

**TEACHING ASSISTANT MANUAL**  
*September 2024*

1. WELCOME TO THE TEACHING STAFF OF THE DEPARTMENT!

Whether you are a first time or a returning TA – welcome! We hope you find your duties rewarding and useful to your future career. Whatever career direction you ultimately take, economists must present material to others, and being a TA is a great way to perfect these skills. These notes are meant both as a practical handbook, and as a formal description of your contract with the University.

2. DATES OF APPOINTMENT

The pay periods and the dates of appoint differ slightly:

Quarter	Payment Months	Dates of Work (specific dates are shown in the University Calendar)
Fall	September – November	Mid-to-late-September to early December
Winter	December – February	Early January to mid-March
Spring	March – May	End of March to early June
Summer	June - August	TAs are not used in Summer Session

The dates of work start on the first day of classes and continuing until the time that grades are due (typically the Monday after examinations end, except for Spring Quarter when it is on Tuesday).

The specific dates for Academic Year 2024-25 are:

- Fall: Tuesday September 24 - Monday December 16
- Winter: Monday January 6 - Monday March 24
- Spring: Tuesday April 1 - Tuesday June 17

You must be available to be on campus on weekdays during the work periods listed above. TAs cannot leave early or arrive back late and must arrange their vacation airline flights accordingly.

Temporary absences on weekdays during these period (to attend conferences etc.) that interfere with your duties require permission of the instructor.

### 3. ATTENDANCE AT TRAINING FOR NEW TEACHING ASSISTANTS

If you are a TA for the first time or missed a last year's program, you must attend a one-day training organized by the Searle Center for Advanced Learning and Teaching. This is typically held on the week before Fall Quarter classes.

**Date:** Monday September 16, 2024 from 9:00am to 3:00pm (general sessions), 4:30pm-6:00pm (Economics-specific session in room 204).

**Where:** Norris University Center

**What:** general sessions, and some specific sessions for Economics TAs. The latter are led by Aaron Wolf, an accomplished TA in the Department.

**Registration required:** Go to:

<https://airtable.com/appWknu4PVeDI0nKb/shrsfr600DcWUBRv7>

and click on Registration. Do this by September 9.

Interested in additional training? The Searle Center holds a series of workshops to help improve your teaching, and deal with issues that occur in the classroom. You can find the schedule at the Searle Center's website:

[https://searle.northwestern.edu/programs-services/programs/#area=&role=Graduate\\_Students](https://searle.northwestern.edu/programs-services/programs/#area=&role=Graduate_Students)

### 4. APPOINTING UNIT

This manual describes TA duties in the Department of Economics. Some Economics students perform TA duties in the Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences (MMSS) program. There are many commonalities between TA work in Economics and MMSS including training, duties and the potential for awards. Students working for MMSS should also consult documentation issued by that program.

### 5. HOW DUTY ALLOCATIONS ARE MADE

Prior to each quarter, you will complete an online form with a listing of courses for which TAs are allocated. You can mark your preferences and provide reasoning for your choices. Faculty are also asked for their preferences. The Associate Chair tries to match up preferences.

Quarter Duties are Performed	Date Preferences are Solicited	Date Allocations are Announced
Fall	Approximately August 5	Approximately August 20
Winter	Week 6 of Fall Quarter	Immediately after Thanksgiving
Spring	Week 6 of Winter Quarter	Approximately March 1

Allocations are made after registration when the number of students in each class is known. In our large core classes (ECON 201, 202, 281, 310-1, 310-2, 311) one TA is assigned for approximately each 60 students enrolled. In our field classes, one TA is assigned. The enrollment cap for these classes is 65, but in practice average enrollment is in the 40s.

A document listing the assignments to be circulated to all TAs and faculty teaching these classes. The assignment shows the name of the instructor, the TA assigned and the times and locations of lectures and discussion sections.

## 6. SUPERVISOR

Your immediate supervisor is the instructor of the course to which you are assigned.

Working with the course instructor is a bilateral relationship. They expect assistance with teaching the class. In return, you should expect that they act as a mentor to you. As a young graduate student who is just setting out on a teaching career, you should look to the instructor to provide support and advice. Instructors are asked to make it their business to find out how well you are doing in the discussion section(s) and your other duties, and to provide constructive advice. However, you have a right to be treated with respect. If you make a mistake or error, you and the instructor should discuss what happened and treat it as an opportunity for a “learning experience.”

The Department’s Associate Chair oversees the employment and allocation of TA on behalf of the Department but is not directly involved in the conduct of individual classes, except when the TA and the Instructor cannot resolve an issue between themselves.

## 7. WORK LOCATION

Normally all TA duties are conducted on the Evanston Campus. Economics undergraduate classes are held on rooms controlled and assigned by the Registrar and are in various buildings on campus. The location of lecture and discussion sections are listed on the TA allocation document but should be confirmed using CAESAR as the Registrar can and does make room changes. TA in-person office hours can be held in dedicated rooms in the Department (see section below).

## 8. DUTIES

You are expected to provide twenty hours a week of TA duties, averaged across the quarter. Some weeks may require more hours (such as midterm exam weeks) and some may require less hours (such as Reading Period).

Your specific duties will be determined in consultation with the instructor and, if applicable, fellow TAs. These duties include, but are not limited to:

- Attendance at lectures if required by the instructor and if you are not attending a class in which you are enrolled at that time.
- Proctoring midterm exams, final examinations, make-up exams and extended time exams for students with AccessibleNU accommodations.
- Reviewing and familiarizing yourself with class materials including instructor’s notes, readings, textbook chapters, software etc.

- Leading discussion sections. TAs in our core undergraduate classes hold two 50-minute discussion sections each week. Each covers the same material. You should expect about 30 students in each discussion section. TAs in the 300-level field courses and the graduate courses hold one discussion section a week. The section lasts either 50 or 80 minutes.
- Preparing for the discussion section.
- Weekly coordinating meetings with the instructor and any other TAs.
- Grading problem sets, quizzes and examinations.
- Contributing questions, and solutions, to problem sets and/or examinations as determined by the instructor.
- Holding up to four hours a week of virtual or in-person office hours at times coordinated with the instructor and other TAs.
- Responding to e-mail communication from students.
- Managing content in Canvas, the course management system.
- Managing message boards and similar pedagogical tools.
- Managing grading software, such as Crowdmark, and assisting in the entry of grades into gradebooks and eventually into CAESAR.
- Other duties as required by the instructor.

Classes vary in their curriculum. Your specific duties are determined in consultation with the instructor. You and the instructor should clearly agree at the start of the quarter on:

- the format for the discussion sections,
- the coordination of office hours,
- whether or not you should attend lectures,
- regular meetings between you and the instructor,
- your role in the setting, proctoring, and grading examinations and quizzes, and
- other pedagogical and administrative tasks.

Your duties should not exceed twenty hours a week on average (it might be higher in weeks with exams but lower in other weeks). Conversely to provide a high-quality course for enrolled students, instructors should expect that TAs do not shirk in their time commitment to providing a successful course.

To ensure that you have time to make good progress in your graduate classes and studies, faculty have been instructed not to overburden you, and to ensure that the workload is spread among the instructor, yourself, and (if applicable) your fellow TA(s). If you feel that you are overburdened, then the first step is to talk with the instructor. If you feel uncomfortable doing so, or if a resolution cannot be found, talk to the Associate Chair.

Instructors who feel that a TA is inattentive to their duties, should in the first instance discuss it privately with the TA. If the situation is not resolved, the instructor should bring the circumstances to the attention of the Associate Chair.

## 9. WORKING HOURS

The University acknowledges as a general principle that most work assignments should be primarily carried out during weekdays from 8:30am to 5:00pm. Work outside of these hours may be necessary:

- Some discussion sections for our core classes are held at 5pm, 6pm and occasionally 7pm on Mondays through Thursdays due to room and undergraduate student availability.
- Classes with final exams held late in exam weeks must submit grades by 3pm on the following Monday. This may require grading on the weekend.

Nothing in this section precludes a TA from voluntarily agreeing to hold office hours in the evenings if it is mutually beneficial to the TA, the instructor, and the students. TAs are also free to decide at what hours during the day they wish to conduct grading duties or class preparation or managing their e-mail inbox based on their preferred schedule.

While students in the class have the right to expect a prompt response to their e-mails, they should only expect to receive a reply on weekdays during normal business hours. There may be exceptional circumstances requiring monitoring of e-mails at other times, such a student reporting an emergency prior to an examination.

## 10. CONDUCT

You have now “moved to the other side of the desk.” You are playing an important role in providing an educational service for which Northwestern charges a high price. You are also involved in evaluating the performance of students, and this affects their GPA, their choice of subject to major in, and their future prospects. This is a serious responsibility. It is expected that you adopt a “professional” attitude to your duties. This may be made quite difficult by the closeness of your age to some of our undergraduate students.

The students should expect you to be well prepared for each class, punctual, neat, and respectful of their abilities. Please think about your conduct as the University has rules about sexual harassment, and bias based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. If you are an international student, pay particular attention to social norms in the United States that may be very different to those in your home country. Even perfectly harmless conduct might be seen by other students as biasing your abilities to grade impartially. You also must treat certain information as confidential, such as the content of an upcoming midterm, and the performance of individual students. Please also remember you are working as part of a “team” involving an instructor and other TAs. It is important that the instructor must be able to “trust” you.

You should prepare class materials and interact with students in a way that is inclusive and respectful. The Graduate School has resources at this website:

<https://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/diversity/navigating-northwestern/inclusive-teaching-resources.html>

The American Economic Association has produced materials on best practices for economists to build a more diverse, inclusive, and productive profession. They have produced guidance for working with students, arguing that “when faculty [and TAs] proactively offer information about the breadth of the field of economics, more students from underrepresented groups study economics.” For guidance, suggestions, and resources, see

<https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/best-practices/working-with-students>

## 11. EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE

The University conducts on-line “CTEC” evaluations of each class at the end of each quarter. Students in your class give you a grade of between 1 (poor) and 6 (excellent) on four numerical questions, and can write a free-form response to the question “What are the primary strengths and weaknesses of the Teaching Assistant?”

You can access your results on-line through a system known as “Blue.” The results are usually available on the Thursday of the week after the quarter ends. To help you interpret your results, the Departmental median and quartiles scores are shown in this table:

		Upper Quartile	Median	Lower Quartile
1	The TA was able to answer the students' questions adequately	5.5	5.3	4.9
2	The TA was well prepared for each session	5.7	5.4	5.1
3	The TA communicated ideas in a clear manner	5.6	5.3	4.8
4	The TA showed strong interest in teaching the course	5.6	5.3	4.9
Average of Questions 1-4		5.5	5.3	4.9

The instructor, the Department and the Dean can see your numerical scores and written comments. The Department analyzes these scores on a quarterly and annual basis. They are used as part of the decision on Distinguished Teaching Awards. However, they are also used in combination with written ratings by faculty members to identify poor performance.

## 12. MID-QUARTER FEEDBACK FOR NEW TEACHING ASSISTANTS

If you are TA for the first time in Fall Quarter, we allow for some early feedback on your performance in class. The end-of-quarter University evaluation forms (CTECs) do not allow you to make any mid-quarter correction. Therefore, we have an internal mid-quarter feedback exercise during the week of October 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>. You will be given

hard copy forms that you can hand out in one of your sections that week. Nominate one of the students to collect the forms and return them to the instructor of the class. Discuss the evaluations with the instructor the following week. The instructor will not show or give you the original forms to preserve the anonymity of the individual respondents. After your conversation, the forms are destroyed. The Department does not know the contents of the evaluations, and they are not part of your academic record.

### 13. DISTINGUISHED TEACHING ASSISTANT AWARDS

Each year the Department awards Distinguished Teaching Assistant Awards to the “top” third of our TAs, i.e., about fifteen awards. The decision is based on two primary pieces of information:

- responses to the four teaching assistant questions on the CTEC questionnaire, and
- TA feedback forms that the Department sends to faculty.

The awards are presented at the annual departmental reception. Awardees receive a certificate, a commemorative coffee mug, and a year membership to the American Economic Association or the Econometric Society.

The awards are open to any Economics graduate student who serves as a TA in either this or any other department for two or more quarters. Past winners have listed the award on their vita when they went on the job market. This evidence of excellent teaching skills may be especially useful to overseas TAs. Your assistance in the teaching mission of the Department is much appreciated, and we hope this scheme encourages you to strive for excellence.

### 14. MINIMUM PERFORMANCE

The Department and the University require that you conduct yourself in a professional manner, take your teaching duties seriously, and perform to the best of your abilities. We recognize that some people may be shy and inexperienced in teaching. The Department and the Searle Center have programs to help you. However, the Department does not tolerate TAs who devote insufficient time and effort to their duties. In addition, the University has sanctions to impose in the event of unprofessional conduct. Discrimination, harassment or sexual misconduct may result in a complaint to the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance.

The Department monitors the performance of TAs based primarily on written evidence from students on their CTEC forms, and from the instructor. Scoring less than an average of 3.5 across the four TA questions on the CTEC evaluation will automatically trigger an intervention. Complaints by instructors, students or their parents can also trigger an investigation. The Department’s ultimate objective is to graduate PhD students with good teaching skills. Consequently, the Department’s interventions are primarily directed to providing additional training and mentoring to remediate the situation. But they can also include written warnings about unprofessional conduct such as, but not limited to, being late to class or disrespectful interaction with students.

The Department may have to intervene immediately in the event of being made aware of egregious conduct. Complaints filed with the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance are investigated and adjudicated confidentially and outside the jurisdiction of the Department.

#### 15. STUDENT PRIVACY AND GRADED WORK

In addition to discretion concerning information about individual students, there are legal restrictions on how you handle graded materials. The law is part of the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Students cannot have access to the graded work of other students in the class. This means that it is *illegal* for you to place graded hard copy problem sets or examinations in a mailbox in the main office or in another public place for students to collect in an unsupervised way, or placing graded electronic work in a public file folder. In addition to the legal aspects, there is a practical concern that students may collect the work of good students and use it to modify and/or resubmit their own work. In addition, it is *illegal* for you to display a listing of grades or scores in such a way that the grade of an individual student can be easily determined by others. If you are pressured by the instructor of the course to do any of these things, please speak to the Associate Chair.

#### 16. ROOMS FOR OFFICE HOURS

Rooms 3198, 3411 and 3496 are designated for office hours. At the beginning of the quarter, you will be sent a link to an online form to reserve weekly time slots. The rooms have keypad access, and the code is 4-1-7-\*. For security, please pull the door closed when you have finished.

Do not schedule office hours at your carrel rooms. This is very disruptive to the work of your office mates and creates noise in the corridors. We can understand that it can be frustrating if few students show up, and you feel that you could be more productive by working in your carrel room. However, we think that your officemates will appreciate it if their personal workspace is not violated by meetings with undergraduates.

In addition, the Department has a rule that you cannot use any of the corner conference rooms (3343, 3441) or the light court (3322) for office hours or meetings for classes.

The three TA rooms are suitable for meeting with up to 8 to 10 students. If you anticipate a very large crowd before examinations, you can reserve a general-purpose University classroom by asking Maggie Hendrix in our main office to contact the Registrar. Our seminar room and classroom (3301 and 1410) are not suitable for this purpose. They are heavily scheduled and access to the building is limited for undergraduates in the evening and weekends.



## 17. PRINTING / PHOTOCOPYING

You may need to duplicate materials for your discussion section or assist the instructor by making multiple copies of handouts, problem sets or examinations. You should log into the copy machines using your Wildcard (or your NetID and password). The Department covers the costs of any copies or prints.