

The Carleton TA Mentor Program: Seven Years of Student Facilitated Learning



The Carleton Department of History offers a unique Mentor training program for Teaching Assistants. The program is a collaborative effort between the Department, the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs (FGPA) and the Educational Development Centre (EDC). The FGPA provides funding for the Mentor program, while the EDC trains Mentors and offers different teaching resources across the university. The department selects a senior TA to fill the Mentor position. The Mentor delivers workshops based on the specific needs of students and training priorities the department identifies. The mission statement of the TA Mentor is "...to provide support and advice in an effort to encourage growth and excellence in TAs, the department and Carleton University through coaching, dialogue and counsel."¹ As the TA Mentor for the current academic year, I witnessed firsthand the advantages of a student led training program. In addition to leading and organizing workshops, my role is also to address the concerns of all TAs in the department about questions or challenges they may experience in their Teaching Assistantships. As a part of the university wide TA Mentorship program, I am also able to learn teaching strategies coming from other disciplines. Twelve mentors from different departments meet and share their teaching strategies at different interdisciplinary meetings organized by the EDC. The program provides valuable educational TA resources that are easily accessible as Mentors run training workshops in the department.

The TA mentorship program emerged as response of a larger need at Carleton to improve TA training. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a survey of university students that asks a number of questions related to issues such as student engagement and academic progress.² The 2006 NSSE report revealed that 35% of first-year Carleton University students responded that one of their main concerns was to improve the quality of TAs. The NSSE report influenced the FGPA to amend article 14.01 of the TA Collective Agreement to provide TAs with five hours of paid work for completing training workshops.³ The five hours of training was set in 1994 but this did not guarantee that TAs received paid hours for all years of their teaching assignments. In addition to this effort, the FGPA implemented a TA Mentorship program to provide accessible training opportunities in different departments. The FGPA was responsible for running the program from 2006 to 2009 when

management was transferred to the EDC.⁴ Under the guidance of the EDC, the TA Mentor is responsible for providing relevant departmental workshops. The Department of History was one of the first departments to join the program in 2006.

History mentors lead workshops on a variety of topics. Discussion facilitation was continuously delivered since the beginning of the program, because the majority of Carleton history TAs is responsible for leading weekly discussion groups based on the course readings and lecture material. For incoming TAs who might have never led discussion groups this can be a difficult and challenging part of their teaching responsibilities. The workshop encouraged students to share and reflect on prior teaching or classroom experiences and discuss what makes an effective discussion group. Like always in the past, this workshop was well attended, which demonstrates its importance in introducing new TAs to their roles in the classroom and giving upper year graduate students a chance to meet and mentor new TAs. Other training options offered in the current session included time management, marking and how to confront aboriginal issues in the classroom.

One of the challenges of being TA Mentor is developing relevant training options for the variety of needs of graduate students. For instance, an upper-year PhD student has different needs and interests than a first-year MA student. The Department of History also offers a Research Assistantship for the Carleton Centre for Public History, which demonstrates that not all History TAs have teaching assignments. This influenced the creation of a How to Get Published workshop. The session was facilitated by three faculty members from different historical disciplines who shared their opinion of the best practices to getting published in historical journals in their field. The session was well attended and set a precedent for future workshops to encourage faculty to participate in TA training sessions.

The larger benefits of such a Mentorship program have been manifold. First, by ensuring that all TAs receive a common training, it has set a standard for the learning environment the department as a whole wants to enforce. It also encourages peer-to-peer support among students in the department. Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of the program encourages departments to learn teaching strategies from other disciplines, which can be shared with and benefit TAs.

Photograph taken courtesy of the Carleton Educational Development Centre to illustrate peer to peer instruction in action in the classroom.

¹ Morgan Rooney, "TA Mentor Program: Orientation," (presentation, Carleton University TA Mentor Training, Ottawa, ON, July 31, 2013).

² Martha Attridge Bufton, "Better Teaching Assistants, More Study Space Top of Student List," Carleton Now, February 2007, <http://carletonnow.carleton.ca/february-2007/better-teaching-assistants-more-study-space-top-student-wish-list/>.

³ Rooney, "TA Mentor Program: Orientation." ⁴ Ibid.