Brown University

Department of Computer Science

UTA Missive

Meta-TAs and The Director of Undergraduate Studies
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0 About this document

This document is intended to outline the various responsibilities of undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) within the Department of Computer Science. It is far from exhaustive, as every course has its own approach to teaching. However, it should serve as a description of the role of the UTA within the department, as well as a guide to our departmental policies and procedures. For an explanation of the specific TA duties for a given course, please contact that course’s head teaching assistant (HTA) or professor.

1 Introduction to the UTA program

Our department’s commitment to an enriched undergraduate experience is reflected in its unique undergraduate teaching assistant program. Every semester, the most talented and dedicated of our undergraduate students assist faculty members in the administration of courses large and small. With a UTA-to-student ratio of approximately 1:10, we are able to offer more personalized instruction and meaningful feedback to our students.

1.1 Structure

Every computer science course is assigned at least one head teaching assistant. Particularly large courses, especially those under level 1000, often have two or three HTAs. An HTA is responsible for dealing with most of the administrative and logistical details of running the course, delegating tasks to a staff of UTAs, and overseeing their work. The chain of command for a CS course is typically: professor → HTA → UTA. However, this may differ in smaller courses or according to the professor’s preferences.

The UTA program is coordinated by two Meta-TAs, who handle administrative and technical details, including the hiring and training of TAs. The MTAs report to the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

1.2 Relevance

The UTA program is one of the most important aspects of an education in computer science at Brown University. Our dedicated staff of TAs allows us to assign more interesting coursework, offer more detailed feedback, and hold more office hours. The TAs themselves benefit from working closely with a professor, developing the types of skills sought-after by employers and graduate schools, and having the great satisfaction of helping their peers learn the material. Ultimately, the UTA program is indispensable to our department’s culture.

1.3 Candidate eligibility

Students who have been convicted of academic code violations are not eligible to be hired as a UTA or HTA. Those not in good academic standing should generally not serve as TAs. Students on academic warning who believe that they can manage being a TA should speak with Thomas Doeppner (twd) The position of UTA requires responsibility, integrity, and confidentiality.

2 UTA duties

Each course will assign its TAs different duties based on how the professor wishes to approach the material. However, some basic responsibilities are expected of all TAs.

2.1 Essential functions

Almost, if not all, UTAs are expected to:
• hold office hours in which students may approach them with questions regarding assignments or material covered in class;
• grade assignments (written and/or programmed), exams, etc. according to standards and criteria established by the professor;
• respond to emails sent to their course’s TA alias (e.g. cs000tas@cs.brown.edu) in a timely manner;
• attend TA camp, a preparatory period before the start of the semester, and a TA orientation organized by the Meta-TAs;
• adhere to all university and department policies and procedures, including but not limited to those described in this document;
• attend regular staff meetings; and
• conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times, both inside and outside of the CIT.

2.2 Additional tasks

Many courses will also require TAs to:

• run lab sessions in the Sun Lab or MS Lab;
• prepare and present help sessions for projects and upcoming exams.
• hold interactive grading sessions for design checks and programming assignments;
• develop new assignments (which may entail writing new support code) and improve old ones; and/or
• manage a course web site.

2.3 Tasks not handled by UTAs

Some tasks are out of the scope of a UTA’s responsibilities. For example, UTAs do not:

• assign final grades and enter them in Banner;
• teach courses, unless invited to give a guest lecture by the professor;
• prosecute cases of alleged academic misconduct; or
• grant extensions or Incompletes to students.

2.4 Substandard performance

UTAs who are unable to perform the basic functions of their job satisfactorily will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In extreme situations, a UTA may be dismissed for poor performance.

3 Hours

Most UTAs hold two or more office hours a week, in addition to hours held by their professor. In some situations, such as right before a major assignment is due, TAs may hold supplemental hours in addition to their scheduled office hours. In general, you should only be helping one student at a time on hours, and other students seeking your expertise should wait either in the foyer outside of the Fishbowl or at a node in another room. Sometimes, you will find it more convenient to help a few students who have the same question at the same time, but be aware of how crowded your space is becoming.
3.1 Location and timing

You should hold your office hours at the time and in the place assigned by your HTA. Hours are always held in public places, never in private areas, such as a dorm or apartment. Almost all courses hold their hours in either the Fishbowl (CIT 271) or the Moonlab (CIT 227). Hours are not held in the Sun Lab. Please respect whatever facility you are assigned to. Do not leave behind trash. Keep the door to the room you are in open, but do not prop the doors to any of the stairwells. If you shift around monitors or chairs, put the room back together before leaving. Also, if you are the last TA to leave the Fishbowl or the Moonlab at night, turn off the lights and close the door after you.

It is your responsibility to arrive at your hours on time and to be appropriately prepared. Do not be late, do not wander away from your post, and do not cancel your hours at the last minute. If you know in advance that you will be unable to attend your hours, try to trade times with another TA. If no other TA is available, then contact your HTA to reschedule your hours for another time that week. If there is ever a change to your course’s schedule, email your students to inform them of it.

A note on facilities: students should not work in the Fishbowl or the Moonlab. If they need to log on for whatever reason, try to have them sux into their accounts instead of allowing them to grab a node of their own. Priority usage for machines in the Moonlab and Fishbowl is as follows:

1. TAs on hours, using a machine to help a student;
2. TAs on hours, using a machine for other TA-related work;
3. TAs on hours, doing their own work;
4. TAs off hours, doing any TA-related work; and finally,
5. TAs off hours, doing their own work.

If someone with a higher priority than you needs a machine, you may be asked to log off.

3.2 Waitlists

Keep a waitlist for your course on the whiteboard while you are on hours. Students should add their logins and whether to zwrite them or look for them outside of the room you are using once you are ready to help them.

TAs for large courses should keep an eye on their waitlists. You may need to cut off your waitlist if it is still growing towards the end of your shift and you are the last TA on hours. You may also want to email your fellow TAs requesting backup if the list gets out of hand.

Do not allow students to ignore the waitlist or add their name in front of others. Do not allow students to add their names to the end of the waitlist immediately after being helped. This is especially important in introductory courses, where some students will continue returning to TA hours without attempting to make progress independently on the assignment.

If there is no one on your waitlist, you may feel free to continue helping a student for as long as you like. However, if you have other students waiting for your help, you may need to limit the attention you give to each individual. Twenty minutes is generally regarded as a decent upper limit for how much time to spend with a single student when others are waiting.

3.3 Grading complaints

If a student comes to you on hours to contest a grade, politely turn them away unless you graded that problem or project. Do not look over their answer. Do not comment on the grade or the grader. Grade complaints can only be handled by the TA who assigned the grade in question or an HTA.
3.4 Teaching tactics

Arrive to your hours well-rested, well-fed, and sober. Make sure you are well-versed in the material that has been covered recently in class. Take a look at whatever assignment is currently out; if you do not feel confident in your ability to solve the problems or your memory of the project is fuzzy, go over the solution key or your old code. Do not bluff your way to an answer; if you are not sure, ask another TA, or tell the student you will investigate and get back to him or her shortly. Giving bad advice on TA hours is harmful not only to the student but also to the TA and the course.

3.5 Dealing with problematic students

Some students under pressure may come to you on hours while angry or depressed. If a student seems under extreme duress and it is clear they will not be able to finish the project/homework before the deadline, gently suggest they have something to eat, get some sleep, and take a late penalty. Do not offer to give the student an extension or Incomplete; only a professor can award these, and the latter will likely involve a recommendation by a Dean who will talk to the student about his or her special circumstances. If the student asks about an extension, refer them to your professor, but do not comment on the likelihood of an extension being granted. If a student is particularly aggressive, we encourage you to leave wherever you usually hold your hours and retreat to the upper-level floors (which students do not have access to) or downstairs to the public atrium (where a Department of Public Safety officer is stationed).

Some students will pressure you for more help than you are allowed to offer them. Do not give them answers or snippets of code. It is not your job to supply your students with the answers; it is your job to help them figure out the answers for themselves.

We strongly discourage discussing course material with students outside of your official hours. If you are approached by a student with questions about the course while you are not on hours, you are not obligated to answer them.

4 Grading

Undergraduate teaching assistants grade much of their students’ assignments, including design checks, problem sets, programs, and exams. These grades are considered a measure of performance and are used by the professor in determining the students’ final grades. It is important to note that while UTAs may grade students’ work, the establishment of grading standards for any assignment and the final recording of grades are done by the course’s professor. **Grading is ultimately the responsibility of the instructor.**

For more information on the grading system of a given course, including its grading meetings, rubrics, late policy, etc., please talk to that course’s HTA or professor.

4.1 Basic Guidelines

Grade in a place your students do not have access to, such as the TA Laboratory (CIT 344), the upper-level floors after business hours, or your room. **Do not grade in the Sun Lab, the Fishbowl, or the Moon Lab.** Grades are a private matter and should not be discussed in public. If a student is present in the area you intend to use for grading, find another space or politely ask them to leave.

Submit your grades on time. If you feel you will not be able to do so, alert your HTA or professor as soon as possible. Missing a deadline reflects poorly on you, your course, your professor, and ultimately our department.
4.2 Fairness

Grade in a fair and consistent manner. If you are grading problem sets, try to have each TA grade only one problem to help maintain consistency. Reach a consensus on how many points to take off for a given mistake and remain faithful to that decision. Remember: the last student you grade should be judged according to the same standards as the first. If you feel that you have made an error in grading, by grading too harshly or too generously or inconsistently, go back through the assignments you graded and adjust accordingly.

It is important that your grading look fair in addition to being fair. Explain whatever point deductions you make and leave clear feedback.

4.3 Suspicious handins

Familiarize yourself with your course’s collaboration policy at the start of the semester. These policies vary from course to course; for example, some programming courses will allow students to debug one another’s code while others forbid so much as looking at another student’s screen. Many courses allow for some amount of collaboration on homeworks, but may not permit taking notes away from collaboration sessions. If you do notice anything suspicious, such as extremely similar code or problem sets, alert your HTA immediately. Possible cases of academic misconduct will be handled by your HTA and your professor.

4.4 Blacklisting

The blacklist may sound ominous, but it is commonly used by TAs who have pre-existing relationships with their students. Your blacklist is a list of students in your course whom you are unable to grade due to a conflict of interest. Potential conflicts of interest include: significant others, former significant others, relatives, close friends, roommates, etc., as well as people with whom you have a personal/professional disagreement or business relationship. Create your blacklist at the start of the semester and add to it when necessary. Never grade a student on your blacklist.

Think of CS TAs as forming a directed graph and avoid cycles. You should not grade TAs of courses you are currently enrolled in, and they should not grade you.

5 Professionalism

As an undergraduate teaching assistant, your behavior reflects on not only your values, but also the culture of our department as a whole. It is critical that you comport yourself in a polite and professional manner at all times.

5.1 Your conduct

Do not speak ill of your students, co-TAs, HTA, professor, or course in public. Do not make disparaging comments about other courses, TAs, professors, or the department in general in public. As a UTA, students will look to you as an example. You will set the tone they will use to describe their experiences within your course and, by extension, the CS department.

Try to appear approachable while on hours. Be patient with your students. Encourage them to ask questions or request that you slow down or repeat explanations. Remember that students of introductory courses may need some guidance when using Linux. Direct them to an online tutorial or consultant if you think they need help using the machines.

Consider the message your behavior, tone, and appearance send to your students. Everything right down to your desktop background should communicate that you are a professional, respectful individual. If
the student does not reciprocate this respectful behavior, ask them to continue their discussion with your HTA, who will have more experience with “difficult” students and may in turn refer them to your professor.

5.2 Interacting with students outside of the CIT

Do not engage in inappropriate relationships with your students. If you find yourself at a non-CS-related social event with one or more of your students, remain professional. Do not consume alcohol or other mind-altering substances with your students. Do not perform illegal activities in front of your students (or at all, for that matter).

5.3 Contributing to a positive work environment

Humor should not come at the expense of others’ comfort. Sexist, racist, and homophobic jokes are never funny. Any joke meant to alienate others is never funny. Be aware of the comments you make while around students and other TAs, even if you are speaking casually to friends.

Though the department encourages the social aspects of working in the Sun Lab and the sense of camaraderie it can foster, do not let your socializing degenerate to the point where it makes the lab overly noisy and unpleasant for students who are trying to concentrate.

6 Miscellanea

You may find the following information useful during your tenure as an undergraduate teaching assistant.

6.1 Compensation

All TAs are paid according to the following formulae:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{UTA pay} & = 8.90 + 0.20 \times (\text{number of semesters previously TAed}) \\
\text{HTA pay} & = 9.20 + 0.20 \times (\text{number of semesters previously TAed})
\end{align*}
\]

6.2 Logging Hours

To log hours for time spent working as a TA, we use Workday. For those of you who are new, you can read about Workday here. You can access Workday at brown.edu/go/wd.

For any/all UTA jobs, log hours under the position titled “Computer Science Undergraduate Teaching Assistant”.

(If you have multiple positions, please make sure to submit hours for the correct position.)

Do not submit the week until you have logged all of the week’s hours. When you are ready to submit, click the large blue button right above the calendar to finalize. Once you have submitted the hours, there will be a page with an empty box for comments at the bottom of the screen. In this comments section, for each position you hold, write the position name and the number of hours for that position.

For example: one week one may write “MTA: 1hr, CS15 HTA: 10hrs”

The Workday week ends on Saturday, so please submit your hours by Saturday at midnight. Once the week ends, you will be unable to edit or submit previous hours and may have to back-log, so please try to make this deadline.

If you are interested in signing up for direct deposit, you can register on the Workday system by clicking the button labeled “Pay”, and then “Payment Elections”.

6.3 Building access

During TA camp, your head TA should ensure that your Brown ID card gives you access to the following rooms:

- the Fishbowl (CIT 271; sometimes referred to as the Birdcage)
- the J-Lab (CIT 367)
- the TA Lab (CIT 348)
- the back and side stairwells

The elevators and stairwells lock after 5 o’clock. Undergraduate students not currently TAing a course are not permitted to the upper-level floors (i.e., floors three, four, and five) after regular business hours.

6.4 Reimbursement

Your course is awarded a small discretionary budget to use on food for long grading meetings. In general, your HTA will take care of ordering and paying for food. However, if you do ever pay for food for your staff, make sure to keep your receipt. It is important to note that when submitting a reimbursement request, you must include the names of the attendees. Please use the attendees’ real names instead of their logins to avoid creating extra work for the administrative staff members (and in turn, causing delays). The department is unable to reimburse TAs for purchases they do not have receipts for. For more information on the reimbursement process, see your professor’s administrative assistant, your HTA, or the current MTA-admin.