Brown University

Department of Computer Science

HTA Missive

Meta-TAs and The Director of Undergraduate Studies
Fall 2014

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0 About this document

This document outlines the role and responsibilities of head teaching assistants within the Department of Computer Science. It describes the tasks which are required of most, if not all, HTAs, and includes important information regarding administrative and technical practices. Some of the content found in this missive will not apply to every course, but it is a useful resource nonetheless. All HTAs, new and returning, are strongly recommended to read this document and refer to it as necessary.

0.1 Contributors

This document was majorly revamped by Ashley Tuccero (MTA-Admin, 2009-2011). It has been updated for the current semester by Aisha Ferrazares and Indy Prentice (MTAs for 2014-2015).

0.2 Related documents

These documents contain other information about the department that may be of interest to HTAs:

- Official HTA Job Description: http://cs.brown.edu/ugrad/jobs/hta/

1 Basic responsibilities

Congratulations on being hired as a head teaching assistant! We hope that you are excited for the coming semester and the challenges (and rewards!) it will bring.

Being a head TA is a large responsibility. You are entrusted with thinking of the "big picture": that is, what is your course's mission, and how will you achieve it? It is up to you to think ahead, to stay on top of things, and to know when to delegate to your UTAs and when to escalate to your professor. You will be hiring a staff, planning TA camp, and making sure that assignments and grades go out on schedule.

In addition to these new responsibilities, you are still expected to adhere to the policies outlined in the UTA missive (found at http://cs.brown.edu/courses/ta/pubs/uta_missive.pdf). Now more than ever, you must remain professional at all times. You set the tone for how your course's UTAs will behave, which affects the experience that your students have, which in turn contributes to the reputation of our department as a whole. Be respectful of your students, staff, and of course, your professor.

2 Immediate tasks

The following tasks should be undertaken once you have been officially hired as a head TA:

- See Kathy Kirman (kpk, CIT 572) for departmental card access. This will allow you to use your Brown ID to swipe into the CIT rooms which have been reserved for undergraduate TA use. All TAs for all CS courses have access to the I-Lab (CIT 316), the Fishbowl (CIT 271), and the TA Lab (CIT 344). Some courses have access to additional rooms.
- See Lori Agresti (laa, CIT 312) for your building access. Building access allows you to swipe into the CIT when it is closed and use the stairwells after hours.
- Set up e-mail forwarding to an account you check often by running mailconfig. It is vital that you respond quickly to all e-mail sent to you as a head TA. Make sure your UTAs do likewise.
- Set up your course's mail aliases (csXXXtas@cs.brown.edu and csXXXheadtas@cs.brown.edu). In order to do this, log in to lists.cs.brown.edu using your LDAP password and edit your list with < List >→Admin→Manage Subscribers. You'll want to remove old TAs and add yourself to the list so you receive any important emails.
• Make sure you have been added to the csxxta and csxxxhta groups. If not, e-mail problem@cs.brown.edu.
• Clean out your course directory. Remove old, unnecessary files.

3 UTA hiring process

Before you begin interviewing UTA applicants, set up a meeting with your professor to discuss what kind of course development will be done for next semester. From there, develop a rough plan of what will need to be done at TA camp: will you be writing new problem sets and solution keys? Creating a new project (and new support code to go with it)? Adding a new unit or removing an old one? Once you have a rough plan for TA camp, pick a start date which will give you enough time to accomplish these goals. You and your co-HTAs may wish to return a few days before this start date to plan and prepare for TA camp. Remember to budget a half-day for the UTA orientation, which is mandatory for all TAs—even returning TAs and head TAs! The Meta-TAs will let you know the earliest day your TA camp may start.

3.1 Recruitment and the UTA Infosession

Head TAs are encouraged to actively recruit potential UTAs. How you do this is up to you and your professor, but you may wish to consider e-mailing people who TAed the course or did well in it as students last year. Individual e-mails which address the recipient by name are much more effective than BCCed mass e-mails. At this point, you should start using a more professional tone in your e-mails as a head TA. You may use your new HTA mail alias as your Reply-To address if you’d like, but never send e-mail directly from that alias—many people consider this rude (especially when there are multiple HTAs).

The UTA Infosession is usually held shortly after the new head TAs are announced. This is where professors and head TAs have the opportunity to advertise their course to prospective UTAs and students. Usually, this consists of a speech lasting a minute or so in which the professor and/or HTA explains what topics are covered in the course, what changes will be made to it next semester, who should take it/TA it, etc. Many undergraduates attend the UTA Infosession, making it the easiest way to pitch your course to a wide audience. It is important that your course be represented.

3.2 Applications

The application process is administered by the Meta-TAs. Applications open immediately after the UTA Infosession. While applications are open, you can email mta@cs.brown.edu to check on the applications for your course. Once applications close, your professor will receive a CSV containing information on all of your applicants.

3.3 Interviewing: the “Do”s

Once applications close, you will want to begin scheduling interviews. Remember that it is department policy to interview either all or none of your applicants, although there are occasional exceptions to this rule when a particular applicant is blatantly unqualified. **Even returning TAs should be interviewed**, as returning TAs are not automatically rehired. When contacting your applicants to schedule interviews, be sure not to accidentally publicize the list of applicants. Do not paste all of their e-mail addresses into the “To:” or “CC:” fields, as this is equivalent to publishing a list of your applicants. You should either send e-mails directly to each applicant or use BCC. Be sure to use the e-mail address specified on their applications, as not everyone reads their CS account regularly.

To set up interviews, we suggest one of two options: you can e-mail your applicants with a list of time slots (works for small courses), or you may use the CIS SignUp Center (better for large courses). The SignUp Center is available at [http://www.brown.edu/cis/Faculty/tools/signup/](http://www.brown.edu/cis/Faculty/tools/signup/).

It is up to you to determine how long you would like to spend with each applicant, although previous HTAs have noted that 20-30 minutes is ideal (and anything less than 15 minutes is probably unfair). During your interviews, you may wish to do the following:
• Describe the job and the responsibilities associated with it (e.g. attending class, attending a weekly TA meeting, writing homework problems, grading, holding office hours, occasional help sessions).

• Tell the applicant when TA camp will start. You may ask them if they will be able to attend, but this information cannot be used in making your final decision.

• Describe any changes you plan to make to your curriculum or coursework.

• Describe the approximate workload.

• Ask the applicant why they are interested in TAing and what related experience and coursework they have.

• Let them ask questions about the position and confirm that they have no qualms with the job description and time commitment.

• Ask about their technical skills (e.g. programming languages, \LaTeX, web design, etc.)

• Review their knowledge of the course material. It may be helpful to have a few sample questions on hand.

• Review an interactive teaching situation (“Pretend you’re on hours and I am a student. Don’t worry about sounding like you’re patronizing me; talk the way you would to an average student on hours.”)

• Ask them what improvements and changes they would like to make to the course.

• Tell them when you expect to be contact applicants with offers. Note that this will be after the hiring meeting with the Meta-TAs. Do not contact applicants about their hiring status before this meeting.

You should take notes from your interviews. You may wish to determine a set of criteria (e.g. “past teaching experience”, “understanding of course material”, “enthusiasm for topic”, etc.) and then give each applicant some kind of 1-10 score for each category. Make sure to schedule time in between interviews to discuss your thoughts on each candidate with your professor. Spacing out interviews will also help your energy levels and recollection, and it will give you a buffer in case your interviews run behind schedule.

3.4 Interviewing: the “Don’t”s

Remember that you may not, under any circumstances, interview an applicant on your own. There should always be at least two representatives of your course present: you and your professor, you and another head TA, etc.

There are also a few questions which you are not lawfully permitted to ask of your applicants. The university explains at http://brown.edu/about/administration/student-employment/sites/brown.edu.about.administration.student-employment/files/EMPLOYER_HB_Nov2013.pdf in Section VII.a.ii, “Questions You May Not Ask”

Additionally, department policy states that you are not permitted to ask your applicants whether they have applied to other courses, what other courses they have applied to, what their course preferences are, etc.

3.5 Ranking candidates

After you have completed your interviews, please note that you are not authorized to begin making offers to the applicants you would like to hire, as they may be in contention with another course. Instead, you should decide which of your candidates are “above threshold” (i.e., you would be willing to make them an offer) and which are not. You should then rank the above-threshold candidates in order of preference, with your most desired applicants at the top. Please do not attempt to game the system, as this will result in delays in the hiring process. Do not include ties, or separate your applicants into different groups and then order the groups by preference. If you are unable to properly rank your preferences, then we will not take them into account when resolving conflicts.
Also note that faculty are ultimately responsible for the selection of UTAs. They do, of course, base this heavily on input from the HTAs.

3.6 The UTA hiring meeting

The hiring meeting is held after UTA applications close and courses have had a chance to interview candidates and discuss their preferences.

Many students apply to TA more than one course. The hiring meeting resolves the conflicts which arise from the contention for these applicants. All courses who wish to hire one or more UTAs should have at least one HTA present, although ideally all HTAs should be in attendance.

Conflicts are resolved taking a number of factors into account, including the students’ preferences as stated in their applications. However, at times these preferences are not followed to avoid short-staffing a course.

3.7 Notifying applicants

After the hiring meeting, you should send notices to all of the applicants you have been authorized to hire informing them that you would like to offer them the job and need to know whether they accept. At this point, you should not yet notify the applicants who are above threshold but who were not at the top of your list that you do not wish to hire them. (However, you may send an e-mail to the applicants who were below threshold informing them that you will not be able to hire them.) Once each of your applicants has replied definitively, tell the Meta-TAs if all have accepted, or if not, how many declined. Do not send offers to any applicants who were above threshold but whom you were not originally authorized to hire. They may be in contention. The Meta-TAs will determine who else on your list is not in contention with any other courses.

Once you have successfully hired as many TAs as your course was allocated, you may send notices to your remaining applicants informing them that you are unable to offer them a position at this time. After all courses have been fully staffed, the Meta-TAs will post the list of all hires to announce. After this post is made, you will want to make sure your UTA alias and group are updated, as you did with your HTA alias and group.

4 Staff organization and training

Congratulations! At this point, you have a staff of UTAs hand-picked by you, your co-HTAs, and your professor. You will now want to begin preparing for TA camp and the coming semester.

4.1 Hand-off meeting

If possible, get together with the previous semesters’ HTAs and the professor. This is one of the best ways to get on-track with the myriad course-specific details related to development, administration, and staff organization. You may wish to ask them questions about what they would change about last year’s curriculum or how the course was run, what issues they ran into, etc.

4.2 Pre-semester gathering

You should try to get your UTAs and professor together at least once before the end of the semester so they can meet one another and start discussing their goals for the course. You may also wish to use this time to go over general TA responsibilities, assign individual TA jobs, etc.

4.3 Before TA camp

Your course may or may not have a TA camp, depending on the size and experience of your staff and how much development needs to be done for a particular semester. Please make sure your staff knows
to be back in time for the mandatory UTA Orientation even if there is no camp.

If you are having TA camp, choose dates once the Office of Residential Life releases information regarding early housing. Inability to attend TA camp is not grounds for turning down an applicant. Some people come from far away (and perhaps have already purchased plane tickets at great expense) and requiring that all staff attend TA camp introduces bias into the hiring process. That being said, you may require very good reason for not attending TA camp.

The absolute earliest date that students living on-campus can move in to their dorms is set by Residential Life and can be found here: http://www.brown.edu/Administration/ResLife/dates.html

The department will pay for TAs to move in early beginning the day before the start of their TA camp (e.g., if your TA camp starts on August 30th, your TAs may move in as early as August 29th without having to pay any fees). The Meta-TAs will request certain information from you regarding which of your TAs are moving in to a dorm early, when they are moving in, what their Banner IDs are, etc. It is vital that you supply them with this information as soon as possible, and certainly before the deadline they set. Failure to do so may result in your TAs not being able to move in early.

UTAs returning early for TA camp are unable to use campus eateries. However, all TAs, including those who are TAing for course credit, will be paid hourly for time spent during TA camp. All TAs should be sure to log their hours promptly.

### 4.4 During TA camp

One of the first things you will want to accomplish during TA camp is getting your TAs the same building and departmental card access as you have (see section 2, “Immediate tasks”). You will also want to figure out some course logistics, such as whether you will need a handin or handback bin, whether you will need a course locker, when you want to hold lab, and when/where your TAs will hold hours. A few things to keep in mind while scheduling TA hours:

- Avoid having all of your hours on the same day.
- Avoid having all of your hours at the same time on different days (especially the same time on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays or Tuesdays and Thursdays).
- Avoid holding hours before 5 p.m., when many students are still in class.
- Avoid being a jerk with your course’s hours schedule. If your homeworks are due on Tuesday mornings, do not schedule all of your hours on Tuesday nights. You should be scheduling your hours to maximize the number of students who will be able to use them, not to avoid students.
- Be flexible: you may have to reschedule some of your hours to avoid overcrowding the Fishbowl and the Moonlab.

And again, remember to keep track of how much your UTAs are working during TA camp!

### 4.5 Staff organization

There are many ways to divide up responsibilities among your UTAs. Here are a few of the classic methods used by past HTAs:

- TA jobs: web TA, scripts TA, grades TA, etc.
- Put each UTA or pair of UTAs in charge of a project, from start to finish. This can include editing handouts and rubrics, running helpsessions, etc.
- Assign two or three TAs to each category of assignment (e.g. labs, sections, homeworks, projects).
- For classes with problem sets, split up solution and rubric writing on a per-problem or per-week basis.
5 Reference

5.1 Administrative reference

5.1.1 Class

Textbook and Classroom These will be determined by your professor.

If you would like to put your course text on reserve in the library, talk to your professor and have
them make a request via OCRA. For more information, visit http://dl.lib.brown.edu/reserves/
and http://dl.lib.brown.edu/reserves/about.php. If there are any questions about the reservation
process, please contact Rock-Reserves@brown.edu.

Syllabus Depending on the professor you are working with, your course will put together some kind
of syllabus with project/homework deadlines in it. Deciding who creates this document and sets these
deadlines is between you and your professor.

Major deadlines are usually discussed with other HTAs at the beginning of the semester so that the
Sunlab isn’t overwhelmed by multiple assignments due on the same day. Also keep in mind that it puts
undue pressure on the consultant (and students, for that matter) when assignments are due after the lab
closes. Be sure to double-check holiday schedules across a variety of faiths when considering due dates
and late policies.

5.1.2 Money

TA Salary TAs are paid according to the following formulae:

\[
\text{UTA pay} = $8.90 + $0.20 \times \text{number of semesters previously TAed} \\
\text{HTA pay} = $9.20 + $0.20 \times \text{number of semesters previously TAed}
\]

In order to be paid, you need to fill out an I-9 form. If you have worked for Brown before, you have
already been cleared and do not need to worry about this. If not, visit Brown Human Resources (on the
3rd Floor of the Brown Office Building) and fill out a form there, providing the required identification.
A passport or a combination of state-issued ID and social security card work nicely. You can also refer to
the full list on page 3 of the I-9: http://www.brown.edu/about/administration/human-resources/
sites/brown.edu.about.administration.human-resources/files/I-9.pdf

As a head TA, you should instruct each of your UTAs to do this. If a UTA does not complete their I-9
before the end of the first pay period, they will receive a reminder from the Meta-TAs.

Logging Hours All TAs who are working for pay are required to log their hours and submit timesheets
using the university time tracking application, Workday. You can access Workday at http://brown.
.edu/go/wd.

Timesheets are due on a weekly basis: Saara Moskowitz (who is in charge of payroll) will send an email
to all student employees weekly as a reminder of this deadline.

Hours submitted late are a major hassle for the TA program. Please make an effort to have all of the
timesheets for your course submitted on time.

Note that during TA camp all TAs (those who are TAing for credit and those who are not) should be
logging hours in order to be paid. However, all hours should reflect work that is being done on the
course; no TAs should be logging hours for social events.

Discretionary funds Each course is allotted a small amount of money to use on food for its TAs
during long grading meetings. The standard amount is $3 per student still enrolled in the course via
Banner after a few weeks of classes. You may access this money through your professor’s administrative
assistant, or if he or she does not have one, through Lori Agresti (laa). Whenever you want to order
pizza, buy sodas, or go out to dinner, you should go see your professor’s admin or Lori first. If you or
one of your UTAs purchases food for your staff and wishes to be reimbursed for it, the receipt must
be kept. If you do not have the receipt, the department will have no way to reimburse you.
5.1.3 Facilities

Reserving a room The first step towards reserving a room is to check if it is listed on [http://www.cs.brown.edu/places](http://www.cs.brown.edu/places). If so, see if it is occupied at the time you would like to reserve it for. If the online schedule shows the room is not occupied, you should contact the person or group responsible for managing that room with the date, time, and name of the event you are reserving it for (“csXXX grading meeting” will suffice, for example) with mta@cs.brown.edu CC’ed on the email. The person or group responsible should be indicated next to the schedule link on the page. If a room is not listed online, send an email to mta@cs.brown.edu and the Meta TAs will help you in reserving the room.

Remember to make your reservations well in advance of the actual event. Keep in mind, you may not be able to reserve the room you want at the time you need it. You will not want to go through the trouble of contacting all of your students to tell them there has been a last-minute change in plans.

Which room you reserve is determined by the capacity you need, whether your event is for students or TAs, and whether you need any special equipment (computers, projectors, etc.). Please note that the upper-level floors are closed to non-TA undergraduate students after business hours, so events attended by students should never be scheduled on floors three and above after 5:00 p.m. The following rooms are available for reservation:

Contact the MTAs (mta@cs.brown.edu) to reserve:

- The Fishbowl (aka Birdcage, CIT 271) and the Moonlab (CIT 219)
  The Fishbowl and Moonlab are where TA hours are typically held. A course typically picks one of these rooms to hold hours in and sticks with it to avoid confusion among students. TAs have access to the Fishbowl and may choose to work there at any time. The Moonlab, however, is shared with the Registrar and may be occupied during the day. TAs often use the Fishbowl for doing work on their courses while hours are not being held. Students, however, should not be allowed to work in the Fishbowl. Usage priority for nodes in the Fishbowl is as follows: (1) TAs currently helping students on hours, (2) TAs on hours, (3) TAs off-hours doing TA-related work, (4) all other TA usage.

- CIT 219
  This space, like the Moonlab, is shared with the Registrar, so you may not be able to access it during the day. You may reserve it for recitations or helpsessions during the evening.

- The TA Laboratory (CIT 348)
  The TA Lab is a room for TAs to do course-related work. No students are permitted in this room—it is not for holding hours or interactive grading. Unless there is a shortage of machines, TAs are welcome to do non-TA work in this room as well. It has around ten nodes.

- The ”New I-Lab”/”J-Lab” (CIT 367)
  During business hours, this room is open for general use. However, after business hours it is only accessible to TAs. Many programming-intensive courses choose to reserve this room for grading meetings because of it has more nodes than the TA Lab (15 in total, to be exact).

Contact the Head Consultant DJ Hoffman (dj) to reserve:

- Sunlab
  You may reserve a few rows of the Sunlab for labs or helpsessions which require students to do work at a node. Most rows have eight nodes, and there are nine and a half rows.

- MSLab
  You may reserve the MSLab for labs or helpsessions which require students to do work at a node which runs Windows. It has around 20 nodes. While there are some Linux machines in the MSLab (specifically, every large, single-screened node can be switched between Windows and Linux by hitting Scroll Lock twice), Windows users always
have priority in the MSLab. Usage priority for the MSLab is as follows: (1) students doing coursework on Windows, (2) students doing coursework on Linux, (3) all other usage.

Contact reception@cs.brown.edu to reserve:

- **Motorola Room (CIT 165)**
  This first-floor lecture hall is popular for helpsessions for large courses. Its seating capacity is around 80.

- **CIT 345**
  This third-floor conference room is located across from the TA Lab and has one node, A/V equipment, and a round table which seats roughly 15.

- **Lubrano**
  This fourth-floor lecture hall has one node and A/V equipment. It is excellent for presentations, but not the best choice for round-table discussions.

- **CIT 506**
  This fifth-floor conference room, located next to the SPOC Office, has one node, A/V equipment, and a round table which seats roughly 20.

- **CIT 368**
  This third-floor conference room, located near the atrium, has one node, A/V equipment, and desks that seat roughly 60.

- **Atriums**
  The main area of the 3rd, 4th and 5th floors are sometimes used for meetings, talks, trainings, or sometimes design checks. Please keep in mind that there are offices around so meetings during the day should be kept quiet and to a minimum.

**Lockers, bins, etc.** Courses have three main forms of physical storage available to them: lockers (which students have no access to), handin bins (which students can drop things off in, but not collect things from), and handback bins (which students can access, but only while the Fishbowl is open). All are located in the second floor, in or near the Fishbowl. These are assigned according to need at the start of the semester. The combinations for the lockers are maintained by the MTA-admin. The keys to the hand-in bins are available from Lori Agresti (laa, CIT 312).

**Card access** Building access (CIT building and stairwell) is managed by Lori Agresti (laa, CIT 312) and department card access (Fishbowl, TA Lab, J-Lab) is managed by Kathy Kirman (kpk, CIT 572). For more information, see Section 2, “Immediate tasks”.

### 5.1.4 Resources

**Printing** Courses are not permitted to use the fourth-floor copy machine. All printed materials should be printed from machines in the CIT. *Only vital materials may be printed.* Examples of vital materials include exams and collaboration policies. Examples of non-vital materials include course missives, syllabi, homeworks, and homework solutions. If you have questions about what constitutes “vital” material, direct them to the Meta-TAs. Your professor’s administrative assistant may also be able to assist you.

**Supplies** All TAs have access to some necessary office supplies for TA-related work. They are kept in the copy room on the 4th floor. These supplies include pens and pencils, notepads, and whiteboard markers.
5.2 Technical details

5.2.1 Mail forwarding

You must set up email forwarding. This can be done using either a .forward file in your home directory or the mailconfig script. More details are available on the department’s email web page http://cs.brown.edu/system/email/forwarding.html.

Make sure UTAs for your course do the same so that you and your students will be able to contact them easily.

5.2.2 Mail aliases

Mail aliases (not to be confused with groups) control where mail addressed to XXX@cs.brown.edu gets sent. To check where mail is sent for a given alias run praliases <alias>.

The HTAs should be in the csXXXheadtas alias and all UTAs and HTAs should be in the csXXXtas alias. An alias’s members are controlled by sending an email to problem@cs.brown.edu.

Including your professor in the TA and HTA aliases is a good thing for the sake of professionalism and helps your professor keep in touch with what students are asking TAs. Talk to your professor about their preferences.

You can set up the list subscribers and preferences at http://lists.cs.brown.edu by following these steps:

1. Sign in to the list management site at https://lists.cs.brown.edu/sympa/ using your brown CS username and LDAP password.
2. Click on your course lists on the left sidebar.
3. Choose ”Admin” on the left sidebar and then ”Manage Subscribers”.
4. Add yourselves (and your professors if they are typically on the TA lists) to these lists as subscribers.

Some configuration things you might want to do (both in Sending/receiving setup):

- Change who can send emails to the list
- Add not_reception mode to options (so you don’t get your own emails)

Student groups will also be set up this way once the semester starts.

5.2.3 Groups

Each user is a member of certain groups which determine which files they have access to on department machines. You can check which groups a user is in by running groups <user>. To list all users who are in a certain group run members <group>.

Each course has a TA group (csXXXta), an HTA group (csXXXhta), and a student group (csXXXstudent). The meta-TAs will set up the TA and HTA groups once hiring decisions have been announced. If you need any corrections made, you can request changes by mailing problem or mta. tstaff will send out instructions on getting all students into your course’s student group at the beginning of the semester.

In addition to file permissions, groups are also used by the the handin program (handin) to determine if a user is allowed to hand in assignments for a class (users must be in the TA group or student group for a course in order to hand in) and by the groups hook to load course hooks during shell initialization. A few other tools rely on groups for determining enrollment in a class.
5.2.4 Test accounts

All courses are entitled to a test account. These are accounts which are set up to have the same permissions as a student of your course to allow for testing course programs and scripts without TA permissions.

To see if your course already has a test account run groups csXXX000, this should show that the user is in the csXXXstudent group. If you receive an error message stating that there is no such user you can email problem to request the account be created. If the account exists check your course directory for a file containing the account’s password (typically in /course/csXXX/admin/csXXX000.kerbpass). If you cannot determine the password for an existing test account you can email problem to have the password reset, but please record the password in a place where it will be easy for future TAs to find.

Some things you should always try using a test account:

- your student hooks
- any software being supported especially for your course
- Windows paths and settings (if you are using Windows)
- your handin scripts and any other scripts you have students run

5.2.5 Course directories

Each course has a directory to store course course-related materials, including grades, course development work, student handins, project support code, etc. Non-course related files should never be stored in the course directory. Before the semester begins at least one of the head TAs for your course should go through the course directory, cleaning up and organizing as as necessary.

Permissions Every file in your course directory should be owned by either the TA group or HTA group and be group writable, otherwise other TAs (and future TAs) will not be able to edit the files. To help enforce this you should make sure that the setgid bit is set on all directories. This bit will force all new files within that directory to be created with the same group as the directory itself. To set this bit run chmod g+s <dir>. To give students access to files make them globally readable (but not writable).

Make sure that any lists or documents relating to TA hiring and old grades are readable only by HTAs.

It is important for files in the course directory to be organized in an intuitive way based on their permissions. Files with permissions other than TA-only (e.g. world-readable assignment handouts and the HTA-only documents) should be isolated in their own directories (e.g. handout for assignment handouts and admin/hta for HTA-only administrative files). This makes (manual and automated) permissions checking much easier.

If a file accidentally ends up with incorrect permissions or groups HTAs can use the chmod! and chgrp! commands to fix them. These commands are similar to the standard chmod and chgrp commands.

Directory structure Exact layouts vary from course to course, but normally they include a bin/ directory for course-specific binaries and scripts students will run, a tabin/ for TA-only scripts and binaries, an admin/ directory for administrative files (grades, student list, test account password, a TODO for the next year, etc.). The startups, handin, and www directories are dedicated to special purposes described elsewhere in this document.

You should also include a README in the root of your course directory describing its layout.

It is a good idea to keep TODO files associated with projects and handouts listing things which should be fixed in future years. This is where you should list complaints and suggestions from students as well as any good ideas you come up with which cannot be implemented immediately.

5.2.6 Snapshots

The department file server features snapshots. This means that every four hours a ‘snapshot’ of the current state of all files is taken. This snapshot can be accessed through the .snapshots directory (it
exists within every directory on the file system, but will not be listed by the ls command or shown when using your shell's tab-completion functionality, however any command which uses it will succeed, try running ls .snapshots within your course directory). The .snapshots directory contains subdirectories named with the GMT timestamp of the time the snapshot in that directory was taken, for example /course/cs167/asgn/.snapshots/@GMT-2010.08.04-08.00.02 contains a snapshot of the /course/cs167/asgn/ directory taken at 8 AM on August 4th, 2010.

The contents of the .snapshots directory is read-only, however you can restore your files by copying them back in to the regular file system.

The department information page on snapshots is available at:

http://cs.brown.edu/system/snapshots/

WARNING: No one (not even root) can modify snapshots. This means that if a file is left world-readable long enough for it to become part of a snapshot, it will remain world-readable in that snapshot until the snapshot expires (at worst this can take several weeks). Therefore it is very important to make sure that permissions are set correctly on sensitive materials such as grades and solutions.

5.2.7 Web

Each course has a web directory at /pro/web/web/courses/csXXX, which should be symlinked from /course/csXXX/www.

This directory should contain a home.html or index.html file, which will be the home page for your course website. You can access your course website by going to:

http://www.cs.brown.edu/courses/csXXX/

You will probably want to limit accessability to certain parts of your web page (e.g. solutions, online book, etc.). To restrict access to a file (e.g. based on client IP address), use an .htaccess file (http://httpd.apache.org/docs/current/howto/htaccess.html, http://cs.brown.edu/system/web/restrict.html). Keep in mind that anyone with a department account can browse your web directory, using .htaccess files will not change this.

5.2.8 Student accounts

If your course uses the department’s computer systems, you will need to inform tstaff about the students in your class so we can add users to your csXXXstudent group and create accounts for the students who need them.

Instructions for doing so can be found on the department wiki here:

https://wiki.cs.brown.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Student_Groups_and_Accounts

5.2.9 Startups

The department provides special startup hooks which are executed by every user on login based on the groups they belong to. Users in the student group for a course will run the /local/projects/hooks/courses/csXXXstudent hook. Users in the TA group for a course will run the /local/projects/hooks/courses/csXXXta hook. In order to make changes to your course’s hooks, contact the MTA-tech.

Remember that hooks must be run by the user’s shell, so the hooks file must only contain shell-independent commands. Hook files also should not be very invasive, they should not modify any of the students files, including configuration files (directly or indirectly).

The default hook file adds the /course/csXXX/bin directory to student’s paths and the /course/csXXX/tabindir directory to TA’s paths.
5.2.10 Printing

Per department printing policies, undergraduate work is to be printed to the CIS printers or bw1 in the Sunlab. However, course TAs can use department printers when producing course-related materials:

- bw2 - in the Fishbowl
- bw3 - in the 3rd floor hallway between the elevators
- bw4 - in the copy room
- bw5 - on the 5th floor behind the elevator

If a printer is not working or print queues are stuck, TAs should not attempt to fix the problem themselves; they should instead mail to problem.

Courses should not print any handouts for students other than the course collaboration policy. Assignment/project handouts, lecture slides, etc. should be distributed in electronic form via your course website.

Sensitive materials should be printed to bw3, bw4, or bw5 and picked up immediately.

There is a printer in the sunlab bw1. Security is a large concern with this printer, as it is accessible to all undergrads. Each course should formulate policies describing what is and isn’t allowed to be printed to the sunlab printer, and make those policies known to the students. The consultants have the ability to take sunlab printing privileges away from students who violate the policies or abuse the printer.

5.2.11 Backups and restore requests

Restores of course directories, and in researching collaboration violations, home directories, are available on request, but can take up to two days. A head TA should run restore_request.

Note that snapshots are the preferred way for handling restores; see the discussion on snapshots in the section on course directories.

5.2.12 Tstaff support

Expert tech support The MTA-tech is available for a reasonable amount of tech support on startups, scripting, software maintenance, web maintenance, permissions and course directory organization, user applications, and of course, the supported software. This is available to HTAs, plus any UTAs who are working on the more technical aspects of the course.

Note that, while you are not really required to use any of the supported software, the MTA-tech might not be willing to provide much support for an alternative solution if there’s a supported solution you’re not taking advantage of.

Other requests Courses may submit general technical requests to tstaff by emailing problem.

5.2.13 /admin/tasupport

/admin/tasupport is a repository for scripts, documents, and other software developed by individual courses but that might, today or some other day, be useful to other courses. These programs are not officially supported, though tech support is available per usual.

Permissions are fairly open, making it possible for people to reorganize things and tweak other people’s solutions.

Everything in this directory is in group tasupport. Students working on useful scripts for courses can be added to this group.
5.2.14 Supported software & environments

There are a few projects that are either developed or supported by the mta-tech (proactively or on demand), or are recommended solutions that the mta-tech is knowledgeable about and willing to support.

- the CS classes for \LaTeX, and texmake, a build environment for \LaTeX
- a java obfuscator
- moss, a tool for checking code similarities
- sorting mail with procmail
- the default startups and the identity hooks
- the handin program and a simple handin script
- a simple grade-management tool (Evalpig)
- consultant minicourses

5.3 Miscellaneous reference

5.3.1 Collaboration

Situations of suspected collaboration are among the most stressful and frustrating situations experienced by TAs, professors, and the students suspected of policy violation.

TAs should be proactive in alerting their head TAs and professors to cases of suspected inappropriate collaboration. However, their involvement in the investigation ends there.

HTAs may be asked to assist the professor “off-line” in documenting the grounds for a code violation charge but should under no circumstances be present if students are confronted on a charge. They may also be asked to testify in a dean’s hearing.

Collaboration observed in the lab or in other public spaces should be brought to the attention of a head TA, who should, if possible, confront the individual at the time of the occurrence, then bring the incident to the attention of any other head TAs and the professor. As a head TA, you should instruct your UTAs as to what course of action they should take when encountering collaboration in the lab. There should be no improvisation: tell your UTAs exactly what they should do and say in these situations.

All information relating to collaboration policy infractions is extremely confidential and only released on a need-to-know basis. UTAs working on identifying collaboration cases should report their findings to head TAs, but must not discuss them with the rest of the staff. Similarly, head TAs should not be made aware of the actual outcome of a case unless it pertains to the course (i.e. they need to know if the student received a directed NC on an assignment or in the course; all other outcomes should be phrased as “the issue has been resolved”). This is a university policy, designed for the students’ protection, which we take very seriously.

The Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Department Chair are the only other people who may be involved in these cases.

Brown’s Academic Code:

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/curriculum/academic_code.php

5.3.2 Struggling students

The first thing to worry about is identifying students who are having trouble. There are many ways to do this, depending on how your course works. Low grades on homeworks or projects are useful, but sometimes indicate just bad time management skills rather than trouble with the material. Labs or other situations where TAs get to watch students working with the material directly are more useful. Note students who consistently don’t finish labs on time. Talking to students, whether during labs, on hours, in interactive grading, etc. is very useful also. Note who tends to have the most misconceptions about the
material, and who tends to come to hours the most with very general questions and misunderstandings (as opposed to just clarifications).

After the first month or so of classes, it is possible to form an idea of which students are consistently having trouble and are in danger of failing if nothing changes. Do not wait until the middle of the semester to do something with this information. Try to act on it as soon as possible so that students have the greatest number of options available to them.

Meet with your professor (if you don’t do that already) and talk about these students. Each TA is likely to know about only some subset of the students, so make sure everyone gets to talk. Mention examples of things that they asked on hours that you would not have expected anyone to ask. Talk about their performance in lab. Try to get a sense of why they’re having trouble (lack of time, bad time management, emotional issues, lack of effort, etc.) and make sure other TAs know about all of this so that they know what to expect from these students on hours and in labs.

Make sure the professor is aware of students who are having trouble, and have him or her try talking to them as soon as possible. The easiest way to do this is to have the professor send them an email asking them to come to office hours or set up an appointment.

Try to give some special attention to these students (within reason). Keep them interested in the class by acting enthusiastic and interested on hours and complimenting their work in labs. When trying to help them on hours, be sure not to assume they understand previously covered concepts, and be prepared to explain material from weeks ago, if they never really learned it then.

Students that struggle in a course often consider dropping it for one reason or another. There is not much you can do about this besides being understanding when students ask for extensions, but there will be students who struggle and do not ask. When a project is due, keep an eye out for students who hand in nothing. Try to contact each of them individually if you can after any late-handin deadline is passed. This way you find out about any handin problems or personal emergencies, and it will be helpful and appreciated. It is a great way to help people avoid dropping out of the course.

### 5.3.3 Institutional memory

Future iterations of the course can benefit greatly from constructive advice left behind by former UTAs and HTAs. The professor can do a lot in this role as well. Without recording your history, you really will end up repeating it.

You may wish to implement any (or all!) of the following suggestions in order to help your course improve for future generations of TAs and students:

- Maintain TODO files for all projects, labs, etc.
- Hold a hand-off meeting with next year’s HTAs. Come with a few things in mind that you would like to bring up and let them ask questions.
- Write up a concise week-by-week timeline for the course: what needs to be happening at each part of the semester?

### 5.3.4 Student technical support

Students can receive technical assistance not directly related to course-specific software (e.g. remote login issues, limited shells, etc.) from the Sunlab consultants. Introductory-level courses should acquaint their students with the basics of Linux if they intend to use it during the semester, but after that, students should direct their questions to the consultant on duty. In addition, consultants can do a systems presentation at an introductory course’s first labs; please contact the head consultant for more information.


Please distribute this remote login information to your students. Try to avoid using a different set of instructions for your course.
5.3.5 HTA recruiting

Toward the end of your class, you should ask your UTAs to consider their interest in HTAing the following year. If course development seems worth doing, the summer before is really the time to do it (even for spring courses!). Getting the current UTAs thinking ahead to the following year may also encourage them to put some extra thought into long-term goals and to write down ideas as they go.

5.3.6 End-of-semester tasks

Before you shake off the burden of responsibility for your course, please remember to take care of wrapping up your course at the end of the semester.

- Clean out your course’s locker, handin bin, and handback bin. These should be emptied before the end of the semester. *Do not leave any important, confidential, or otherwise valuable papers in these cabinets.* Anything left in any one of them will be thrown out before the next semester.
- Return your handin bin key to Lori Agresti (laa, CIT 312).
- If any students have incompletes, put a list together and circulate it to the professor and other head TAs, and keep reasonably close tabs on them. You should also send the names and logins to the Meta-TAs so that these students’ accounts and identities will not be deleted.
- Plan for an HTA organizational meeting with the professor and the next year’s HTAs. If this is not possible, arrange for an in-person or written “exit interview” to pass on some official course-specific advice to the next HTAs.
- Clean out your course directory. Remove unnecessary material, like handins, etc.

6 Conclusion

Phew! That is quite a lot of information. If you have questions about anything covered in this document, or feel that something has been left out, or are just puzzled about what to do as a head TA, do not hesitate to contact the Meta-TAs at mta@cs.brown.edu.