

Providing Quality Instruction in the Laboratory: A Training Program for Graduate Student Teaching Assistants

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Although we rely on graduate student teaching assistants (GTAs) for teaching the laboratory component of undergraduate biology courses, more often than not, these GTAs receive little to no guidance in teaching skills and self evaluation. The quality of instruction in the laboratory is very important, because for a lot of students in large lecture biology courses, the lab setting is the only place where they get any direct student-teacher time. The laboratory is also the place where students have opportunities to extend upon the concepts they are learning in lecture. In an attempt to improve teaching in the laboratory, a certificate program for teaching in the life sciences was implemented. In this program, GTAs enroll in a two-semester seminar course. In the first semester, GTAs get the “methods” of teaching, covering such topics as classroom management, questioning skills, grading, assessment, and others. In the second part of the course, GTAs pair up to conduct self and peer-evaluations. During this semester, GTAs videotape each other and complete formal evaluations and plans of actions. GTAs also complete a teaching portfolio and attend at least three university-wide teaching workshops offered through the Graduate School. This program is still under development in collaboration with the Graduate School. Preliminary survey responses by GTAs completing the program suggest that GTAs felt prepared to teach, write and grade assessments, handle difficult moments in the classroom, and set goals for professional development.