Pivotal Events in Graduate Teacher Preparation for a Faculty Career

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Graduate programs can help future faculty become knowledgeable and successful participants of academic cultures by providing experiences which reflect the reality of faculty roles. This paper discusses the pivotal events in the graduate teaching experience which contribute positively and negatively to the professional development of teacher scholars. The study assessed the value of graduate school teaching experiences at a Research I institution from the perspective of new faculty who have moved to a variety of institutions to begin their careers in higher education. Assessing graduate school teaching opportunities and the impact these opportunities have on new faculty careers helped to focus graduate student support in preparing future faculty for teaching roles.

Research I institutions produce the faculty for the majority of colleges and universities in the United States and the faculty for an increasing number of developing nations. The tremendous investment institutions of higher education make in graduate education, in the search for outstanding faculty and in the undergraduate teaching environment make it imperative to support the successful development of graduate students as instructors in the undergraduate classroom. In addition, the strength of a research university is found in the wealth of human capital. The best and brightest young scholars make up the graduate student cohort. They are a tremendous source of intellectual inspiration for undergraduates and constitute a renewable resource for the future of higher education. This paper details a longitudinal study of a cohort of outstanding graduate students and their teaching experiences as they prepared for and moved into faculty roles. The researcher identified the pivotal events in the graduate experience which contribute to the successful preparation of teacher scholars. Pivotal events are those experiences which shape a graduate student’s and new faculty’s professional development and allow them to be knowledgeable and successful participants in the academic culture of their institution. The rationale for this study is to identify and support the institutional enabling factors which contribute positive experiences while reducing the events which seem to detract from the development of a professional approach to the scholarship of teaching.

Background

In some countries, instructional development focuses on course design and tenure track faculty rather than on graduate students’ classroom practice (Gibbs, 1998). In contrast, few institutions of higher education in the United States have mandatory teacher training requirements for faculty. Furthermore, teacher certification beyond secondary education in the U.S. is strongly resisted. As we enter the new millennium, initial training of university teachers is predominately done at the graduate level in the United States.
States (Chism, 1987; Lewis, 1993; Nyquist, 1991). When graduate preparation is done well, the dialogue on teaching continues into the early years of a faculty career and becomes the framework for a lifelong quest for teaching excellence by the teacher scholar.

This study is built on the work of Smith (1993); Simpson & Smith (1993); Smith & Simpson (1995); and Smith & Kalivoda (1998). In 1993 and 1995, Simpson & Smith conducted Delphi studies of leaders in faculty development to determine the teaching competencies or skills faculty and teaching assistants needed to become successful classroom teachers (Figure 1). These competencies and skills were used as the basis for developing a teaching assistant support program at a large research university.

Graduate programs which provide training and experience in discipline-based pedagogy address the public outcry about the quality of instruction at research institutions and provide graduate students better preparation for their future careers. Most graduates do not find jobs at research institutions (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1992) and teaching typically accounts for about two-thirds of faculty time the first year at most institutions. The exception is at research universities where teaching and research time is more evenly balanced (Menges, 1996).

Assessment of these TA support programs has been sporadic and there is little in the literature to document the impact these policies and programs have on the career paths of graduates who are hired by other types of institutions. The purpose of this longitudinal study, now including a ten-year cohort of TAs, is to track how doctoral students use their graduate teaching experience to make a successful transition into faculty roles at a variety of institutions. This investigation seeks to understand how environmental factors such as institutional support, departmental support, and the nature of the discipline shape the concept of teaching scholarship as TAs move from being graduate students to being new faculty members. Research began with the questions: How do highly successful TAs view their graduate teaching experiences in preparing them for a faculty position? How does the graduate teaching experience contribute or distract from their view of themselves as teacher scholars and help them to become knowledgeable and successful participants of academic cultures?

**Research Methods**

The investigator is using a qualitative, multi-case study approach (Merriam, 1988) with the constant comparative method to develop grounded theory as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The goal of grounded theory research is to generate theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved (Strauss, 1987). The researcher has collected and analyzed data from teaching assistants who participate in the well-established Teaching Assistant Mentor Program (Smith, 1993) coordinated through the Office of Instructional Support and Development at The University of Georgia. In this ten-year-old program to prepare future faculty, participants are experienced teaching assistants who have been recognized at the institutional level for their outstanding teaching. Each year, ten to fifteen TAs are selected from a variety of disciplines to serve as TA Mentors. These TA Mentors participate in a year-long mentoring experience that includes group discussions on teaching, individual mentoring by faculty members, and mentoring by and for TA peers. In addition, past and present TA Mentors are able to participate in a private list-serv discussion on teaching.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation Techniques**

In 1993, the first year of the study, we began collecting data about the graduate teaching assistant experience using purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) from 35 past and present TA Mentors. By focusing on how these outstanding TAs took advantage of their graduate teaching experience to manage the transition into faculty positions we hoped to learn more about the graduate student strategies and the kinds of support which promote a successful transition from TA to faculty member. In 1999 we extended the study to include TA Mentor cohorts from 1990-2000. At this point in the study, data collection and analysis has occurred simultaneously over a ten-year period and includes 96 participants at 55 insti-
tutions of higher education in the United States.

Each year, the new TA Mentor group participates in Phase I of the study which includes qualitative interviews (Spradley, 1979) and observations (Spradley, 1980). Data from interviews, observations, group discussions on teaching, and from the list-serv, TAMENTOR, are transcribed and entered into a computerized data-base manager (Filemaker Pro, 1990). Procedures in this phase include self description of significant factors in the graduate teaching experience which contributed to their being recognized as outstanding teachers by their departments and the university. In addition, we document the graduate experiences which seem to contribute to their future development as teacher scholars. We also track their job search to identify the factors which enabled them to successfully secure their first faculty position. These data are coded and categorized to identify patterns and roles which contribute to the TA experience and a smooth transition into faculty positions.

Phase II of the study began in 1994 as members of the first cohort of the TA Mentor study moved into their first faculty positions and began to use their graduate experience as the basis for a career. Data from Phase II participants comes from TAMENTOR list-serv discussions, mailed questionnaires, and individual interviews. The focus of the Phase II data collection is to determine what aspects of the graduate experience help participants, from a variety of backgrounds, successfully move into full-time, tenure-track careers. Through the TAMENTOR list-serv discussion we are able to compare perceptions and strategies and to verify with the participants our understanding of the data. Integrative diagrams are used from the early stages of the data collection to visualize and conceptualize data. A visual of the transition process of the participants in this study (Smith & Kalivoda, 1998) identified background, intervening, enabling and outcome variables which set the stage for the next phase of our investigation.

Phase III of the study began in 1999 as the early TA Mentor cohorts reflected on the third-year review process or were put up for promotion. A questionnaire was mailed to 96 former TA Mentors at 55 institutions of Higher Education in the U.S. and abroad. Of these 96, 52 are female, 44 are male, and 11 are minority or international participants. We asked them to reflect on the events in their graduate program they felt contributed to their professional development as teacher scholars and to identify the events that negatively influenced their professional growth. Response to the mailed survey totaled 42. However, we followed up with those not responding to the initial survey with encouragement via the TA Mentor list-serv discussion. For this paper we coded and analyzed the insights of the 42 responding to the survey as well as the comments and responses from the 72 former TA Mentors currently active on the TA Mentor list-serv discussion.

Summary of the 1999 Questionnaire

From the perspective of a first or second faculty position, the respondents to our tenth-year survey overwhelmingly agreed that the teaching competencies/skills identified for faculty and TAs in the earlier studies (Simpson & Smith, 1993; Smith & Simpson, 1995) (Figure 1) were crucial for success as a faculty member at a variety of institutions. However, the open-ended comments from the survey and the TA Mentor list-serv discussion revealed that many graduate departments had not consciously provided opportunities for TAs to develop these skills. These relatively new faculty members had actively developed teaching expertise through working with an individual faculty member, the TA Mentor Program, and the centralized teaching support classes. Some had developed teaching skills through their own initiatives independent of the message their departments were giving them about the importance of teaching. The 1999 survey and discussion on the TA Mentor list-serv further clarified the pivotal events in graduate teacher preparation that helped prepare these doctoral students for their future academic roles. The researcher coded and grouped the responses in relationship to the skills identified in the earlier studies (Figure 1). It was apparent that significant graduate experiences were few in number, but dramatically important in both positive and negative ways. TAs who were successful in making the transition into a faculty position were able to identify significant events and experiences which shaped their maturation as teachers and which helped them to be knowledgeable teaching scholars.
Scholastic Skills

The majority of the TA Mentor respondents felt they had not been exposed to the scholarship of teaching as part of the intentional culture of their department. Although each of the TA Mentors had won teaching awards, many had achieved a certain level of success in the classroom on their own initiative, through centralized teaching support efforts or with the mentorship of an individual faculty member or experienced TA. Departmental opportunities to develop teaching often occurred by default because TAs were assigned teaching responsibilities for undergraduate core courses which faculty did not want to teach. These TAs developed mastery of the material and identified the needs of undergraduates on their own. In some cases they had a variety of teaching experiences as they accepted more and more responsibilities for developing courses. However, despite extensive teaching responsibilities, the majority were repeatedly encouraged to focus more on research and less on teaching.

An alarming number of respondents admitted that the culture of the graduate department still did not value the scholarship of teaching. Some even had to push their departments to nominate TAs for teaching awards and few were provided funding to present at teaching conferences. Nevertheless, the pivotal event for developing scholastic skills related to teaching occurred when these TAs received departmental and institutional recognition by winning one of the teaching awards. This public recognition and validation provided them with official documentation and the encouragement to view themselves as accomplished teachers. With their acceptance into the TA Mentor Program, as award winning TAs, they continued to receive public recognition for their interest in teaching and were introduced to the scholarship of teaching. Armed with confidence in their abilities, many began to give teaching seminars in the department and at regional teaching conferences. Several attended national teaching conferences and two respondents won prestigious Wilbert McKeachie awards. The first TA won a discipline McKeachie award based on the teaching portfolio she had developed in the TA Mentor Program, the other won an international competition sponsored by the McKeachies for a paper on teaching she wrote for an international conference. Winning the paper award for the international conference resulted in funding from the conference and the institution for travel to South Africa to give the paper and accept the award. Some went on to publish manuscripts of their innovative teaching strategies. Out of these experiences, the TAs, in this study, felt they developed a sense of community with teachers in other disciplines and with faculty members at a variety of institutions as they moved on in their careers. Many continue to win teaching awards, to present and publish their teaching scholarship and to mentor peers on the value of accepting teaching as a fundamental and challenging dimension of scholarship.

Planning Skills

The respondents who had significant graduate school teaching responsibilities, developmental feedback on their teaching and a significant mentoring or a teaching support structure were confident instructors in their early years as faculty members. Those who had no opportunity to go beyond laboratory teaching or taught the same class year after year faced a much harder challenge in organizing new classes and reflecting on their practices. Having the opportunity to revise and develop new courses during a graduate program was a significant pivotal event in gaining confidence and departmental recognition of their teaching ability. This confidence was reflected in the interview process and the early years as a faculty member. Developmental feedback from peers, faculty, and students also allowed these graduate students an opportunity to critically reflect on their teaching and student learning. Those respondents who had the opportunity to use formative feedback as a positive force in their professional development were able to approach the challenges inherent in working at other types of institutions. Many of our respondents felt they were knowledgeable new faculty in seeking support for their teaching and in establishing mentoring relationships because they had experienced them as graduate students through the TA Mentor Program or from individual faculty members.

Management Skills

The participants in this study were considered highly successful graduate students because they had
managed very complicated schedules, been recognized for their outstanding teaching, and conducted significant research to complete a doctorate. Nevertheless, management of their faculty roles was the most challenging aspect of their academic lives. The 1999 survey confirmed data from the earlier studies that suggested personal time management has a profound impact on management of professional lives. Without setting priorities in both areas, TAs and new faculty are quickly absorbed with the most pressing issue while neglecting some that the department viewed as crucial. Departments which provided a well articulated teaching support structure for both TAs and faculty eliminated most of the teaching related management issues and saved instructors countless hours in trying to locate information or repair damage when a class was mismanaged. Poorly articulated or unrealistic time management policies contributed to both graduate student and new faculty frustration. Respondents who found themselves in departments that expected 60-hour work weeks and little support for personal lives, were less enthusiastic about their faculty roles. However, participants in our study were exposed to time management skills as graduate students and were as a group pro-active in seeking information and solving instructional challenges. In addition, they had provided leadership in mentoring other graduate students in managing the learning environment. Nevertheless, time management was the pivotal event that influenced several to rethink their academic careers and focus on careers or seek other institutions where they could manage their time better.

Presentation and Communication Skills

The most negative graduate experience related to the development of presentation and communication skills was the lack of departmental feedback on how well the TA was presenting and communicating with students. Although our institutional policy requires yearly observations of TAs for formative purposes, few of our respondents felt it was done effectively at the departmental level. Although a number of the TA Mentors felt they had observed good modeling from professors or peers, most felt they had only gotten feedback on their own teaching in the centralized teaching support seminars. In addition, many were not being exposed in the department to options for presenting materials including advancements in technology or how to use technology effectively based on a pedagogical need. Our respondents had been exposed to pedagogical options, technology advances, and strategies to communicate with undergraduates while in the TA Mentor Program, but they admitted many of their departmental peers had not had the same experience.

As the TA Mentors moved on to new institutions, they continued to seek opportunities to develop their presentation and communication skills and to develop new teaching strategies. They credited the developmental support and encouragement they had received as TA Mentors with helping them to understand what they needed to do in developing new classes using the latest technology and pedagogy appropriate to the class. Several respondents were delighted to find themselves at institutions where collaborative teaching provided them wonderful opportunities to observe others teaching and refine their own approaches.

Evaluation and Feedback Skills

Institutional policy requires any TA without college-level teaching experience to take a teaching support class, have yearly observations by a faculty supervisor, and to have the opportunity to receive student evaluations. However, some of our respondents felt that they had not received enough training in evaluating students and were not getting helpful feedback from student evaluations or departmental faculty on their teaching. Because of the nature of the TA support role, they were often using student evaluation measures constructed by the faculty teacher of record and receiving only cursory feedback from the course evaluation instrument. In one department, TAs were instructed to ignore student evaluations as inconsequential. However, in the centralized teaching support seminar and in the TA Mentor Program, participants were exposed to classroom assessment strategies such as those developed by Angelo & Cross (1993). Many respondents identified assessment of student learning and their own teaching as the event which developed their evaluation and feedback skills the most. They credited an ability to reflect on their own teaching and the knowledge of how to develop
feedback strategies as the pivotal event in helping them to improve as teachers and to adapt to different types of students when they moved to other institutions.

An important element of the TA Mentor Program is to help graduate students document their graduate experiences via a professional portfolio. The teaching portfolio process was credited as instrumental in helping our participants reflect on and improve their teaching and was essential in the job search and yearly review process as faculty members.

**Interpersonal Skills**

Despite some negative departmental experiences related to teaching undergraduates, most of the respondents felt the pleasure they found in teaching students the most important reason for keeping a focus on teaching. Understanding how students learn and acknowledging multi-cultural needs helped them to further appreciate working with students. Participants in our study were predominately doctoral level when they became TA Mentors. They had spent many years intimately involved with their discipline and had made an active decision to pursue a career in higher education. As they moved into faculty positions, they carried with them an enthusiasm for their discipline and a heady sense of accomplishment in completing their doctorate and securing a faculty position. Many felt that their efforts in teaching would impact people’s lives more than their research. Since they respected and understood students’ abilities and needs, many chose predominately teaching institutions for their first faculty position.

**Discussion**

We began this study to assess the value of certain graduate experiences in helping junior faculty make a smooth transition into academic roles. Because our respondents were highly successful in being recognized for their teaching, in completing their graduate programs and in securing a faculty position, we asked them to identify those pivotal graduate school events which helped them become knowledgeable and successful participants of academic cultures. It is clear that most of our respondents have made an admirable transition into their academic roles because of the confidence they had developed as graduate students in their teaching ability. Though the majority continue to struggle with time management issues, many have sailed through the third-year review process and a number have received tenure. They credit their graduate school teaching experiences with easing this transition. With years of teaching experience documented in a professional portfolio, they came into their new positions recognized as teacher scholars. Being knowledgeable teacher scholars helped them to quickly ascertain the expectations of their new institution, at least in the teaching arena. Those who had extensive practice in developing courses and in teaching a variety of courses could more easily step into a new course while balancing other institutional expectations. Having also developed a reflective approach to teaching improvement, they actively sought peer feedback on their new roles and in some cases established strong mentoring relationships. Even without formal feedback mechanisms, these TAs were able to seek out feedback on how they were doing as they moved through the first several years of a faculty role.

Many felt documenting their work for annual and third-year reviews was easy because of their experience in creating a teaching or professional portfolio. Since our participants felt validated and recognized as teachers, they took pride in their teaching and connection with other teacher scholars during their graduate program.

**Conclusions**

In reflecting on these pivotal events and the impact on graduate preparation for a faculty position, we acknowledged that our TA support programming must go deeper into departments to create the kind of opportunities that are currently available for a select group of TAs. We have begun to make inroads into the departments by expanding the TA Mentor peer support effort in the departments and by expanding the teaching support seminar initiatives. In 2000 we had fifteen TA Mentors setting up departmental seminars on everything from creating a teaching portfolio to using WebCT. In addition, we had over 300 graduate students enrolled in the se-
mester-long departmental sections of our teaching support seminar. We accomplished this by providing partial assistantships to award-winning TAs to help the faculty teacher of record develop a departmental teaching support seminar. We feel that these efforts reduce the negative events associated with a perception that teaching is not valued in a department. The teaching support seminars have, in fact, pulled departmental faculty into a very productive teaching discussion with their graduate students. In several cases, faculty members have credited these discussions with changing the way they approach working with undergraduates. In addition, some of the traditional lab-oriented departments are working to provide more teaching opportunities for their graduate students by allowing them to guest lecture and do summer teaching. The teaching fellowship that is established by these seminars continues beyond the semester course because peers are readily available in the department to discuss teaching issues.

This study has re-invigorated our TA support efforts as we expand the efforts of the centralized TA support structure into departments. We confirmed that teaching must be recognized and validated by the institution to optimize graduate student development as teacher scholars. Graduate students who have developed confidence and pride in their abilities to teach continue to take the initiative to improve and refine their teaching as new faculty members. They seek out mentors and the fellowship of other teaching scholars in their departments and across campus. The positive events associated with the development of teaching skills made the transition into a faculty position smoother and provided these teacher scholars the framework for successfully managing that aspect of an academic position.

References


**Figure 1**

### Pivotal Events in Graduate Teacher Preparation for a Faculty Career

#### Scholastic Skills
- Recognize and accept teaching as a fundamental and challenging dimension of scholarship.
- Demonstrate mastery of subject matter.
- Advise students of career opportunities in the discipline or profession.
- Demonstrate relationships between the course and the broader liberal education curriculum.
- Enhance motivation of students by demonstrating relevance to future needs and goals of students.

**Positive Events Contribute to Success**
- Introduced to teaching as scholarship
- Teaching opportunities in department-developmental and variety of classes
- Opportunity to attend teaching conferences and publish in teaching journals
- Taking the initiative to improve teaching
- Official recognition-opportunity for teaching awards
- Cross campus perspective of teaching from teaching support class, TA Mentors
- Sense of community-being accepted as a peer by colleagues

**Negative Events Detract from Success**
- Little support of teaching expressed in department
- Little interest in the developmental needs of undergraduates
- Reluctance of department to recognize outstanding teaching by nominating TAs for teaching awards
- Lack of community related to the scholarship of teaching

#### Planning Skills
- Select course material suited to the background, ability level and interests of students.
- Match varying teaching methods with specific instructional objectives.
- Present material that is sequenced and paced appropriately for learners.
- Promote individual involvement of students through learner-centered teaching methods.
- Encourage cooperation and collaboration among students.
- Enhance motivation of students by demonstrating relevance to future needs and goals of students.

**Positive Events Contribute to Success**
- Feedback on teaching-department, student, peer
- Opportunity to revise and develop new courses
- Exposure to learning styles and student developmental needs
- Exposure to multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching
- Institutional or departmental support structure-credit classes-resource room, individual consultation, mentoring

**Negative Events Detract from Success**
- No opportunity to develop teaching-laboratory teachers or same class year after year with focus directed by department
- Negative message on undergraduate abilities
- Lack of faculty understanding of undergraduate cognitive needs

#### Management Skills
- Communicate important departmental policies that relate to the goals of the course.
- Manage administrative responsibilities such as ordering books, handling withdrawals, and complying with other departmental requirements.
- Communicate and manage appropriate expectations for achievement in the course.
- Communicate and implement important safety measures in the classroom.
- Deal appropriately with matters of discipline, academic honesty and legal information.
- Manage the learning environment so that optimum learning will result.

**Positive Events Contribute to Success**
- Strong departmental teaching support structure
- Opportunity and encouragement for improving a course
- Well publicized institutional guidelines for teaching
- Development of priorities-clear goals in professional and personal life
- Learning time management skills
- Leadership in mentoring other TAs

**Negative Events Detract from Success**
- Lack of departmental communication about teaching and teaching resources
- Negative departmental message on undergraduate abilities
- Personal responsibilities-balance of professional and personal life
- TAing for poorly organized courses
**Figure 1 (continued)**

**Pivotal Events in Graduate Teacher Preparation for a Faculty Career**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Presentation &amp; Communication Skills</strong></th>
<th><strong>Positive Events Contribute to Success</strong></th>
<th><strong>Negative Events Detract from Success</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Communicate effectively in both written and oral formats in English.</td>
<td>• Developmental support for presentations and writing</td>
<td>• No departmental feedback on teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lead class discussions that stimulate learning and enhance the goals of the course.</td>
<td>• Technology support to improve pedagogy and learning</td>
<td>• No access to technology in department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use technology to enhance learning.</td>
<td>• Introduction to other possibilities for teaching</td>
<td>• Over zealous use of technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promote individual involvement of students through learner-centered teaching methods.</td>
<td>• Modeling from professors and peers and from teaching support seminar and TA Mentor program</td>
<td>• Classes too large to promote interaction among students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage cooperation and collaboration among students.</td>
<td>• Enhance motivation of students by demonstrating relevance to future needs and goals of students.</td>
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</table>

**Interpersonal Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Positive Events Contribute to Success</strong></th>
<th><strong>Negative Events Detract from Success</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Enhance motivation of students through personal enthusiasm for the subject.</td>
<td>• Departmental weed out course mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exhibit respect and understanding for all students.</td>
<td>• Little departmental understanding of how students learn and how to provide learning support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate a general belief that all students are capable of learning.</td>
<td>• Lack of leadership opportunities in teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Deal appropriately with issues that relate to various aspects of diversity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enhance motivation of students by demonstrating relevance to future needs and goals of students.</td>
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**Evaluation & Feedback Skills**

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Positive Events Contribute to Success</strong></th>
<th><strong>Negative Events Detract from Success</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Construct valid and reliable tests and administer fairly other evaluation measures.</td>
<td>• Having to respond to someone else’s exam procedure with little TA input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide helpful feedback to students in a variety of ways.</td>
<td>• Little training in constructing good exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop a reflective approach to teaching through collecting feedback and continually modifying instructional approaches.</td>
<td>• No mechanism for TA feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Message from faculty to ignore student evaluations.</td>
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