

Board 83: Lessons Learned: A Three-office Partnership to Engage Graduate TAs with Mental Health Training

Dr. Ken Yasuhara, University of Washington

Ken Yasuhara is an instructional consultant and assistant director at the Office for the Advancement of Engineering Teaching & Learning (ET&L) at the University of Washington. He completed an A.B. in computer science at Dartmouth College and a Ph.D. in computer science and engineering at the University of Washington. When he finds the time, he plays with bicycle tools or knitting needles.

Dr. Katie Malcolm, University of Washington
Natacha M.R. Foo Kune Ph.D.

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Introduction

One in five adults age 18–25 in the U.S. has a diagnosable mental illness [1], and a recent international study suggests that graduate students are six times more likely than the general population to experience depression and anxiety [2]. These trends compel colleges and universities to improve how they prepare and support graduate students in managing mental health challenges for themselves, their peers, and the students whom they serve as teaching assistants (TAs).

We share lessons from the collaborative design and implementation of an interactive workshop intended to engage new graduate student TAs with training about mental health challenges, intervention strategies, and campus resources. The workshop was intended to address mental health challenges of both the TAs and the students whom they teach. The workshop was the result of a mutually beneficial partnership between an engineering-specific teaching and learning office, a campus-wide center for teaching and learning, and a campus-wide counseling center at the University of Washington.

This important and timely effort succeeded because of the combination of subject matter expertise from the counseling center's director and teaching/learning expertise from the engineering and campus-wide faculty developers. This paper describes the alignment of interests and opportunities among the three partners, how the workshop was designed and why, some details about the workshop's impact, and future work.

Lesson: Be humble; assemble a team to cover the required expertise.

The origins of this workshop effort trace back to an initiative in the College of Engineering focused on student mental health. Among the college's projects under this initiative were training workshops for various key audiences, including engineering faculty, advising staff, and graduate students (for their work as TAs). With workshop topics including such complex and sensitive ones as suicide, the college staff person who was charged with the mental health initiative recognized the need to bring in expertise from the counseling center. The counseling center regularly presents workshops to a wide range of campus stakeholders, so initial attempts simply involved scheduling key audience groups for dedicated workshop offerings. While this worked reasonably well for the faculty and advising staff, even with multiple sessions offered for graduate students, attendance was extremely poor.

At this point, the college staff person contacted an instructional consultant at the engineering-specific teaching and learning office, the Office for the Advancement of Engineering Teaching & Learning (ET&L). The ET&L consultant, based on their prior experience with graduate TA professional development, suggested expanding the partnership beyond the counseling center to

include the campus-wide Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). This larger partnership combined the counseling center's subject matter expertise with ET&L and CTL's expertise on graduate student professional development, and ET&L's discipline-specific expertise on professional development in engineering. As discussed further below in the "piggyback" lesson, this partnership was more than just combining expertise but also resources.

Beyond facilitating the CTL partnership, the ET&L consultant worked closely with the director of the counseling center to produce and co-facilitate the workshop session. The larger partnership ensured that the workshop was not only sound from a subject matter perspective (counseling center's expertise) but was also well designed pedagogically and logistically (ET&L and CTL's expertise). Details are discussed with the next two lessons.

Lesson: Piggyback on existing programs.

A significant logistical advantage of partnering with CTL was the opportunity to offer the mental health training as part of CTL's well-established, annual training conference offered to graduate students before the start of every academic year. CTL was not only happy to include a session on mental health in the TA conference program, they featured it prominently as a closing plenary. Although this was not a perfect solution for reaching engineering graduate students specifically (as discussed with the lesson about perfection below), it promised to be far more effective and far easier for the College of Engineering than independently organizing further attempts at standalone, engineering-only workshop offerings. It also offered CTL the chance to address mental health at the TA Conference for the first time on a larger scale. With the counseling center and ET&L taking care of producing and facilitating the session, CTL bore the logistics and cost of including an additional session in their program description, room reservations, and registration process. This was much appreciated by the ET&L consultant, whose office has less staffing and funding.

Lesson: Don't start from scratch.

Although the counseling center had extensive experience with a standard workshop presentation, it was largely lecture-based and was designed for a longer duration than what was available in the TA conference schedule. The counseling center director and ET&L consultant, with advice from CTL staff, worked together to shorten and adapt the workshop to better align with best practices for teaching and learning, as well as the TA conference context. The resulting workshop was more interactive, even engaging a large auditorium audience. It also targeted a more modest set of learning outcomes, given the short duration and its position at the end of a busy conference schedule. In keeping with modest expectations of what students could retain, given the common information overload of pre-autumn orientation programs, a variety of details and resources were duplicated or pushed onto a reference handout. In one respect, the workshop's scope was expanded, in that it addressed both the mental health of TAs and that of the students they would serve.

To motivate the topic, the workshop opened with interactive engagement with national and local statistics on mental health. This was an attempt to raise awareness of the prevalence of mental health challenges and to combat stigma surrounding them. Further interaction included small-group discussions on scenarios that represented a range of mental health challenges. One function of these discussions was to motivate interest in mini-lecture segments on warning signs and intervention strategies. The workshop closed with a brief overview of the many campus resources available to them as TAs and as students themselves (also listed on the handout).

Lesson: Expect a lot of interest.

Graduate student interest in the workshop was far greater than anticipated, with initial registrations exceeding the auditorium capacity of 350 people and leading CTL to schedule a second offering outside of the original TA conference schedule. (In retrospect, this should not have been surprising, given the prevalence of mental illness among graduate students.)

Lesson: Perfect is good, but done is better.

In many ways, this workshop offering represented a compromise among multiple priorities, especially with respect to the specific goals of the College of Engineering initiative. For various reasons, we only reached a minority of engineering graduate students. The TA conference is primarily attended by new (not returning) graduate students, and only a subset of engineering departments require or recommend attendance. Even for those who do attend, some might not TA until quarters or even years later, leaving plenty of time to forget the training. Despite these qualifications, the scale of a well-established, annual event timed just before the academic year ensured that our training reached at least a substantial minority of engineering students, as well as many students from other departments. What started as an engineering-specific initiative led to an opportunity for other departments to benefit with marginal additional effort.

As mentioned above (*Don't start from scratch.*), to fit into the TA conference schedule, this version of the workshop was shorter than the one the counseling center normally offers. However, more time and more material covered does not necessarily result in more learning. In the absence of a direct comparative evaluation, our hope is that the incorporation of more active engagement, the focus on a smaller number of key takeaways, and the accompanying reference handout helped ensure that the shorter workshop was at least as impactful as the longer version would have been.

Even in its shortened form, the workshop retained its emphasis on equipping TAs to recognize possible warning signs of someone experiencing mental health challenges, be it a student, a graduate student colleague, or even themselves. However, the workshop also made clear that TAs are not expected to handle even ostensibly minor challenges themselves. Instead, they were encouraged to utilize the wide range of services and resources available on and near campus. Fortunately, responding appropriately is significantly simplified on our campus, thanks to SafeCampus, a centralized phone service that is designed to serve as the first point of contact for any non-emergency situation concerning safety or wellness. Staffed 24-7, SafeCampus helps

campus community members assess safety/wellness situations and facilitates referral to appropriate services and resources. The presence of SafeCampus allowed our workshop to streamline the “seeking help” section, with the essential message being to call 911 or SafeCampus, depending on whether the situation is an emergency.

Future work

We were only able to collect workshop evaluation data from a small subset of the workshop attendees, but what data we have suggest the workshop was received well. Feedback was positive, despite the workshop’s ambitious scope and limited duration, as well as the challenges of facilitating active learning in a large auditorium. Respondents reported that the workshop helped them learn about specific practices for supporting their own and their students’ mental health, as well as learn about campus resources for mental health. The data also suggests that we can do a better job of moderating expectations that such a short workshop can do more than offer the most basic and essential information.

CTL and graduate school administrators who attended suggested bringing elements of the workshop to other key campus audiences, including graduate program advisors and even the university faculty as a whole. (A university administrator who observed the workshop admitted to the attendees that they were probably better prepared than most faculty are to face challenging mental health scenarios.) The counseling center’s director is interested in incorporating active learning elements from this workshop back into the center’s standard training presentation.

As for the College of Engineering, the TA conference is only intended to be a partial solution, and smaller, standalone events are being considered among the means of reaching more engineering TAs, perhaps on a per-department basis. Further embracing the notion of done being better than perfect and acknowledging that no training effort will reach 100% of its intended audience, we are considering the possibility that a standalone handout (not just for TAs but faculty, staff, and anyone else serving a teaching, mentoring, or advising role) could be better than nothing. Continuing collaboration with the counseling center, as well as research on similar efforts on other campuses, will undoubtedly inform the details of these implementation efforts.

References

- [1] National Institute of Mental Health. (2017). Mental illness. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>
- [2] Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3).