

**Third Year Program Report – Fall 2007**  
**The Graduate Student Instructor Program**  
**University of Texas at Austin**  
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## **Executive Summary**

Since its creation in 2004, the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Program has been committed to continued program evaluation and development based on current pedagogical theory and feedback from the graduate students it serves. Notwithstanding the fact that the program is primarily supported by one FTE and two half-time GRAs, we believe that we have improved the professional development of graduate students and made substantial contributions to helping ensure the quality of undergraduate education at UT.

Because of the successes of the GSI Program, we welcome the chance to continue developing graduate student instructor's teaching excellence at UT through balancing current pedagogical theory and best practices. In particular, given the findings of the 2004 Task Force on Curricular Reform which established the *Signature Course Series* as the foundation of undergraduate education, we recognize that we have a specific opportunity to be able to train up to an additional 200 TAs annually who will play an important role in supporting future *Signature Courses*. With this in mind, we look forward to the continued development and expansion of the GSI Program in ways that will continue to support the ongoing pedagogical development of UT's GSI community and the University's mission.

In order to facilitate this development and expansion, we plan to aggressively pursue the following actionable goals: 1) to develop a more robust collaboration with teaching-based departments, 2) to investigate the efficacy of a ASPECTS-based (Advancing Students' Professional Excellence in Teaching Series) Certification Program, in conjunction with current departmental support (i.e., 398T), so as to formalize teaching-based professional development by noting associated teaching portfolio production, 3) to hire additional dedicated staff, 4) to develop inter- and intra-divisional collaborative projects that will provide desired training for 398T faculty, and 5) to advocate for the GSI Program's designation as the centralized coordinating and training entity for GSIs through an integration of the Graduate Student Colloquium, ASPECTS, and 398T as well as a partnership with the Office of Graduate Studies.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to document the progress and success of the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Program and discuss plans to ensure that this success continues in future years. To this end, we demonstrate that the GSI Program is accomplishing its mission to the university, in that it has and continues to provide consistent and effective pedagogical support for teaching assistants and assistant instructors at UT.

## History

Early development of the GSI Program was based on an analysis of similar programs at universities around the country which had documented their successes in preparing graduate students for the demands of teaching undergraduates. Additionally, in the spring of 2004, the GSI Program conducted research—surveyed and interviewed graduate coordinators and graduate student instructors, among others—to identify the needs of GSIs across campus. Based on analyses of both datasets, ASPECTS was created. ASPECTS is composed of a variety of workshops that provide professional development opportunities for GSIs in areas ranging from leading effective discussions to assessing student writing. Also, the GSI Program developed an annual Graduate Student Colloquium to act as a forum where GSIs could network and be exposed to their peers' current best practices for teaching.

Since its creation in 2004, the GSI Program has surveyed and conducted focus groups with graduate coordinators, faculty, and GSIs to ensure relevant and pertinent growth. All workshops and colloquia are evaluated throughout each semester, and, when appropriate, changes are made. In addition, as new needs are identified, we are quick to develop new workshops or series.

## Staff

As previously noted, the GSI Program employs one full-time program coordinator and two part time Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs). However, inter- and intra-division collaborations have allowed the GSI program to create a number of quality services that would normally be impossible with only 80 man-hours of work per week. One of the major successes of the program has been its ability to manage this collaborative process and maintain program quality with a constant eye towards program expansion.

## Population Served

In a typical long semester, there are over 3000 graduate student instructors on the UT Austin campus (see Table 1. below.). Since Fall 2004, over 1000 unique graduate students have attended ASPECTS sessions, attending an average of 3 sessions each. A subset of this group, approximately 300 graduate students, has attended GSI colloquia. In addition, several 398T course instructors consistently request individualized workshop sessions to help support their courses (see Appendix A for a list of these workshops).

TA/AI Headcounts (not FTE)

|      | Fall '05 | Spring '06 | Fall '06 | Spring '07 |
|------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| AI's | 594      | 600        | 609      | 628        |
| TA's | 2,505    | 2,497      | 2,591    | 2,504      |

Table 1. TA/AI Data Provided by Office of Information Management & Analysis. Aug. 2007

## GSI Colloquia

Since Spring 2004, the GSI Program has worked aggressively to provide current, relevant, pedagogical instruction for all GSIs, including international students, at no cost to them, or their departments. One of the programs through which this is accomplished is the GSI Colloquium. Colloquia themes are chosen based on feedback from the graduate student body, current theory in teaching and learning, and through internal discussions of innovative techniques currently being used by UT faculty and experienced GSIs.

The first colloquium in 2004, *A New View*, welcomed new faculty and GSIs with a joint event. The event focused on teaching excellence, and featured sessions lead by UT faculty who had been recognized for outstanding teaching (i.e., members of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers).

The 2005 colloquium, *Conversations about Teaching and Learning*, offered students the option of focusing on classroom management or on building a learning community. Over 90 students participated in this half-day event. Developed in response to feedback from the 2004 colloquium, participants were given a choice between attending two strands: one for new GSIs and the other for experienced GSIs. The first strand focused on techniques for managing an interactive classroom while the second focused on building learning communities.

The 2006 colloquium, *Reflecting: Using Discussion, Writing, and Technology to Encourage Student-Centered Learning*, introduced many graduate students to the Call for Proposal process as we solicited presentations from the entire UT graduate student community. Previously, we relied on recommendations from various sources from around campus. This new model permitted students to experience a review process that paralleled what might be experienced in the real world of academia, but did so with an eye towards continual support and coaching. This resulted in diverse and engaging presentations from GSIs in natural sciences, educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, foreign language education, and communications. More than 70 graduate students attended concurrent sessions, poster sessions during lunch and breaks, and a networking lunch. With sessions focused on interactivity and discussion, the departmental diversity of the attendees, and session presenters, provided for rich exchanges in an interdisciplinary context.

Based on feedback from previous colloquia, the 2007 colloquium, *Communication: The Foundation of Teaching Excellence*, was organized around presentations by current GSIs in addition to two student-panels—one that focused on facilitating a dialogue among GSIs that focused on identifying and meeting classroom challenges—and the other that highlighted graduate students and their affiliation with various academic centers (e.g., Center for Women and Gender Studies, Center for African and African American Studies).

Over the course of the past 4 years, the Graduate Student Colloquium has evolved into a reflective, student-driven forum for GSIs to develop a dialogue with their peers about best practices in pedagogy within authentic classroom contexts. It has become a forum where GSIs meet, discuss their successes, understand the challenges of the profession, and build learning communities that act as support networks, geared towards increasing the likelihood of future success in their careers as teacher-scholars.

## ASPECTS

ASPECTS was developed by the GSI Program in 2004 to help encourage ongoing pedagogical, personal and professional development for GSIs. During each long semester, ASPECTS workshops, covering a range of technical, organizational, and pedagogical topics, are offered to all graduate students at no cost. An ASPECTS certificate provides tangible evidence that the GSI has been willing to go beyond the minimum requirements of their position to explore ways of becoming more effective in classrooms, labs, or office hours. To earn a certificate, participants are required to attend five sessions (three core series sessions and two electives) and compose an essay that incorporates application and self-reflection, which are essential components to the development of effective teaching practices.

Graduate students have cited the following motivations, among others, for pursuing ASPECTS certificates:

- To place the certificates in a teaching portfolio to demonstrate commitment to teaching and learning development;
- To improve teaching in specific areas that student evaluations have indicated as problematic;
- To provide evidence to the GSIs department that they are gaining expertise in teaching and;
- To enhance job placement opportunities upon graduation.

ASPECTS participants have the opportunity to earn one of the certificates outlined in Table 2 below.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Assessment</b>   | <b>Understanding Your Students</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing Your Instruction</li> <li>• Using Rubrics to Grade Student Performance</li> <li>• Evaluating Student Learning in Large Classes</li> </ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivating Students to Learn</li> <li>• Learning Styles and Implications for Instruction</li> <li>• Helping Your Students Become More Effective Learners</li> </ul>                 |
| <b>Leading Discussions</b>  | <b>Teaching with Technology</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designing Effective Discussions</li> <li>• Promoting Active Learning</li> <li>• Assessing Classroom Discussion</li> </ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An Introduction to Blackboard</li> <li>• Building an Online Community</li> <li>• Teaching with PowerPoint</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Lecturing</b>  | <b>Teaching Through Writing</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective Public Speaking Techniques</li> <li>• Designing Effective Lectures for Learning</li> <li>• Interactive Techniques for Large Classes</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporating a Substantial Writing Component in the Syllabus and Assignments</li> <li>• Assessment versus Evaluation</li> <li>• Conventions of Standard, Edited English</li> </ul> |
| <b>Teaching Research Skills</b>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve Your Research Assignments</li> <li>• Web Savvy Students</li> <li>• Preventing and Detecting Plagiarism</li> </ul>                                |  |

*Table 2: Overview of ASPECTS Certificate Series*

Since Fall 2004, the GSI program has awarded 75 certificates to graduate students who have participated in ASPECTS sessions and have successfully completed the requirements for certification.

Table 3 shows a breakdown of certificates awarded per ASPECTS series:

| <b>Certificate Series</b>   | <b># of certificates awarded</b> |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Assessment                  | 8                                |
| Leading Discussions         | 27                               |
| Lecturing                   | 19                               |
| Teaching Research Skills    | 2                                |
| Teaching with Technology    | 12                               |
| Understanding Your Students | 6                                |
| Teaching through Writing    | 1                                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                | <b>75</b>                        |

*Table 3: ASPECTS Certificated Awarded Since Fall 2004*

From Fall 2004 through Spring 2007, the GSI Program has served 1019 graduate students through its ASPECTS offerings.

Table 4 shows a per-semester breakdown of the number of graduate students who attended ASPECTS sessions:

| <b>Semester</b> | <b>Unique attendees</b> | <b>Total attendees</b> |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Fall 2004       | 90                      | 257                    |
| Spring 2005     | 140                     | 488                    |
| Summer 2005     | 18                      | 28                     |
| Fall 2005       | 200                     | 520                    |
| Spring 06       | 105                     | 301                    |
| Summer 06       | 27                      | 46                     |
| Fall 06         | 350                     | 672                    |
| Spring 07       | 89                      | 235                    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>1019</b>             | <b>2547</b>            |

*Table 4: ASPECTS Attendance Data Since Fall 2004*

As part of a reflective process of program design and development, the GSI Program is committed to evaluating its services and using the data collected to help move the program forward based on the self-identified needs of the UT graduate student body. ASPECTS evaluation data is used for a number of purposes that range from informing future directions of the GSI program to providing feedback to session presenters. ASPECTS evaluation data is collected primarily through post-session evaluation forms that assess the quality of the session instruction as well as soliciting suggestions for strategies for improving the session and ASPECTS in general. The data collected through the evaluation process is disseminated in two ways:

1. *Presenter Feedback Summaries:* At the conclusion of each spring semester, summaries of the ASPECTS evaluation data are distributed to each session leader. The purpose of this distribution is to give session leaders evaluative data from the past year that will facilitate reflective modification of content, learning objectives, or session activities.

2. *End-of-Year Reports*: At the end of each spring semester, the GSI Program publishes a report summarizing the important conclusions collected from the evaluations. These reports focus on reporting program data (such as attendance, certificates awarded, and new sessions/series) as well as recommendations for modifications to ASPECTS. Unlike the Presenter Feedback Summaries, which focus intra-session data, End-of Year Reports focus on inter-session data. Through both a micro and macro analysis, the GSI Program is able to ensure the quality of the individual ASPECTS sessions as well as maintaining the quality of ASPECTS as a unified program.

## Other Services

In addition to the colloquia and ASPECTS, the GSI Program offers a number of additional services committed to the pedagogical, personal and professional development of UT graduate students.

One of these services, *Promising Practices*, is a space on the GSI website in which GSIs offer suggestions and practical solutions to the GSI community based on challenges and concerns they have faced in their classrooms. The GSI Program remains committed to developing Promising Practices by actively seeking out interested GSIs and ASPECTS certificate holders to contribute their authentic experiences of how they have applied the information learned in ASPECTS sessions to their teaching.

The GSI Program also provides support to faculty responsible for intra-departmental training of teaching assistants and assistant instructors via the 398T course. GSIs are required to enroll in 398T in the semester prior to teaching. Throughout the semester, 398T instructors may request that the GSI Program-affiliated staff visit their classes and help prepare their students for success in the classroom. The GSI Program has recruited a number of DIIA staff to lead these sessions that can be customized based on the needs of the 398T instructor.

The GSI Program also provides training for GSIs involved in a variety of University-wide initiatives such as *Difficult Dialogues* (<http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/dd/>) and *Signature Courses* (<http://www.geo.utexas.edu/courses/302P/signature.html>). Difficult Dialogues is a Ford Foundation project where 27 higher education institutions were selected to receive grants of \$100,000 each for projects that promote campus environments where sensitive subjects can be discussed in a spirit of open scholarly inquiry, academic freedom and with respect for different viewpoints.

Finally, the GSI Program offers individual consultation sessions for interested GSIs. GSIs commonly find some instructional coaching helpful during their teaching career at UT. DIIA staff devoted to GSI-specific teaching needs are available to support and advise GSIs on syllabus and activity design, effective classroom management, and strategies for inspiring (or re-inspiring) GSIs and their students. From June 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 through June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007, the GSI Program provided individual consultation services to 27 GSIs. The total

amount of time spent with these GSIs totaled approximately 46 hours, with each session lasting more than 1.5 hours on average.

## Future Directions

Over the past three years, the GSI Program has developed a number of initiatives to help better prepare the graduate student community for the challenges that may arise in their future as teacher-leaders of the university-wide learning community. However, we are constantly searching for new and innovative ways to continue the development of the GSI Program by reviewing other graduate student development programs around the country. The GSI Program is currently working on the following initiatives:

1. *GSI Teaching Award*: For the past few semesters, the GSI Program has been developing a GSI Teaching Awards program based on similar programs already established at other universities. The purpose of this Awards Program is to recognize outstanding GSIs from the greater GSI community in an effort to encourage GSI professional and pedagogical development. By creating an awards program, we are recognizing the importance of the GSI contributions to undergraduate learning and success. Because GSIs are generally responsible for teaching undergraduate courses, the success of the undergraduates is directly contingent upon the success of the GSIs as effective course instructors. As faculty are consistently recognized for their contributions to the success of their students via programs such as the Academy of Distinguished Teachers, we feel that GSIs deserve similar recognition for their contributions to the university. The inaugural award was awarded at the 2007 GSI Colloquium to Catherine Dossin (Art & Art History).
2. *ASPECTS*: The GSI Program's goal is to continue to develop more series as determined by feedback obtained from past ASPECTS session participants and from 398T faculty. For example, we are considering a Communications Series that will respond to deficiencies noted in the communication strategies between GSIs and their students as documented in external research. For this series, we want to emphasize the importance of basic communication strategies between all GSIs and the undergraduate students they serve.  
Another series under consideration will address Cultural Diversity. This series, still in its initial planning stages, will be developed in collaboration with the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE).  
A third series, geared towards encouraging a proactive approach to Teacher Concerns issues, will be developed in consultation with faculty from Educational Psychology.
3. *ASPECTS Certification*: We are investigating documentation processes as they relate to professional development efforts and their potential inclusion on the official transcript.
4. *Colloquia*: Colloquia goals include expansion of the current colloquium into a regional and eventually a national offering bringing together GSIs from a variety of universities to share their experiences and expertise.

5. *Marketing*: The Graduate Coordinator Network (GCN) is the primary means of disseminating information about the GSI Program to GSIs. In the coming months, we plan to revisit our dependency on GCN and work collaboratively on strategies for reaching more GSI through more efficient means.

## Conclusion

Our more immediate goals are to respond to anticipated training needs precipitated by a growth in *Signature Course* offerings. It is expected that between 7000-8000 of all incoming freshmen will be expected to take one of many seminar courses. These courses will be primarily supported, especially as they relate to discussion and the assessment of writing, by GSIs. This new undergraduate initiative will create a demand for 200-300 new GSIs who are able to effectively respond to the learning needs of these undergraduates. Therefore the program's most immediate needs are to effectively develop a training strategy that will be able to respond to a significantly larger TA cadre.

One of the program's strengths is that we have been able to respond to our students, the graduate coordinators and advisors who support them, as well as the 398T faculty. In addition, we have remained attuned to university initiatives in such a way that has allowed us to effortlessly adapt in productive ways. The current and future *Signature Course* initiative and the increased role of graduate students in the annual colloquia are examples of both our responsiveness and a realization of increased empowerment of graduate students.

As a final note, the GSI Program feels that it would be remiss if it did not take this opportunity to make a number of recommendations that will help the program continue to become a more recognizable resource for graduate students interested in their professional, pedagogical, and personal development. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. That the GSI Program, in conjunction with departmental faculty and the Office Of Graduate Studies, develop content standards for 398T;
2. That ASPECTS certification, supported by an e-portfolio model, be developed in conjunction with the parties referenced above and that successful efforts be reflected on official transcripts;
3. In addition to the required 398T course, GSI attempting to obtain certification be required to attend the annual GSI Colloquium and relevant ASPECTS sessions;
4. *Signature Course* GSIs be required to earn both the Leading Effective Discussions and Teaching through Writing ASPECTS Certificates.

## Resources

Please visit the following websites for more detailed information on the GSI program.

DIIA Website: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/>

GSI Program Website: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/gsi/index.php>

ASPECTS: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/gsi/aspects/index.php>

GS Colloquia: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/gsi/seminars/index.php>

## Appendix A.

### Graduate Student Instructor Program: Fall 2007—398T Workshop Descriptions

Each workshop is approximately 1.5 hours long. Each 398T instructor may request one workshop during the semester. For additional information, or to schedule a workshop, contact Mark Decker, GSI Program Coordinator, at 232-1774 or [markl.decker@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:markl.decker@mail.utexas.edu).

#### *Professional Development for Graduate Student Instructors*

1. **Learning Theory:** There is a great deal known about how to facilitate learning based on psychological theory and research. This workshop will provide students with basic learning principles derived from current educational research. In addition, this workshop will teach students to translate those principles into teaching activities.
2. **Crafting Successful Discussion Sections:** Even experienced instructors find that leading discussions can be much more challenging than giving lectures. This workshop will provide guidelines on planning, implementing and evaluating successful discussions. Included will be information on formulating effective questions, stimulating student interest and accomplishing meaningful learning goals.
3. **Lecturing Techniques:** Lecturing effectively is more than just standing in front of a class and talking non-stop for 50 or more minutes. Effective lecturing takes students' learning needs into account. In this workshop we will look at ways to make lectures more effective learning tools including introducing interactive methods into the lecture.
4. **Motivation in the College Classroom:** This workshop focuses on how to increase motivation in the classroom through the use of motivational and cognitive strategies. The emphasis will be on helping instructors provide students with answers to the questions, "Why should I learn this?" and "Can I learn this?". Specific strategies that promote both learning and motivation in the classroom will be discussed.

#### *Enhancing Your Instructional Effectiveness*

5. **Interactive Teaching and Student Participation:** This workshop focuses on *why* and *how* to interact with students during instruction, including how to make lectures more interactive. The goal of the workshop is for GSIs to understand that learning is an active process and when instructors do not interact with students, they do not know what students are learning or which topics need the most coverage. Instructional skills are discussed for increasing positive forms of student participation and handling difficult student interactions (i.e. students who ask tough questions; students who won't participate).
6. **Learning Styles and their Implications for Instruction:** This workshop focuses on different learning styles and how these styles influence teaching and learning. The participants will complete the *Kolb Learning Styles Inventory* and discuss how their own learning style might influence their teaching. The emphasis of the workshop is on discussing different instructional activities that will be beneficial to students with each of the four learning styles.

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7. **Individual Differences:** Learning styles, multiple intelligences and cultural diversity all affect individual students' ability to learn. With so many differences, what's an instructor to do? This workshop will glean some key findings from research in these areas, and offer suggestions on modifying your teaching strategies to promote effective learning for all students.

#### *Technology-Enhanced Teaching and Learning*

8. **Blackboard: Getting Started with your Course Content:** Blackboard enables educators to enhance in-class instruction by providing 24/7 access to course materials along with a variety of tools that can assist instructors with the management of their courses. In this hands-on session, you will learn how to build a Blackboard course site by uploading course documents, organizing material, and applying course designs to your site.
9. **Blackboard: Enhancing Communication:** This hands-on session will focus on the effective uses of Blackboard's communication tools to connect instructors with students outside the classroom. We will discuss how to use, facilitate, and manage these tools to elevate class communication online.
10. **Blackboard: Increasing Feedback:** This hands-on session will teach you how to use Blackboard's assessment features to evaluate student learning and to gain valuable feedback from your students. We will demonstrate the process of creating quizzes/surveys, using the gradebook, and collecting assignments through Blackboard.
11. **Teaching with PowerPoint:** PowerPoint has become the standard presentation software used at UT Austin. Unfortunately, students often view PowerPoint presentations as boring. This session will demonstrate effective uses of PowerPoint and will provide techniques to gain students' attention, increase their participation, and enable student interaction through the branching of presentations.
12. **e-Gradebook:** Customized for UT Austin, eGradebook allows instructors and designated proxies or designees to view and maintain class assignment grades online. Students may also view their own class assignment grades within eGradebook using their UTEID. Some advantages of using eGradebook are its integration of other campus services, including UTDirect, Online Grade Submission, and the Measurement and Evaluation Center's scanning services.
13. **Ongoing Course Assessment:** Ongoing Course Assessment is a tool created within UT Austin, for instructors to use to get anonymous feedback from students about the class. Instructors can design their own questionnaires or choose questionnaires that are already created and ready to use. Surveys can be sent out at any time during the semester, and responses can be downloaded to Excel or Word.
14. **Teaching 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners:** Some instructors lament that today's students are coming to college less prepared than students of old. Does this mean that college instructors need to "stop teaching" and yield their roles to technology or to the students themselves? Certainly not, but it could imply that instructors should make deliberate attempts to change the way they teach students. This session will focus on the experiences and expectations that students bring to learning environments and how instructors can successfully meet those expectations to create opportunities for learning.