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# Teaching Assistant Wellness: Individual, Social & Structural Strategies

*Executive Summary*



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# Teaching Assistant Wellness Report

## *Sustainability Scholars Program*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The aim of this project is to identify areas of needed support around TA wellness at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and build capacity around Teaching Assistant (TA) wellness in departments across the university. The role of the teaching assistant in higher education has grown over the last two decades. With an increase in undergraduate enrollment and greater student diversity, universities across Canada have placed more emphasis on developing undergraduate education (Park 2004). Hiring more teaching assistants is one way that post-secondary institutions are coping with increasing undergraduate academic demands. Teaching assistants are often responsible for grading, advising and tutoring undergraduate students. However, professional development programs for university-level teaching assistants, related to teaching skills, often don't include formal lessons on maintaining TA wellness. This gap in training places university level teaching assistants at risk of experiencing more stress and inappropriately addressing teaching related experiences that have a negative impact on their wellness.

To better understand how TA wellness is impacted by their work duties and how UBC can best support TA wellness we conducted an environmental scan, focus groups and distributed surveys to graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants across campus. This research was approved by The University of British Columbia's Behavioral Research Ethics Board. Our environmental scan consists of a review of the teaching assistant training programs conducted by 20 post-secondary institutions across Canada. This sample includes 5 universities in British Columbia and 20 universities in other provinces. We also conducted focus groups with 15 graduate teaching assistants at UBC to better understand the gaps in our own university's teaching assistant training programs for supporting TA wellness. Building on these findings we also surveyed 300+ teaching assistants (graduate and undergraduate) to better understand the wellness challenges facing different teaching assistant groups at UBC.

### 1.1 Teaching Assistant Groups at UBC

Different teaching assistant groups are at risk for experiencing different teaching-related stressors. At universities across Canada there are two distinct teaching assistant groups: 1) graduate student teaching assistants (GTA) and 2) undergraduate student teaching assistants (UTA). GTAs and UTAs are often hired for similar teaching assistant positions, but the teaching experiences of these groups tend to differ.

### 1.2 Graduate Student Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

The GTA is a recognized position within the higher education system. GTA job positions provide graduate students with the opportunity to hone their teaching skills through hands-on experience. The main role of the GTA is often to provide immediate help to teaching staff, but this position also often serves as the first career step for aspiring academics (Park 2004). It is also a significant source of funding for many graduate students who do not receive funding from their department, supervisors or are unsuccessful at securing federal subsidies. Although teaching assistant positions for graduate students are key to their professional development as academics, their positionality as students and employees places them at particular risk for experiencing emotional strain.

GTAs are required to master a daunting range of teaching-related competencies, including grading large amounts of student work, managing lab schedules and supply lists, accommodating undergraduate student academic needs, coordinating office hours with students, conducting productive classroom discussions, fostering autonomous skill development among students, measuring and evaluating student progress, understanding what to reasonably expect from their undergraduate students, and coping with teaching related stress (Park 2004). Since this is a pivotal time in graduate students' career development, GTAs also often confront issues related to identity and notions of self-worth as their beliefs and ideas



are constantly tested through their interactions with undergraduate students (Lal 2000). Although some GTAs have previous teaching-related experience and are provided university-level teaching development classes many of the experiences that they face at

this stage in their career development can result in excessive stress and might negatively affect their wellbeing.

### 1.3 Undergraduate Student Teaching Assistants (UTAs)

UTAs are undergraduate students hired by the university to aid instructors and professors. Their work is primarily clerical, however, in some specialized programs UTAs can be found leading group discussions, assisting with class activities, running review sessions, and completing many other tasks more closely related to GTA employment duties (Park 2004). UTAs gain an invaluable employment experience from these jobs; learning first-hand the components related to teaching a course, such as planning, paperwork and managing student conflicts (Hogan et al. 2007). These positions also come with the benefit of reviewing material covered in introductory courses that are sometimes useful in their current coursework or in studying for their GRE subjects test. The UTAs also benefit by having teaching experience on their vita for graduate school, and therefore are more likely to be offered a GTA position when they move into their Master's programs (Hogan et al. 2007).

Despite the numerous benefits of being a UTA, there are several drawbacks for undergraduate students. UTAs have much less autonomy in their responsibilities than GTAs and require more specific directions (e.g. use of more thorough grading rubrics, scoring only objective quizzes, recording grades etc.) than their GTA counterparts (Park 2004). This means that training and clerical work can take up much more of their time, imposing on their own coursework and program specific deadlines. Some UTAs also tend to feel unprepared for the scope of their responsibility (Gillreath & Slater 1994). UTAs tend to have less knowledge about course material than their GTA counterparts, and as a result, have lower confidence in their instructional ability (Park 2004). Feeling incompetent in one's employment can cause emotional strain and impact the effectiveness of one's work (Onuoha & Akintola 2016; Turgut et al. 2016). For UTAs this might mean that they take longer to grade assignments, because they are unsure of their abilities to evaluate others, or that they are reluctant to lead discussions with students. UTAs also face potential conflict-of-interest situations if they have friendships with classmates that might compromise their ethical standards in teaching (Weidert, Wendorf, Gurung & Filz 2012). The lack of confidence, experience, and formal relationships with students can place undue strain on UTAs that isn't experienced by GTAs. Understanding how these different teaching groups navigate their positionality in higher-education institutions is imperative for designing teaching-related professional development programs and services that progress both their employment skills and wellbeing.

To better understand how we can effectively support teaching assistant wellbeing at UBC we asked the following research questions: 1) "What are universities in British Columbia and across Canada doing to support TA wellbeing?" and 2) "What are the wellness needs expressed by teaching assistants at UBC?". To answer these questions we first conducted an environmental scan of universities in British Columbia and across Canada. Second, we conducted focus groups and surveys with GTAs and UTAs at the University of British Columbia. The findings from these three methodological approaches demonstrate a gap in support and training practices around wellbeing across the country and at UBC.

## 2.0 Environmental Scan

To better understand how wellbeing is facilitated by teaching assistant training programs in Canada we reviewed TA wellness programming at UBC and contacted Teaching and Learning Centers at twenty universities across the country. In British Columbia, there are eleven public universities and five private institutions to sample from. We sampled five public universities in British Columbia because they were the only schools who hired teaching assistants to support their undergraduate classes. To get a better idea of what teaching assistant training programs across the country are doing to support TA wellbeing we sampled 15 national public institutions. There are ninety-six universities in Canada, and fifteen of those are considered part of the U15 (a collective universities that undertake 80 percent of all competitive university research in Canada, and represent a research enterprise valued at more than \$5 billion annually) (U15 2017). We sampled all fifteen of the U15 schools because their funding and research aims are similar to UBC.

### 2.1 The University of British Columbia

In recent years, more emphasis has been put on promoting wellness at The University of British Columbia (UBC). This is reflected in the sessions and resources that many central units have developed to help UBC students manage their wellness. Of these units, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (FoGPS), Graduate Student Society (GSS), and Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) offer services and sessions specifically designed and offered for graduate students and TAs at UBC. GSS offers an [Advocacy Service](#) for graduate students. Through this program, graduate student GSS Advocates provide confidential assistance to individual fellow graduate students experiencing personal, financial, academic and overall wellness difficulties. Through, FoGPS the Graduate Pathway to Success Program (GPS) has been very active offering [sessions](#) to support graduate student wellbeing. These sessions which are offered annually address: [Communication skills](#); [Assertiveness](#); [Breaking Patterns of Procrastination](#); [Emotional Intelligence](#); [Resilience](#); [Financial Literacy](#); [Time Management](#); [Live Well to Learn Well](#); [from Stress to Strength](#); [Conflict Resolution](#); and [Building Effective Supervisory Relationships](#). CTLT offers the following [sessions](#) specifically designed to support UBC TA wellness once a year: [Time Management \(for TAs\)](#), [Mentoring TAs](#), and [TA-Instructor Working Relationship](#). CTLT has also offered one off sessions on [Graduate Student Mental Health](#); [Metacognition](#); and [Value Your Work as a Graduate Student](#). In addition to sessions offered to TAs, CTLT offers a session about working with TAs to faculty members once per year before the start of each academic year. Sadly, this session is often not well attended by faculty members. In addition to the above listed sessions, many sessions (such as [TAing in a Culturally Diverse Classroom](#)) are offered to TAs through CTLT to help them support undergraduate student wellness. Many other units on UBC campus offer variety of wellbeing support to all UBC students. These units include: [AMS](#); [Equity and Inclusion](#); [Health Promotion and Education](#); and [UBC HR](#). UBC Wellbeing office offers variety of resources to UBC students on their [website](#). Many Faculties and departments also offer faculty-wide or departmental training sessions for

their TAs. Most faculty-wide or departmental sessions and resources offered to TAs on wellbeing either focus on time management for TAs or supporting undergraduate student mental health and wellbeing.

## 2.2 Universities in British Columbia

Many of the universities in British Columbia are small enough that they don't need to employ teaching assistants to help their faculty members with their teaching assignments. Of the universities that do employ teaching assistants to help facilitate undergraduate coursework, few institutions consider TA wellness in their professional development programming. Other than the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria are two universities in British Columbia that seem to offer some degree of programming and support around TA wellness. Simon Fraser University (2017) provides two workshops, two times a year, focused on TA wellbeing. The "Building Resilience" workshop is facilitated by SFU's wellness center staff, and provides TAs with strategies and resources to benefit their own mental wellbeing and resilience (Simon Fraser University 2017). This session is strongly focused on developing TA time-management skills. The second session that SFU provides TAs is called "Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Assault" (Simon Fraser University 2017). This session is facilitated by SFU's Sexual Violence Support office and teaches TAs how to provide empathetic and supportive responses to disclosure of sexual assault. It also teaches TAs about appropriate protocols for responding to assault and provides resources for TAs and students who have learned about or been affected by sexual assault.

The University of Victoria offers workshops to TAs on managing undergraduate student mental health problems and on how to maintain their own mental wellbeing (The University of Victoria 2017). The University of Victoria also offers sessions for TA coordinators on how to best support their TAs' wellbeing (The University of Victoria 2017). These sessions are usually one hour in length and cover basic mental health literacy and self-care as well as ways to build resilience and managing student stressors.

The sessions provided by Simon Fraser University and The University of Victoria emphasize a wide range of mental health issues and effective wellness practices. However, even these two universities are more focused on helping their teaching assistants support undergraduate wellness. Most universities across the province do not have teaching assistant training programs or information sessions that focus specifically on teaching assistant wellbeing. This gap in training places university level teaching assistants at risk of experiencing and inappropriately addressing teaching related experiences that negatively impact their wellbeing.



### 2.3 U15 Universities

All of the U15 universities across Canada employ graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants to support their teaching faculty. A few of those institutions do provide some level of TA-specific mental health professional development training. This training tends to address



ways to support others in distress rather than focusing on TA specific wellbeing support. For example, The University of Alberta presently offers two streams of mental health training to their academic community, including TAs. The first involves the provision of crisis intervention and suicide gatekeeper training via their community social work team (The University of Alberta 2017).

“Front Line Staff Training” has been specifically developed to provide TA’s and first point-of-contact staff members with the coping strategies necessary to support individuals in crisis while ensuring their own safety and mental health (The University of Alberta 2017). The second stream of support exists via mental health consultation and coaching support that TA’s faculty and staff can access via the Counseling and Clinical Services (CCS) Psychologist teams at the University of Alberta. CCS regularly provides both workshops and one-to-one coaching support to TA’s and faculty who are seeking advice on how to manage students in distress (The University of Alberta). In the case of the Faculties of Arts, Science, FGSR, and Engineering satellite psychologists funded under the GOA provincial mental health grant have been placed directly in the faculties to provide this support service to TA’s and faculty directly in their home offices (The University of Alberta).

Dalhousie University, the largest post-secondary institution in the Maritime Provinces, provides wellbeing professional development programming for all teaching assistants. During an annual TA Day, Dalhousie offers a session on health and wellbeing for TAs. The topics for these session change each year, but they tend to focus on self-awareness and time management tools (Dalhousie University 2017). For specific mental wellness training, Dalhousie University refers TAs (and all grad students) to non-TA specific wellness programs through their university-wide Thrive Program. Dalhousie University’s Thrive Program is a university-wide mental wellness initiative that aims to reduce mental health stigma, expand the skills of faculty, staff and students to identify and support mental health issues and promote mental wellness and connect individuals to the support they need (Dalhousie University 2017). Throughout the year Dalhousie University also offers one-off workshops on certain well-being themes to teaching assistants through the student services department. Dalhousie University states that it is working to create an ongoing recognition of self-health and wellbeing by actively creating resources, workshops, campus events that focus on mental health.

All Canadian universities expressed interest in effectively supporting their teaching assistants. However, the creation of wellness-specific programming and dialogue around teaching assistant wellbeing is extremely variable among those schools. Although most universities do provide some teaching assistant training programming, not all U15 institutions provide training that focuses on teaching assistant wellbeing. After reviewing the gaps in teaching assistant training programs across British Columbia and Canada, we turned our focus toward graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants at The University of British Columbia to better understand their wellness needs.

### **3.0 Focus Group Findings**

We conducted 3 exploratory focus groups with graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants at UBC. Teaching Assistants at UBC were contacted to participate in our focus groups via department emails and posters across campus (See Appendix 1.0 and 1.1). Our focus groups were comprised of 15 graduate teaching assistants from faculties across campus, including: the Faculty of Applied Science, the Faculty of Forestry, the Faculty of Science, the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Land and Food Systems and the Faculty of Medicine. Unfortunately, due to the small number of undergraduate teaching assistants employed by UBC during the summer months, we were not able to facilitate focus groups that included undergraduate teaching assistants. Teaching assistants gave consent to participate in our focus groups and each focus group lasted on average 1.5 hours. Focus group discussions included the following questions: “What types of duties are you expected to perform as a TA in your department?”, “How do you define wellbeing?”, “How does your role as a TA impact your overall wellbeing?” “How do you manage situations related to your role as a TA where your wellbeing is impacted?” and “What can we do to improve TA wellbeing at UBC?”. Responses to these questions were audio recorded and two note takers were on hand to provide accounts of the focus group discussions. The main themes that were highlighted in our focus groups included discussions about work-life balance, workplace autonomy, and respect.

#### **3.1 Work-Life Balance**

When our teaching assistants were asked to define wellbeing, many of them commented on some sort of balance between their teaching assistant commitments, department specific deadlines and their home life. One graduate student teaching assistant stated that wellbeing while teaching is “the ability to attend to different things at different times... the ability to be present in the activity that you’re doing and to be able to do things with intention”(Andy<sup>1</sup>, Graduate Student Teaching Assistant). Not only did the teaching assistants we met consider wellness a balance between different life domains, but they also had an awareness of the compromises to wellness they would experience as a teaching assistant. One of the focus group participants commented, “Wellness is knowing that you’re going to have hard times and planning for it. It’s when you’re given a challenging situation and you can rise to it” (Grace, Graduate Teaching Assistant). Another teaching assistant indicated

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this document are pseudonyms. For more information, see Appendix 1.0.

that being unwell is a result of “chronic lack of balance”. Some of the responsibilities that our teaching assistants described balancing included grading, leading tutorials, giving guest lectures, invigilating exams, attending classes, completing their own coursework, meeting department deadlines, applying for grants, managing social relationships, maintaining a healthy diet and keeping regular sleep hours. All of the TAs in our focus groups commented on sacrificing social relationships, a healthy diet or sleep schedules at some point in their teaching assistant work.

### 3.2 Autonomy

In addition to asking teaching assistants how they understood wellbeing, we also asked them to discuss what contributed to their overall wellbeing. One of the things that teaching assistants commented on as contributing to their overall wellbeing was feelings of autonomy at work. Some of our teaching assistants said that they had the best work experiences when they were invited to collaborate with instructors on course programming. Most of the graduate teaching assistants have performed their teaching assistant duties for multiple courses and repeatedly worked for the same



courses year after year. They have developed keen teaching skills and are learning how to create and implement assignments. Teaching assistants said that being able to help develop programming for the courses that they worked for allowed them to feel more independence in their workplace. As one graduate teaching assistant commented, “My supervisor really likes teaching and is supportive of our teaching. I get to take part in making the course, and that helps me help the students. I feel like am more capable at teaching when I get to do this.” (Amanda, Graduate Teaching Assistant). As graduate students, learning how to make assignments and design course content is an extremely important professional development opportunity. Not only do these opportunities help teaching assistants feel like they can effect change in their work environments, but it also gives them the opportunity to learn important skills that can contribute to their future academic careers.

### 3.3 Respect: Time and Expertise

Teaching assistants in our focus groups also commented that having their time and expertise respected by their departments and instructors, and being fairly compensated for their work, strongly contributed to their wellbeing. Some of the teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups said that the instructors that they worked for didn’t always respect their time. One teaching assistant commented,

*“Being respected is an important part of wellbeing. It’s not just about being a workhorse for the department all of the time. Departments and instructors don’t understand that it takes us a long time to finish our PhDs because about two of our six total years are taken up by teaching assistant duties”* (Vanessa, Graduate Teaching Assistant).

Teaching assistants commented that the instructors and departments that they worked for didn’t always balance their teaching duties with the graduate student program requirements. They wanted to contribute more (or in more meaningful ways) to the classes that they were helping teach, but didn’t always have time. Teaching assistants discussed being overwhelmed by competing deadlines and department commitments. In conjunction with feelings of frustration for not being able to meet their program requirements as a result of work-time expectations as a teaching assistant, teaching assistants also discussed feeling disheartened by the prospect of disappointing their supervisors. Another teaching assistant commented,

*“Balancing all of the expectations, like the timelines I need to meet for my supervisor and for the professor I’m working for, and having the feeling of disappointment from those you work for is really challenging. I worry that I’m not meeting their expectations because they don’t give me enough time to do things, they don’t clearly express their expectations and the department doesn’t always support our teaching work”* (Brenda, Graduate Teaching Assistant)

Some of the teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups complained that their departments didn’t always support their contributions as a teaching assistant because it “took away” from their program specific obligations. They also mentioned that their supervisors were not always supportive of the time they spend fulfilling their teaching commitments. As one teaching assistant commented, “When my supervisor is not supportive of my TA jobs it really impacts how I value teaching. If our supervisors, professors and departments devalue teaching it can really negatively impact how I feel about my work and teaching.” (Tom, Graduate Teaching Assistant). When the teaching related work that many graduate students are expected to do is devalued by the departments and persons they work for, it negatively impacts their overall wellbeing.

### **3.4 Respect: Compensation**

Respect for teaching assistants was also discussed in terms of professionalization. One of the graduate student teaching assistant who took part in our focus groups mentioned working for an instructor who valued their professional background. They commented:

*“I worked with a really inspiring professor once. They were really good because they were really aware of the inequality in the current TAing system. They understood that doing a guest lecture is extra work and they gave us [teaching assistants] extra pay for the extra work that we did. This made me feel more valued as an expert in the field. For her, a guest lecture wasn’t just another professional development moment, but that she was inviting another professional to help instruct the class.” (Max, Graduate Student Teaching Assistant).*

Many of the graduate student teaching assistants at UBC hold multiple degrees and are extremely proficient in the field that they help instruct. Recognizing that teaching assistants are professionals in their own right and can contribute to student learning is extremely important for supporting the wellbeing of teaching assistants.

### 3.5 Support from Faculty

Although some teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups commented on lack of respect for their teaching work, others also discussed how support from the instructors that they worked for, positively impacted their wellbeing. As explained by one graduate student teaching assistant,



*“Interaction between the instructor and teaching assistants is deeply important. How the instructor acts toward us in the classroom impacts how the students see us and respect us. Acknowledgement in class about a TA’s performance has a big impact on the interactions students have with us. It shows us we are valued, respected and trusted.” (Nancy,*

*Graduate Student Teaching Assistant)*

The manner in which instructors act toward teaching assistants also impacts how students interact with teaching assistants. Teaching assistants in our focus groups commented that when they weren’t supported by instructors they had to deal with more conflict from their students. This meant that they tended to receive more emails, spend more time managing student correspondence and responding to complaints about grades. When instructors positively referred to their work in front of students and other TAs, it made them feel appreciated and it cut back on the amount of student problems they experienced.

### 3.6 Contributors to TA Wellbeing

After discussing the impact of teaching assistant work on their wellbeing we asked our teaching assistants how the university could effectively support their overall wellbeing. They identified three levels of wellness strategies that could best support their well-being as TAs: individual strategies; social strategies; and structural strategies. Some of the individual

strategies outlined by teaching assistants in our focus groups included developing coping strategies and self-advocacy skills to help them with boundary setting. Teaching assistants noted that having workshops that discussed different wellbeing strategies including strategies for TAs to promote their own agency within the university would be especially beneficial.

Teaching assistants also mentioned social strategies that could be developed by UBC to support their overall wellbeing. First, they outlined the creation of a community of practice for instructors, teaching assistants and administrators at UBC that focused on TA wellness awareness and programming. Teaching assistants asked for opportunities to meet with other TAs to discuss challenges they are experiencing as TAs and learn about strategies that their peers have used to address similar challenges. They felt strongly that these meetings and other teaching assistant wellness programming should be financially compensated by the university. Second, they discussed outlets for communication between instructors/faculty members and their teaching assistants about their experiences as TAs. They explained that regular meetings between teaching assistants and the faculty members that they TA for could help them voice their concerns and clarify their needs. For example, many of the teaching assistants said that their wellbeing would be better supported if the instructors they worked for provided them with grading rubrics, student conduct policies and workload agreements. Setting standard guidelines and communication practices among TAs and instructors would provide teaching assistants with more clarity in terms of their work duties, and would improve their overall wellbeing.

The teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups also talked about structural changes at UBC that could support their wellbeing. First, teaching assistants asked for UBC to place more value in TAs. One suggestion was for TAs to count towards their academic degrees. Teaching assistants also asked that all departments run department specific teaching assistant training programs which also include TA peer mentorship programs. This training would help them learn important workplace skills, and institutionalize the role of teaching assistants in each department. In addition, teaching assistants also asked that departments standardize student conduct policies. Many of the teaching assistants in our focus groups commented on extended work-time being spent dealing with student issues that their instructors and departments didn't provide clear protocols for. Formal student conduct policies at the department level would relieve TAs of some of the stress of managing student problems. Teaching assistants also requested established UBC-wide and/or departmental specific guidelines around steps to take if their TAship is not going well (i.e.: when they go over time; when they don't have a positive working relationship with the faculty member they are working with, etc.). Those who needed support didn't know what to do or where to go and considered reaching out to the TA Union a drastic move. Finally, in addition to teaching assistant training programming, teaching assistants would like mandatory training for all faculty members who will be working with teaching assistants. Many of the teaching assistants that attended the focus groups commented on their frustration in working for instructors that didn't understand

the challenges that undergraduate, and graduate teaching assistants deal with in their line of work and the impact on their wellbeing. One graduate student teaching assistant expressed in frustration: *“we have received more training for animal care protocols for working with rats than I think any professor is required to have for taking graduate students”* (Naomi, Graduate Teaching Assistant).

Programming for instructors around supervising and mentoring teaching assistants (clarifying expectations and boundaries, laying out TA responsibilities, as well as learning more about TA wellness) was highlighted several times in our focus groups as a strategy to positively contribute to teaching assistant wellbeing.



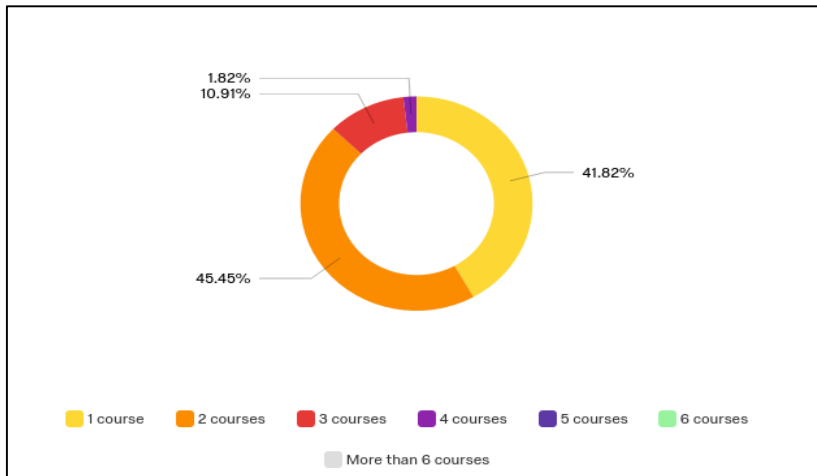
#### 4.0 Survey Findings

Following the findings from our focus groups we created and distributed surveys to all teaching assistants at UBC. We did this by emailing every department and teaching assistant coordinator at UBC and asking them to disseminate the survey and consent form (See Appendix 1.0). We also displayed posters advertising participation in our surveys in all of the major building lounges on campus (See Appendix 1.1). From June 29, 2018 to July 31, 2018 we collected 300 surveys from graduate, and undergraduate teaching assistants at UBC. The surveys included such questions and statements as: “How many courses did you TA for, from September 2017 to August 2018?” “How would you describe the overall impact of your TA experience on your wellbeing in the past academic year (September 2017 – August 2018)?”, “I felt generally qualified and prepared to perform my TA duties?”, “My TA duties did not interfere with my other academic responsibilities.”, “My TA workload was manageable.” “I had no financial concerns.”, “I had colleagues or mentors to call on for help when needed.”, “I got along well with my students.” and “I got along well with the instructor of the course I was TAing”. We also asked students what they have heard about the wellness supports provided by UBC, what types of supports they would like to see included in their TA training programming, and if they would participate in training focused on maintaining TA wellbeing if it was provided. All of these questions and statements were carefully created to give us the best understanding of the problems teaching assistants at UBC might face as a result of their TA work, and how they can most effectively be supported.

### 4.1 Number of Courses Assisted by Teaching Assistants

The majority of graduate teaching assistants assist more than 2 courses in a year (69.5%) and 25% of graduate students are teaching assistants for more than three courses in a year.

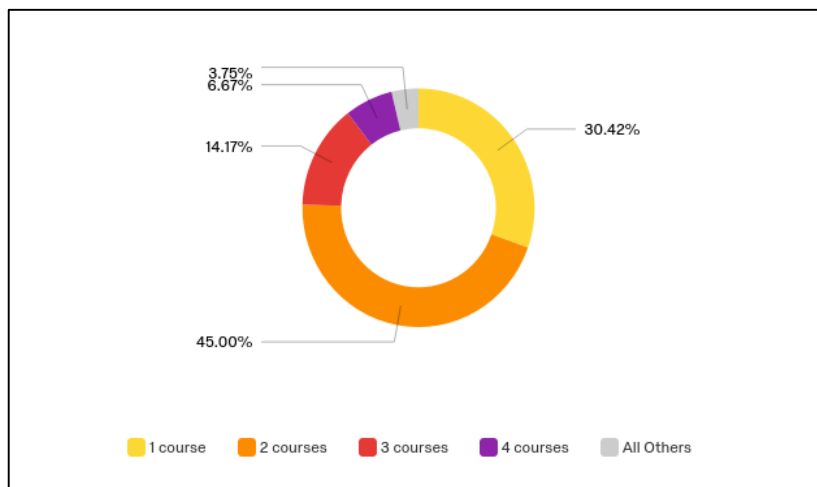
Figure 1: Number of Courses Assisted by GTAs



Undergraduate teaching assistants also tend to assist more than one course per academic year (58.18%) (see Figure 1). Of the undergraduate students who assisted more than one course per year, 12.73% of those students assisted three or more courses per year (see Figure 2). The large number of courses assisted per year by both student groups corroborates focus group

notes about the financial dependency of graduate and undergraduate students. It also supports responses from a survey question that asked about teaching assistants' financial situations. Of the undergraduate students surveyed 16.66% reported having serious financial concerns and 34.5% of graduate students

Figure 2: Number of Courses Assisted by UTAs



reported the same concerns. Tuition and the cost of living at UBC are extremely high. For graduate and undergraduate students, being a teaching assistant is a source of income that is conveniently located and bears the potential to improve their own understanding of program content. However teaching a large number of courses each

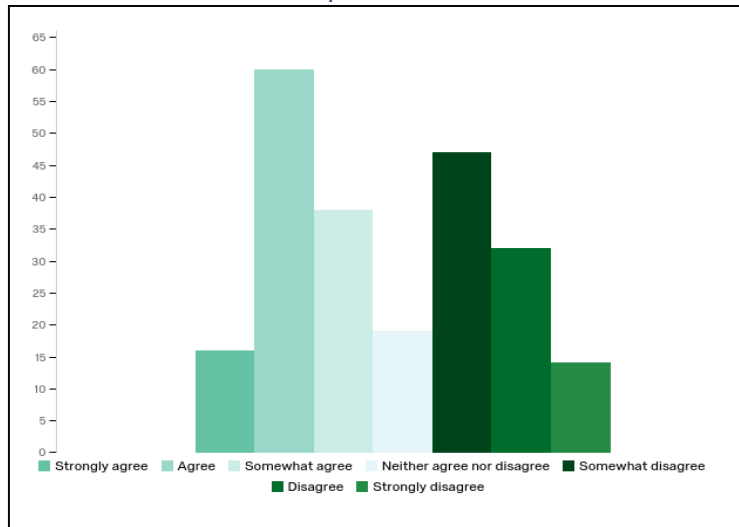
year can be stressful and might negatively impact teaching assistants' academic and mental wellbeing. Thinking about the number of courses and the financial concerns expressed by teaching assistants at UBC, we next asked students about how they felt their teaching experiences impacted their overall wellbeing.



## 4.2 Impact of Teaching Assistant Duties on Wellness

A substantial proportion of graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants commented that their duties negatively impacted their mental health. Of the 55 undergraduate teaching assistants surveyed, 20% of those workers said that their TA duties negatively impacted their

*Figure 3: Graduate Student Descriptions of the Impact of TA Duties on their Academic Responsibilities*

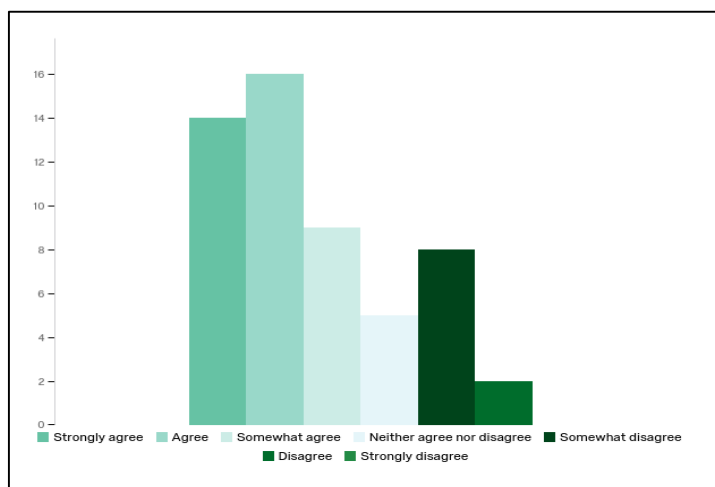


mental health. Graduate students were more likely to comment that their teaching assistant duties negatively impacted their mental health, with 38% (over one third) of those TAs responding yes.

Some of the reasons that teaching assistants might have negative experiences relating to their teaching assistant duties might be the interference that work has on their academic progress. Almost half of the graduate students surveyed (44%) noted that their

teaching assistant duties negatively impacted their academic progress (see Figure 3). For undergraduate teaching assistants, 23% of those surveyed commented that their teaching assistant work negatively impacted their academic progress (see Figure 4). Teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups talked about wanting to be a teaching assistant partly because they enjoy teaching and interacting with students. However, they also indicated that this work sometimes comes at cost to academic progress.

*Figure 4: Undergraduate Student Descriptions of the Impact of TA Duties on their Academic Responsibilities*



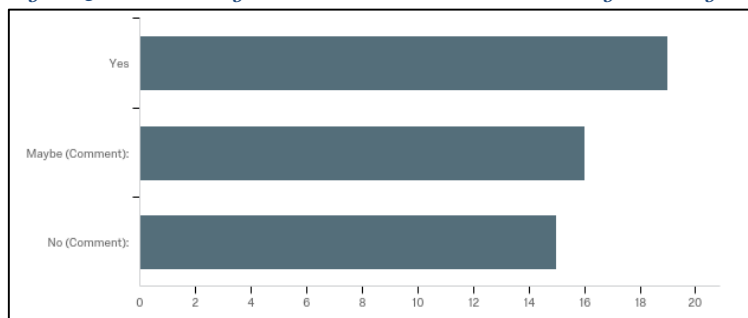
Teaching assistants were also asked who they talked to about their stressful teaching experiences. Of the graduate student teaching assistants surveyed, they were most likely to take their problems to other TAs (54.27%) in and outside of their departments, and to a faculty member in their department (22.71%). Undergraduate teaching assistants were similarly most likely to talk about their stressful teaching experiences with other TAs (56.25%) in and outside of their departments,

and faculty members in their department (25%). Undergraduate students who were uncomfortable talking to others about their teaching experiences most frequently commented that their reluctance to talk to others about their stressful situations was because they weren't sure that their experience was legitimate/serious (37.5%) or that they were worried that reaching out to others would negatively impact their employment (25%). Graduate students were similarly reluctant to share their negative experiences because they weren't sure their concerns were legitimate/serious (37.78%) or that it would negatively impact them professionally (21.11%).

Corroborating teaching assistants' apprehensions for talking to others about their stress, graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants also expressed fear of the stigma associated with experiencing mental health problems. When asked how teaching assistants perceived others' perceptions of mental health problems, 30.87% of graduate students confirmed that they thought most people would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment. Similarly, 25% of undergraduate teaching assistants indicated that they thought most people would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment. Teaching assistants' views of others' perceptions of mental health problems are particularly troubling when we consider that 21.5% of undergraduate student and 39.27% of graduate student teaching assistants identified themselves as a person with mental health problems. Combined with their financial and academic dependence on this employment, their positionality makes them a vulnerable population in the university. Their livelihood and professional development are dependent on these jobs, but expressing problems they are having puts them at risk for losing that support.

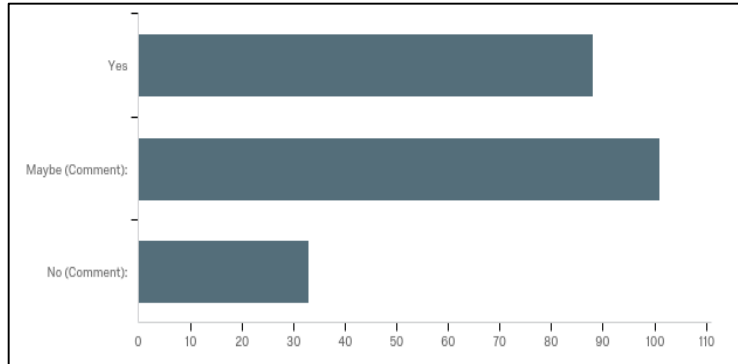
### 4.3 Teaching Assistant Support

*Figure 5: UTA Willingness to Take Part in Wellness Programming*



Of the teaching assistants surveyed for this research, 38.99% of graduate students and 38% of undergraduate students said that they would be willing to take part in wellness programs for TAs at UBC. The majority of both student groups negatively responded for various reasons. Students explained that they would be reluctant to take part in TA centered wellness programming because they lacked free time to take part due to their teaching assistant duties and academic responsibilities. Others commented that their department wouldn't support such programming or that these programs wouldn't solve the systemic issue of the precarious positionality of teaching assistants related to their work. Many indicated that the money and time spent creating wellness centered programming for teaching

Figure 6: GTA Willingness to Take Part in Wellness Programming



assistants could be better spent educating faculty members on wellness literacy and providing teaching assistants with more sufficient pay.

## 5.0 Recommendations

The University of British Columbia is one of the best universities in Canada and has some of the most progressive programming in terms of supporting teaching across post-secondary institutions. The teaching assistants who took part in our study were eager to help the university continue developing their teaching related programming to help future generations of students and teaching assistants. Teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups and surveys highlighted several areas of improvement in TA wellness at UBC. In this section we highlight their top three key areas for improvement as recommendations: compensation, peer support programming and faculty training programs.

### 5.1 Compensation

Teaching assistants in both groups suggested that the monetary compensation that they received for their TA work was not always commensurate with the work that they completed. Many teaching assistants commented that they needed to go over their mandated work-hours to complete the tasks assigned to them. This type of behavior has the potential to compromise arrangements between the UBC teaching assistants' union (CUPE 2278) and the university. Professors and instructors at UBC should be discouraged from expecting teaching assistants to go beyond their agreed work hours and teaching assistants should receive commensurate compensation for additional work that they do.

## 5.2 Peer Support Programming

Our survey findings demonstrated that graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants



are both more likely to seek help for managing their wellbeing from other teaching assistants (inside or outside their departments) or instructors in their own departments. Considering these findings teaching assistant wellness support should focus on developing in-department peer-support programs for TAs to support other TAs. Department specific support over centralized wellbeing programming might be more effective

because as our results indicate, teaching assistants feel more comfortable seeking help from others with similar disciplinary context and background as their own. Creating programming that is department based can also address department specific teaching assistant issues. This type of approach also falls in line with responses from surveyed teaching assistants who said that they would be reluctant to take part in additional teaching assistant training programs because of a lack of time. Peer-support programs could be more flexible than formal professional development sessions focused on wellbeing. Teaching assistants can schedule meetings with peers trained in helping others on a case by case basis. Training for “mentor” peers would also be a potential professional development opportunity that could help graduate students later in their own teaching duties.

## 5.3 Faculty Training

Both focus group and surveyed teaching assistants commented that training for faculty members on effectively working with teaching assistants would be especially helpful. Unfortunately, the teaching assistants featured in this research project frequently commented on instructor mismanagement of class outlines, assignments, interactions with students and with teaching assistants as negatively affecting their wellbeing. If programming was available that clearly outlined the work-hour limitations for teaching assistants at UBC, how to administer course content for their students large classes and how to effectively communicate expectations to students and TAs, much of the strain experienced by teaching assistants could be mitigated.

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### Appendix 1.0 Focus Group Pseudonyms

<b>Pseudonym**</b>	<b>Teaching Assistant Program</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Andy	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	31-35	Male
Vanessa	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	26-30	Female
Samantha	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	25	Female
Grace	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	36-40	Female
Amanda	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	26-30	Female
Max	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	31-35	Gender Queer
Tom	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	31-35	Male
Chelsea	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	26-30	Female
Nancy	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	40+	Female
Frank	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	36-40	Male
Emmy	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	26-30	Female
River	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	26-30	Female
Naomi	Graduate Student Teaching Assistant	25	Female

*\*\*Pseudonyms were created through a random name generator*

### Appendix 1.1 Survey/Focus Group Email

Dear Teaching Assistants,

My name is Nicole Malette, and I am a Research Assistant for The University of British Columbia's (UBC) Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology. You are being asked to take part in a study about TA Wellness because you are or have been a Teaching Assistant (TA) for UBC. We want to survey TAs to learn more about the types of support they are receiving pertaining to their wellness, and the TA experiences they find most stressful. Please take 10 min to fill out our short [survey](#). If you would like to participate in a focus group with other UBC TAs (1.5 hours maximum), please indicate your availability in the following [link](#) or by contacting Nicole Malette ([n.malette@alumni.ubc.ca](mailto:n.malette@alumni.ubc.ca)).

Thank you!

Sign up for **Focus Groups** here: [https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9BIroLXmtN4tEj3](https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9BIroLXmtN4tEj3)

Fill out our **Survey** here (*should take 10 min max to complete*):

[https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0UOsxV1jPQRKsHX](https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0UOsxV1jPQRKsHX)

#### For more information you can contact:

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The University of British Columbia

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## Appendix 1.2 Survey/Focus Group Poster



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

**Have you been a Teaching Assistant at UBC in the past year?**



**Would you like to share your experiences with us?**

We are interested in listening to your experiences as a Teaching Assistant (TA) at The University of British Columbia (UBC) and how that work has affected your overall wellbeing. We will be conducting focus groups and surveys with TAs from different departments across campus to best inform new TA training programs.

**Please contact us for more information about how to join the study:**

**“TA Wellness Project” Study Team**

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Academic Director

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