

# An Overview of TF Training at SEAS

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In this document, we first provide an overview of the SEAS TF population and the current training attendance. We then discuss challenges related to training logistics, motivation and attendance, and mismatch between the curriculum and TF duties. Finally, we end with suggestions that may improve the current process.

## OVERVIEW OF SEAS TF POPULATION:

Here is an overview of the SEAS TF population from the spring 2023 semester, as well as the attendance at the trainings. This spring, we had 123 graduate TFs at SEAS. 81 of those TFs were hired by 01/17—less than a week before the start of the semester; 42 were hired between then and 02/01—a week and a half after the start of the semester.

Of these TFs, 74 reported being PhD students, 47 were masters students, and 2 were earning professional degrees. 89 TFs were only affiliated with SEAS, with a long tail of other programs—See Table below.

### Home school/department:

Your home department/school	Count of Your home department/school
SEAS	89
SEAS/GSD	8
GSD	6
EPS	5
HBS	4
Physics	2
HES	2
Philosophy	1
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Biostatistics	1
Harvard Kennedy School	1
HBS/Law	1
Organismic and Evolutionary Biology	1
Law	1

**Grand Total****123**

Roughly half of the TFs needed to participate in training, with 59 having previously TFed, 55 not having previously TFed, and 9 unknown (these numbers are estimated based on communications with TFs and orientation attendance). Of those 55 TFs who needed to participate in training, 24 satisfied both the microteaching and the orientation requirement, 25 satisfied one but not both (7 attended only an orientation and 18 attended only a microteaching), and the remaining 6 did not attend at all. Orientation attendance was composed of 9 TFs at the first orientation I ran, 10 at the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 11 at a separately held CS training.

## CHALLENGES IN CURRENT TRAINING APPROACH:

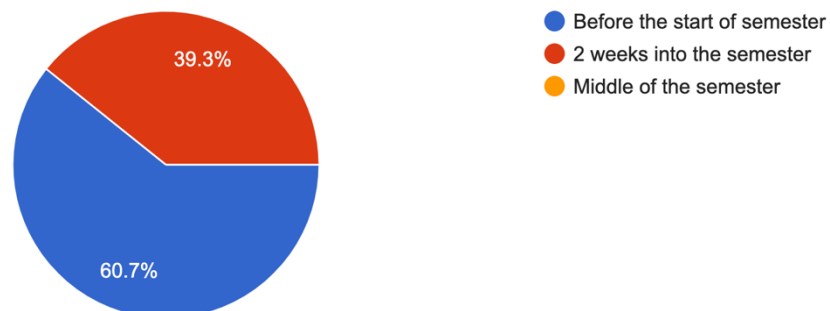
### Logistical challenges:

Logistics of scheduling and sending appropriate messaging to TFs about training requirements were a big challenge for 3 main reasons: 1) Timing is challenging as TFs get hired at different points through the first few weeks of the semester; 2) there's no reliable way of tracking who is a first time TF (and should be trained) and who isn't; 3) we ended up with a variety of ways of meeting the program requirements and communicating all of the possible alternatives was challenging.

1. *Timing*: TFs get hired in roughly 2 waves: several weeks before the start of the semester, and 1-2 weeks into the semester. In order to catch the significant group of people who get hired after the start of the semester, we held 2 sets of orientation events. The first was during the first few days of the semester and the second was 2 weeks later. The other plausible alternatives we discussed were to hold the orientation for all TFs 2 weeks into the semester. In a survey we sent out to fall semester TFs with 29 responses, most (60%) preferred the orientation to occur before the start of the semester.

When would required TF training have been most beneficial?

28 responses



Another scheduling challenge to timing the orientation events is that TFs may not arrive on campus until the start of the semester, so holding events before that excludes those who have not returned (this could be addressed by finding ways to incentivize TFs to

return to campus sooner). On the other hand, holding them after the start of the semester conflicts with people's class schedules. In the spring semester, we held one set of orientation activities (an orientation session and micro-teaching sessions) during the first week of the semester, and another set the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of the semester for TFs hired later. This worked ok, but requires more work to organize, staff and run.

2. *Tracking*: Currently, training is required for first time TFs at Harvard. I have been requesting by email the list of all hired TFs at roughly weekly intervals to send out communications about training to newly hired TFs, however it is difficult to tell from this list who needs to do the training. I discussed this with staff after the fall semester, and they were able to give me a flag for who had previously met their G2 teaching requirement in the spring semester, but this does not provide information about the 1/3 of TFs who are masters students, or the people who are not SEAS PhD students or leave this blank.

A related challenge is that this way of getting me the information about newly hired TFs is somewhat inefficient for both of us and has a time lag between when someone is hired and when they hear about the training. If there were a way to access this information more directly, it would remove some overhead.

3. *Communicating*: Currently, meeting the TF training requirement requires 3 things: 1) an orientation, 2) a microteaching session, and 3) an online training through the Bok center. In the spring semester, for example, there were multiple ways to meet the first requirement, including: attending the rising G2 orientation in the summer, attending either of the new TF orientations I ran in the spring, or attending the CS TF orientation. The micro-teaching session could be fulfilled by attending the CS TF orientation, attending a microteaching session with me or at the Bok center, or having a 1-on-1 meeting with me for people who were unable to make any of the scheduled sessions.

### **Motivational/Attendance Challenges:**

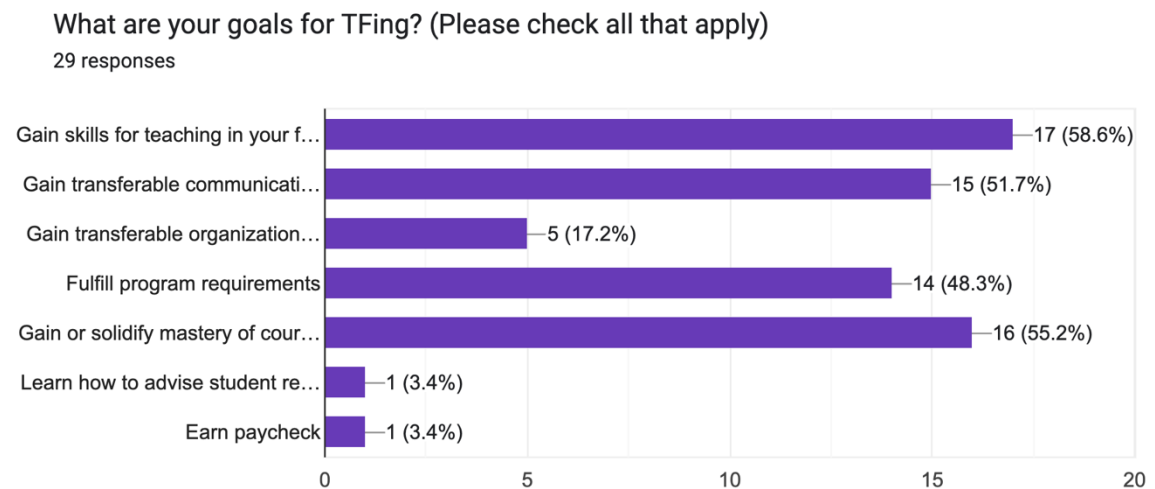
Attendance for these orientations was inconsistent. Without knowing who has previously been a TF (see challenge 2 above), we don't know exactly how many people should have participated in these trainings, but from the spring semester, we can say: most people who required training attended at least one of the orientation sessions; but only half of those attended both, with the remaining majority attending only a microteaching component. See overview section for a full breakdown by training type. I suspect this comes from 3 main factors: 1) there are no consequences for not doing the training; 2) the value proposition of the training isn't clearly communicated; and 3) the messaging about exceptions from the training based on past experience were unclear.

1. *No negative incentives*: The TF training requirements outlined above are required in TFs contract, and I made that clear in my messaging, however I had no way of enforcing that as there are not consequences for not completing the training. In the spring semester, I tracked who was coming to orientation sessions and sent out messages to those who had not attended, making it clear that I was tracking attendance, but that was the best I could do to provide a sense of actual requirement for the training. I believe some TFs participated in the training because of imagined negative consequences for not doing it,

saying things like they were worried that their TFing wouldn't "count" for PhD requirements otherwise. I'm guessing that others didn't participate because they knew it wasn't required in any tangible way and they have many other competing demands on their time.

2. *No clearly articulated positive takeaways*: On the flip side, consequences for not completing the training are only one motivator—a clear positive value proposition for completing the training might also motivate people to engage. Currently, the training covers mostly small pieces of logistics, appropriate behavior for TFs, and a small amount of general teaching advice, as well as the micro-teaching component that focuses on classroom teaching practice. While I think these topics are important, I don't feel clearly able to articulate a takeaway that TFs can expect to get out of the orientation that I think would encourage them to participate (e.g. practical skills for time management as a new TF, or how to be prepared for the first day of class).

Responses to the survey I sent in the fall semester suggest that TFs have a variety of motivations for TFing beyond financial and program-requirement reasons including gaining teaching skills, transferable communication skills, and gaining mastery of course material. Perhaps highlighting how the training can address these motivations would improve participation.



3. *No clear messaging about exceptions*: There are a lot of edge cases where people asked me if they should participate in different parts of the training. I made some case by case calls, but I think some people made those calls themselves since we didn't clearly state what the exceptions are. I think clear messaging around this would help, but I didn't feel confident providing it because a) the trainings mix together different components of working at Harvard and learning to teach in general, so it was unclear to me what to say for people with past TF experience elsewhere, and b) I didn't feel confident spelling out the exceptions clearly as attendance already felt like a challenge. The common exceptions include past teaching experience elsewhere ranging from grad

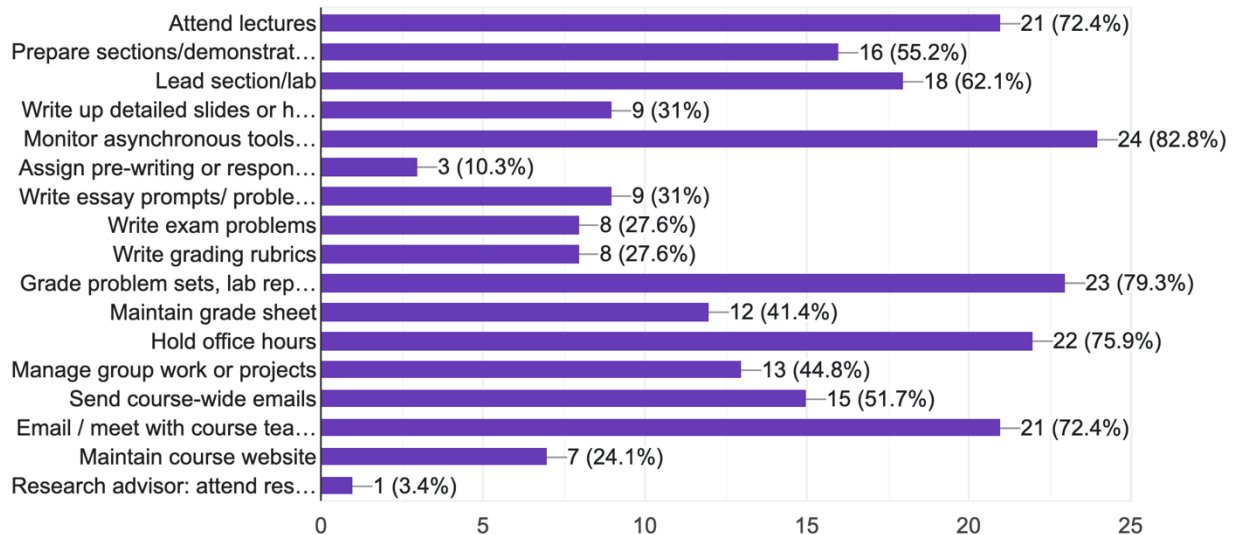
TA duties, to undergrad TA duties (both US and non-US), to non-college teaching and training from programs at Harvard besides SEAS (e.g. EPS).

### Content challenges:

The difficulty in clearly communicating the value of attending these sessions to new TFs comes, in part, from a disconnect between the type of duties that many TFs have, and the areas focused on by the training. The micro-teaching session is the main practice component of the orientation, which focuses on the lecture style component of teaching. From the survey responses from fall semester TFs, we can see that only around 60% of TFs who responded are leading sections or labs. Anecdotally, a portion of those will not be running weekly sections or labs, but will instead run only a few throughout the semester. 80% of TFs who responded are grading, and 75% are holding office hours. Content that addresses these scenarios, or that allows TFs to pick and choose skills that are most relevant for their duties may be more widely applicable or popular, which may help with the motivation challenges described above.

#### What are your TF Duties? (Please check all that apply)

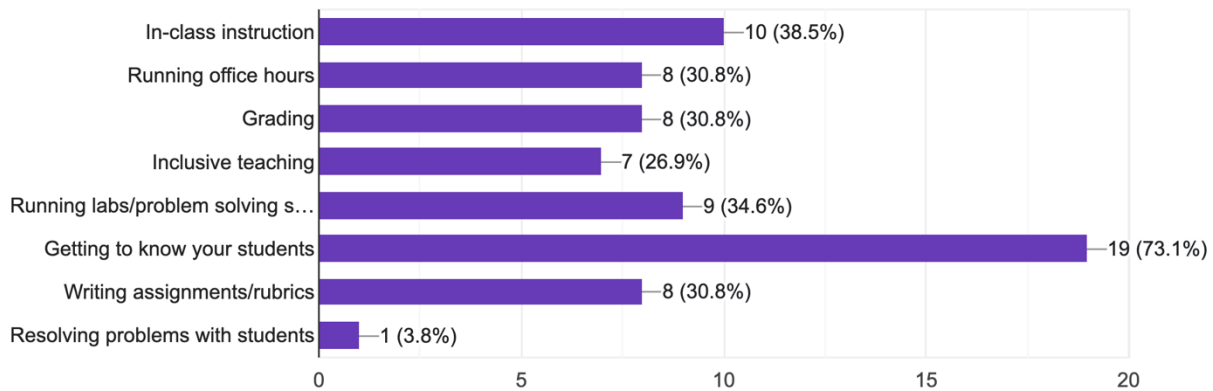
29 responses



The survey also asked TFs about what they wish had been covered during their required training. The results are diverse, with 30-40% of respondents marking in-class instruction, office hours, grading, inclusive teaching, running labs/problem solving sections and writing assignments/rubrics respectively. The one response that got a high response rate with over 70% of respondents agreeing is getting to know your students. This appears to be a widely of interest and under-addressed aspect of the TF training.

## What topics would you have liked to cover in your required TF training?

26 responses



## SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGES TO TRAINING:

We have discussed several ideas that may be useful for addressing some of these challenges. These include organizing the TF training requirements through a Canvas site; replacing the micro-teaching requirement with a broader practice requirement; and clearly articulating the learning goals for the orientation to TFs.

1. *Canvas site:* We suggest that organizing the TF training requirements through a Canvas site (or similar) will have several advantages. It will allow TFs to transparently see and communicate when they have completed training requirements (I currently track this on spreadsheets that aren't easily visible to TFs). It will collect all of the information about training options into one place where we can clearly list out the different requirements and options for meeting them (I currently send a series of emails that may get skimmed and lost). It will facilitate tracking who needs to complete requirements and who already has. Finally, I think it will provide additional "legitimacy" to the training requirements rather than having them come exclusively from a series of emails from one of their peers. In addition to this, I hope it would be possible that TFs would be added to this Canvas site automatically to reduce the overhead of Sarah and I having to email spreadsheets back and forth to keep track of new hires.
2. *Broadening practice requirement:* We suggest expanding the microteaching requirement to a broader practice requirement that also includes training in the skill before the practice. Currently, students are expected to show up to micro-teaching sessions with a lesson prepared, but there is no instruction in how to prepare it, and many TFs do not actually come prepared. I think scheduling time to give some general instruction and time to plan a lesson into this component would allow us to focus on more substantive issues than people coming to these sessions unprepared. We also suggest that broadening the type of practice from just classroom teaching to topics like holding office

hours and grading would allow TFs to practice skills that are more relevant to their particular TF duties.

3. *Communicating learning goals:* We suggest that clearly spelling out a set of learning goals for the TF orientations would have two advantages. The first is that it could serve as motivation for TFs to see the positive outcomes of attending the training and encourage them to do so. We would then also be able to ensure that the training content matches those goals. The second advantage is that it would guide decisions around exceptions to training requirements based on the learning goals of each component, and each TF's prior experience as this currently feels like a very ad-hoc process.