

---

---

---

---

---

# Teaching Assistant Wellness: Individual, Social & Structural Strategies (Part 2)

*Executive Summary*



Nicole Malette  
Sustainability Scholar, 2019  
The University of British Columbia

**Prepared for:**

Dr. Shaya Golparian  
Educational Developer  
Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology  
The University of British Columbia  
Shaya.golparian@ubc.ca

Dr. Christina Hendricks  
Academic Director  
Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology  
The University of British Columbia  
Christina.hendricks@ubc.ca

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants who took part in our focus groups and who completed our surveys. Your feedback has been exceptionally helpful. We would also like to thank Dr. Christina Hendricks and Dr. Joseph Topornycky for reviewing our research and the UBC Sustainability Scholars program for funding this work.

**Disclaimer**

This report was produced as part of the UBC Sustainability Scholars Program, a partnership between the University of British Columbia and various local governments and organisations in support of providing graduate students with opportunities to do applied research on projects that advance sustainability across the region.

This project was conducted under the mentorship of The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology staff. The opinions and recommendations in this report and any errors are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology or the University of British Columbia.

## Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction	3
1.1 Teaching Assistant Wellbeing Program in 2018	3
1.2 Teaching Assistant Wellbeing Program in 2019	3
2.0 TA Wellbeing Strategy	3
2.1 Teaching Assistant Groups at UBC	4
2.1a Graduate Student Teaching Assistants (GTAs)	4
2.1b Undergraduate Student Teaching Assistants (UTAs)	4
2.2 Research Questions	5
2.3 Review of Teaching Assistant Supports at UBC	5
2.4 Designing Focus Groups and Survey Questions	6
2.5 Ethics	6
2.6 Recruitment	6
2.7 Conducting Focus Groups	6
2.8 Conducting Surveys	7
2.9 Analyzing the Data	7
2.9a Focus Groups	7
2.19b Surveys	7
2.10 Distributing Findings	7
2.11 Recommendations	8
3.0 Faculty Specific Reports	8
References	9
Appendix 1	11
Appendix 2	12
Appendix 3	14

# Teaching Assistant Wellness Report

## *Sustainability Scholars Program*

### **1.0 Introduction**

#### **1.1 Teaching Assistant Wellbeing Research Project in 2018**

The aim of this project in 2019 has been to share resources with UBC Faculties and departments and other post-secondary institutions in order to support TA wellness. To better understand how TA wellness is impacted by their work duties and how UBC can best support TA wellness we previously 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.

#### **1.2 Teaching Assistant Wellbeing Research Project in 2019**

Building on the research conducted last year we conducted focus groups with 15 additional undergraduate teaching assistants at UBC. We also expanded our survey to collect responses from almost 400 teaching assistants across the university. Findings from data collected this year and last year were used to create a public facing report for other Canadian post-secondary institutions to use to collect information on the wellbeing of their own TAs. We also created faculty-specific reports for Faculties of Arts, Sciences and Applied Sciences here at UBC. These faculties had the highest survey response rates. These private reports will be delivered to each on-campus faculty for use in their own TA wellbeing strategies.

### **2.0 TA Wellbeing Strategy**

This year, one of the main aims of the TA Wellbeing research group has been to create a document that could help other post-secondary institutions evaluate the wellness needs of their own TAs. This strategy includes information about the different TA groups that we focused on, our research questions, TA supports that were already present at UBC, our research process and how we decimated our findings. In addition to the suggestions listed below we also created a step-by-step how-to guide (see Appendix 1) for conducting TA Wellbeing research as other institutions.

## 2.1 Teaching Assistant Groups at UBC<sup>1</sup>

Before we began collecting data on TA wellbeing at UBC Vancouver Campus we first identified the teaching assistant groups we wanted to study. 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.

### 2.1a 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.

### 2.1b Undergraduate Student Teaching Assistants (UTAs)

UTAs are undergraduate students hired by the university to aid instructors and professors. AT UBC- Vancouver, 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, paper work 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Our section on Teaching Assistant Groups at UBC is replicated in our 2018 Teaching Assistant Wellness Report. We included this information in the 2019 and 2019 reports because the two documents are so closely connected. It was also included in this report so that those who read only the second report could better understand the context of this study.

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.

## **2.2 Research Questions**

To better understand how we could effectively support teaching assistant wellbeing at UBC we next designed research questions. The research questions we used for our project included: 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?"

## **2.3 Review of Teaching Assistant Supports at UBC**

To better understand how wellbeing is facilitated by teaching assistant training programs we reviewed all TA programming at UBC Vancouver Campus. 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. However, in January 2019 CTLT offered series of sessions under wellbeing themes identified by UBC TAs.

## **2.4 Designing Focus Groups and Survey Questions**

After investigating the types of wellbeing supports provided at UBC Vancouver campus we next designed focus group and survey questions we thought could best be used to investigate the TA wellbeing needs. These questions were informed by TA concerns around their wellbeing as well as already existing literature around wellness in school settings. An example of our survey and focus group questions are available in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

## **2.5 Ethics**

Because our research investigates the wellbeing needs of TAs at UBC Vancouver campus, and because we were interested in using this data for future publication, we completed and received certification from the UBC's Behavioral Research Ethics Board. With our ethics application we submitted the focus group and survey questions we planned to use, potential recruitment posters and emails, and consent forms. This process can be quite lengthy, but one thing to note is that UBC V BREB considered this work as "minimal risk" to teaching students.

## **2.6 Recruitment**

After we received permission to begin collecting data from the UBC ethics board we began distributing posters across campus. We hung posters in all of the main faculty lounges across campus and in the student union building. We also asked the union representing UBC TAs (CUPE 2278) to distribute recruitment emails to TAs through their networks. Our recruitment emails and posters included contact information for researchers on this project and how to sign-up for focus groups and take the survey. If TAs wanted to take part in a focus group they were given a list of dates and times they could choose from to take part in a focus group. The same recruitment posters and emails included links to our survey hosted by Qualtrics survey tool.

## **2.7 Conducting Focus Groups**

Students who agreed to take part in our focus groups and picked a date/time that was provided for them through the recruitment information were told where they could meet with us on campus. All focus group participants were reminded of their agreement to participate in the focus group two days before the event and the morning of the event.

We facilitated the focus groups in meeting rooms in the Centre for Teaching and Learning Technologies at UBC. Before TAs arrived to take part in the focus groups we printed two consent forms for each participant, a sign-in sheet and a list of questions that would be asked during the focus groups. Three members of the research team were also on hand to help facilitate the focus groups. One member met TAs at the front of the office and showed them where the focus groups would take place. That person also informed the teaching assistants of the aims of the research that we were doing and the protocols of consent. The two other researchers helped set up the focus group, collect signed consent forms and provided audio recording support for the focus group. Those researchers also took notes during the question and answer period of the focus group. Our focus groups were scheduled to last one hour and thirty minutes. Most focus groups took up all of this time.

## **2.8 Conducting Surveys**

After receiving approval from the UBC research ethics board we posted and published our survey questions on Qualtrics survey software and gave students an Internet link that would take them to the survey sign-in page. Qualtrics organizes and maintains all survey responses and provides easy access to analysis tools and data downloading opportunities.

## **2.9 Analyzing Data**

After we collected responses from almost 400 survey participants and 25 focus group members we set about cleaning and analyzing the data.

### *2.9a Focus Groups*

After running all of the focus groups we set out to conduct we set about transcribing the focus group audio recordings. It took a research assistant a month to transcribe all of these discussions. After the audio recordings were transcribed they were then uploaded to INVIVO qualitative data analysis software. Using INVIVO we have used inductive and deductive coding methods to take note of themes that came up in focus group conversations. Some of the main issues teaching assistants discussed in our focus groups were feelings autonomy, respect and a mismatch between academic expectations and TA duties.

### *2.9b Surveys*

We used the data analysis tools to investigate the proportions of responses to certain survey questions that we asked. We also downloaded the raw data provided by Qualtrics and uploaded it to STATA data analysis software. With STATA we were able to better investigate the relationships between TA work and certain wellbeing outcomes.

## **2.10 Distributing Findings**

This work was funded by the UBC Sustainability Scholars program. As such, initial findings from our research were published on their website. We also shared those findings with the UBC TA union (CUPE 2278). Non-public faculty specific findings are also being provided to the Arts, Sciences and Natural Sciences departments across campus. Other findings were also presented at academic research conferences, focusing on issues in higher education, and are currently being used for a peer-reviewed research paper.



### **2.11 Recommendations**

Our recommendation to any unit pursuing research on TA wellness is to start this project by first and foremost reaching out to their TAs to see how they define wellness for themselves. Drawing on the definition of wellness as defined by TAs, the next step we recommend is reviewing the wellbeing supports and programs already in place on their campus, particularly those (if any) that are specifically addressing TA wellness. This will help them design survey and focus group questions that suit the needs of their students/employees.

### **3.0 Faculty Specific Reports**

This year we also created reports on our findings for the three faculties at UBC that had the highest survey response rates. We made individualized reports for the Arts, Sciences and Applied Sciences that discuss the concerns of GTAs and UTAS working for those units. To do this we segment the overall data that we collected on TA wellbeing according to discipline in our data cleaning process. We next analyzed that data in the same way that we analyzed the overall dataset using INVIVO, Qualtrics and Stata data analysis software. After analyzing the data and collecting the findings we wrote faculty specific reports that have been distributed to each unit. These findings are confidential to each unit and not sharable with the public.

## References

- Christopher, J. C., Christopher, S. E., Dunnagan, T., & Schure, M. (2006). Teaching self-care through mindfulness practices: The application of yoga, meditation, and qigong to counselor training. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 46*(4), 494-509.
- Clauss, L. (2011). *An analysis of student wellness behaviors at a top ten university* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of the Pacific. Stockton, California.
- Creese, G., & Kambere, E. N. (2003). What colour is your English?. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie, 40*(5), 565-573.
- Dalhousie University (2018) <https://www.dal.ca/>
- Gill, M. M. (1994). Accent and stereotypes: Their effect on perceptions of teachers and lecture comprehension.
- Gilreath, J. A., & Slater, T. F. (1994). Training graduate teaching assistants to be better undergraduate physics educators. *Physics Education, 29*(4), 200.
- Hogan, T. P., Norcross, J. C., Cannon, J. T., & Karpiak, C. P. (2007). Working with and training undergraduates as teaching assistants. *Teaching of Psychology, 34*(3), 187-190.
- Hong, C. Y. (2015). Making complaints—Proficiency effects on instructor-and peer-directed email correspondence. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 6*(1), 53-60.
- Kupchella, C. E. (2009). Colleges and universities should give more broad-based attention to health and wellness-at all levels. *Journal of American College Health, 58*(2), 185-186.
- Lal, S. (2000). Dangerous silences: lessons in daring. *Radical Teacher, (58)*, 12.
- Onuoha, U. C., & Akintola, A. A. (2016). Gender differences in self-reported academic burnout among undergraduates. *Gender & Behaviour, 14*(1), 7110.
- Owen, T. R. (1999). The relationship between self-direction and wellness among graduate students. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 47*(1), 31-39.
- Park, C. (2004). The graduate teaching assistant (GTA): Lessons from North American experience. *Teaching in Higher Education, 9*(3), 349-361.
- Simon Fraser University (2017) <https://www.sfu.ca/>
- Soutter, A. K., O'Steen, B., & Gilmore, A. (2014). The student well-being model: A conceptual framework for the development of student well-being indicators. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 19*(4), 496-520.

Subtirelu, N. C. (2015). “She does have an accent but...”: Race and language ideology in students' evaluations of mathematics instructors on RateMyProfessors. com. *Language in Society*, 44(1), 35-62.

The University of Alberta (2017) <https://www.ualberta.ca/>

The University of Victoria (2017) <https://www.uvic.ca/>

Turgut, N., Karacalar, S., Polat, C., Kıran, Ö., Gültop, F., Kalyon, S. T., ... & Kaya, E. (2016). Burnout syndrome during residency. *Turkish journal of anaesthesiology and reanimation*, 44(5), 258.

Weidert, J. M., Wendorf, A. R., Gurung, R. A., & Filz, T. (2012). A survey of graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants. *College Teaching*, 60(3), 95-103.

Appendix 1

**Teaching Assistant Wellness**

**A Checklist for Conducting Teaching Assistant Wellbeing Research**

This condensed guide has been created as a quick reference for anyone thinking about conducting research on Teaching Assistant (TA) Wellbeing at their institution. We hope that this document will help you plan your research and effectively manage your timelines.

**Conducting TA Wellbeing Research Checklist:**

- ( ) Reach out to TAs and investigate what wellbeing means to them
- ( ) Review TA supports at institution
- ( ) Design focus group and survey questions
- ( ) File for approval to conduct research from your institutional Behavioral Research Ethics Board
- ( ) Recruit TAs for surveys/focus groups (e.g. distributed recruitment posters and emails)
- ( ) Find space to conduct focus groups
- ( ) Conduct focus groups
- ( ) Analyze data
- ( ) Distribute findings to key stakeholders (e.g. TA Union, on-campus Center for Teaching and Learning, Faculties)

Appendix 2

**Sample Survey Questions<sup>2</sup>**

1. How many courses did you TA for, from September 2017 to August 2018?
  - 1 course
  - 2 courses
  - 3 courses
  - 4 courses
  - 5 courses
  - 6 courses
  - More than 6 courses (please specify)
2. If you need to seek professional help for your mental or emotional health at UBC, would you know where to go?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
3. I see myself as a person with a mental illness
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
4. How would you describe the overall impact of your TA experience on your wellbeing in the past academic year (September 2018-August 2019)?
  - Very Positive
  - Positive
  - Slightly positive
  - Slightly negative
  - Negative
  - Very negative
5. In the past academic year, 1 or more of the issues raised in the question #9 have negatively impacted my academic progress.
  - Yes

---

<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of survey questions please contact a member of the Teaching Assistant Wellness research group (e.g. Nicole Mallette, Shaya Golparian).

- No
6. Have you ever discussed stressful teaching experiences with others?
- Yes
  - No
7. If you have ever discussed stressful teaching experiences with others, who did you talk to? (*Note: Please choose as many as applicable*)
- TA in my department
  - Faculty member in my department
  - Staff in my department
  - TA outside of my department
  - Faculty member outside of my department
  - Staff outside of my department
  - Other (Please specify)
8. If you have not discussed stressful teaching experience with others at UBC, please indicate the reason: (*Note: Please choose as many as applicable*)
- I wasn't sure that my experience was legitimate/serious
  - I didn't trust that others would support me
  - I didn't trust that others were capable of supporting me
  - I was worried that reaching out to others would impact me professionally
  - I did not experience a stressful teaching experience
  - Other (Please specify):
9. Have you ever discussed stressful teaching experiences with faculty?
- Yes
  - No
10. What kind of wellness programs do you think should be available for TAs at UBC? (indicate all that apply)
- Time management workshops
  - Stress management workshops
  - Department specific TA training workshops
  - Mental health resources Repository
  - TA mentorship programming
  - TA wellbeing literacy programming for TAs
  - TA wellbeing literacy programming for Faculty
11. Would you take part in wellness programs for TAs at UBC?
- Yes
  - No
  - Maybe

## Appendix 3

### **Sample Focus Group Questions**<sup>3</sup>

- 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?
- What can we do to improve TA wellbeing at UBC?

---

<sup>3</sup> For a complete list of focus group questions please contact a member of the Teaching Assistant Wellness research group (e.g. Nicole Malette, Shaya Golparian).