combined. The distribution of this statistic is positively skewed, as TA's in the larger colleges tended to be responsible for many more students during their appointments. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.



Respondents were also asked to indicate how much time they devoted each week, on average, to specific job-related tasks. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Time Spent on Tasks

	Average Number of Hours per Week	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
On average, how much of your time was spent per week...		
conducting/teaching lectures, discussions, or lab courses	5.0	5.3
preparing for lectures, discussions, or lab courses	5.0	4.3
holding office hours and meeting with students	2.6	2.2
answering student emails	2.0	2.1
grading assignments and tests	5.6	4.7
attending lectures, proctoring exams, and meeting with professors and other TAs	2.7	4.7
supervising or advising students	2.5	3.2
other	3.7	5.6
Total	29.1	

Teaching assistants were devoting around 5 hours per week each to conducting lectures, preparing for lectures, and grading. Holding office hours, answering student emails, and advising students each required approximately two hours of time per week. On average, TA's were spending around 29 hours per week in total on these tasks combined.

Respondents were also asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the average number of hours per week they worked along a 5-point continuum. The results are displayed below in Chart 3.

Chart 3.



Less than half of TA respondents were either “satisfied” (38%) or “very satisfied” (8%) with their average weekly workload. A notable proportion of the teaching assistants was “dissatisfied” (16%) or “very dissatisfied” (7%).

Responses of new Teaching Assistants were compared to those of experienced Teaching Assistants to see if the number of semesters previously assigned as a TA impacted average weekly workload and

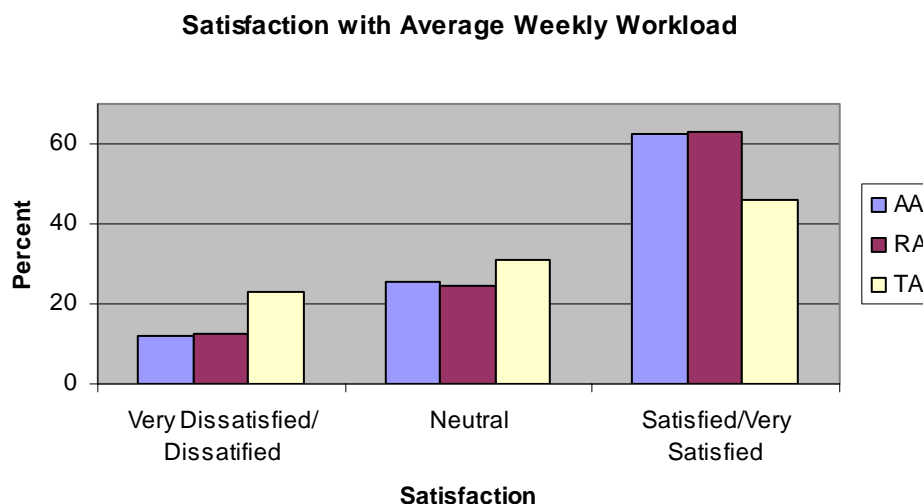
satisfaction ratings. Non-significant chi-square statistics ($\alpha = .05$) indicated that new TA's reported working approximately the same number of hours as TA's with several semesters of teaching experience, and that new TA's were equally as satisfied – or dissatisfied – as experienced TA's.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in their department if, hypothetically, they felt they were being asked to spend too much time on their TA experience or were being treated unfairly in some way. Around two-thirds of the respondents (64%) said that they would know where to turn for help within their department. Similarly, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would know where to go for help in the Graduate School if, hypothetically, they felt they were being treated unfairly. In this case, only a fourth of respondents (23%) answered "Yes."

Comparisons across Job Title

All respondents, regardless of job type, were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the average number of hours per week they worked during their Fall 2005 appointment. The results are displayed below in Chart 4.

Chart 4.



The satisfaction ratings of Administrative Assistants and Research Assistants mirror each other closely. Almost two-thirds (63%) of these respondents reported that they are satisfied with their average weekly workload. In contrast, less than half of Teaching Assistants (46%) reported the same feelings of satisfaction, and almost a fourth (23%) reported feeling dissatisfied to some extent.

Although the same question was not asked of Research Assistants, it was possible to compare the average weekly workload of Teaching Assistants and Administrative Assistants to help explain the difference in satisfaction ratings. Twenty-two percent (22%) of AA's worked more than 20 hours per week – compared to 36% of TA's – over the entire Fall 2005 appointment. This difference in workload may account for at least part of the difference in satisfaction. Based on responses to a similar item, Research Assistants, however, also reported working far more than 20 hours per week on average. Combining the average number of hours spent on research related to their thesis/dissertation and research unrelated to this work, RA's were working around 45 hours per week; despite this fact, RA's were more likely to report feelings of satisfaction than TA's, who reported working an average of 29 hours per week on job-related tasks. Note that the vast majority of RA's (88%) also reported that their work as a Research

Assistant contributed “somewhat” or “significantly” to their own thesis or dissertation work, which may help to shed light on this finding.

When asked to indicate whether or not they knew where to go for help, hypothetically, in the case of unfair treatment, RA’s were the least likely to know where to go in their department (55%) and TA’s were the most likely to know where to turn for help (64%). This difference may be of little practical value, as it appears that over one-third of Graduate Assistants combined said they do not know where to go for help in their department if they felt they were being asked to spend too much time on their appointment, or were being treated unfairly in some other way. There was no statistical difference in the proportion of respondents who indicated that they did not know where to turn for help in the Graduate School across the three surveys. Three-quarters (75%) of Graduate Assistants were unsure where to go for help in the Graduate School in the case of unfair treatment.

Close to one third (30%) of all respondents felt that they were expected to spend too much time on their assistantship, or were being treated unfairly in some other way. Also, the vast majority (78%) of AA’s, RA’s, and TA’s who felt they had been treated unfairly had not sought help.