

# Report on the 2007/2008 Teaching Assistant Survey at UNBC

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## Introduction

In April 2008, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) conducted a voluntary, anonymous survey of teaching assistants (TAs) designed to assess respondents' attitudes towards TA training at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). This report summarizes the responses and findings of the survey and makes recommendations for improving TA training at UNBC. The survey consisted of 16 multiple choice questions and a space for additional written comments. As will be seen graduate student teaching assistants at UNBC view their TA experience as an important part of their academic and professional development but stress the need for more specific types of training to increase their effectiveness.

The questionnaire was designed to answer the following questions:

- What type and level of training is received by teaching assistants at UNBC? (questions 4, 5, 8, 9)
- Do the teaching assistants think that the training currently offered has been effective? (questions 6, 13)
- What type of training methods/programs do teaching assistants think are necessary? (questions 7, 10, 12)
- Has the TA experience been a valuable part of respondents' academic and/or professional development? (questions 14, 15)

## Response Rate

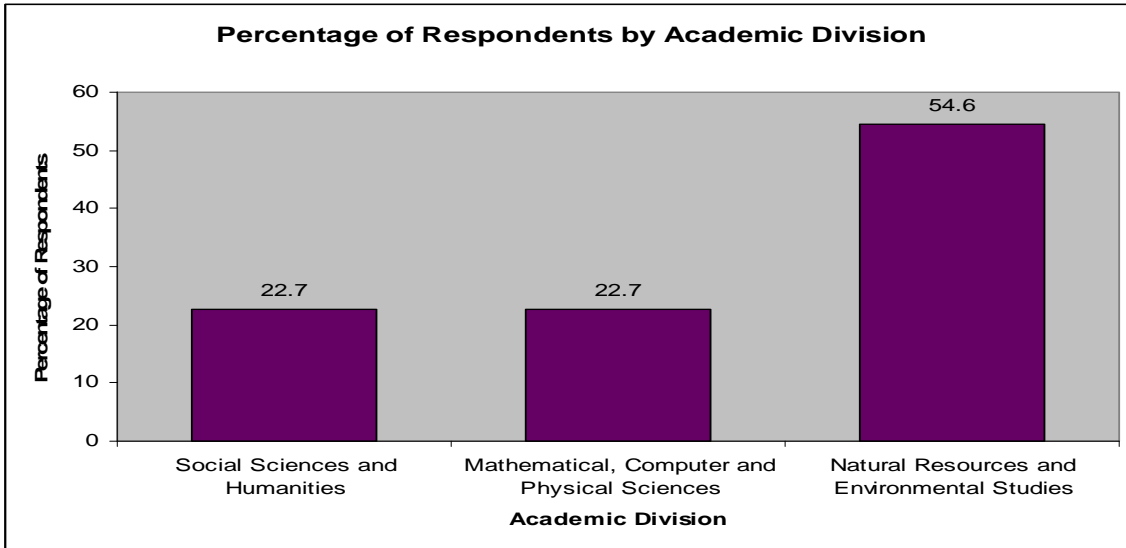
All full, half and part time teaching assistants who were employed during the 2007/2008 academic year (Fall/Winter semesters) were eligible to complete the survey. The survey was available for completion from April 7 to April 29, 2008.

Overall, there were 22 responses representing **29.7%** of eligible TAs (based on numbers provided by Kathy Josephson, Executive Assistant to the Deans, using Winter 2008 data; see Table 1).

**Table 1: Type of TA by College (Winter 2008)**

Type of TA	Winter 2008
<b>CASHS</b>	
Full-time TA	15
Half-time TA	10
Part-time TA	1
	<b>26</b>
<b>CSAM</b>	
Full-Time TA	28
Half-Time TA	20
	<b>48</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>

Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents by Academic Division



**TA Profiles**

→ **81.8% (18)** of the respondents reported that they were full time TAs (192 hours a semester or 10-12 hours a week for the duration of the semester). This is equal to **41.8%** of all full-time TAs employed at UNBC during the Winter semester.

**18.2% (4)** reported being half-time TA (96 hours a semester).

→ Question 3 asked respondents how much experience they had as teaching assistants.

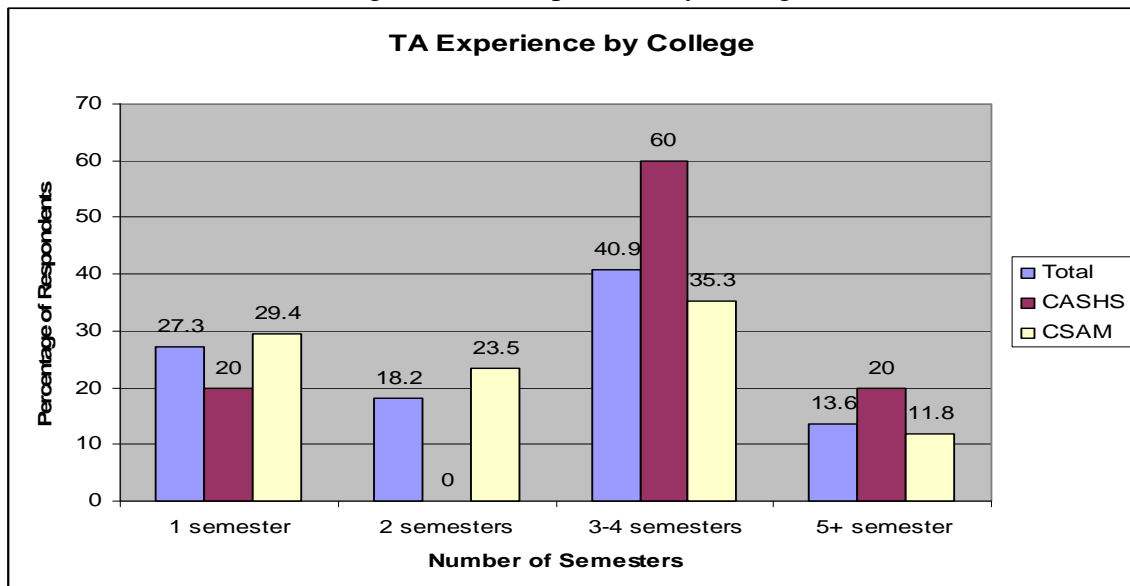
**27.3% (6)** reported being first time TAs with one semester of experience;

**18.2 % (4)** reported having a full year’s experience.

The majority of TAs who completed the survey, **40.9% (9)** had 3-4 semester’s of experience.

**13.6% (3)** reported having five or more semester experience as a teaching assistant.

Figure 2: TA Experience by College



## **TA Training at UNBC**

→ Survey question 5 asked respondents to select the training methods and program that they attended to improve their skills as a TA.

The majority of teaching assistants (**77.3%**) responded that they met with course supervisor/senior lab instructor.

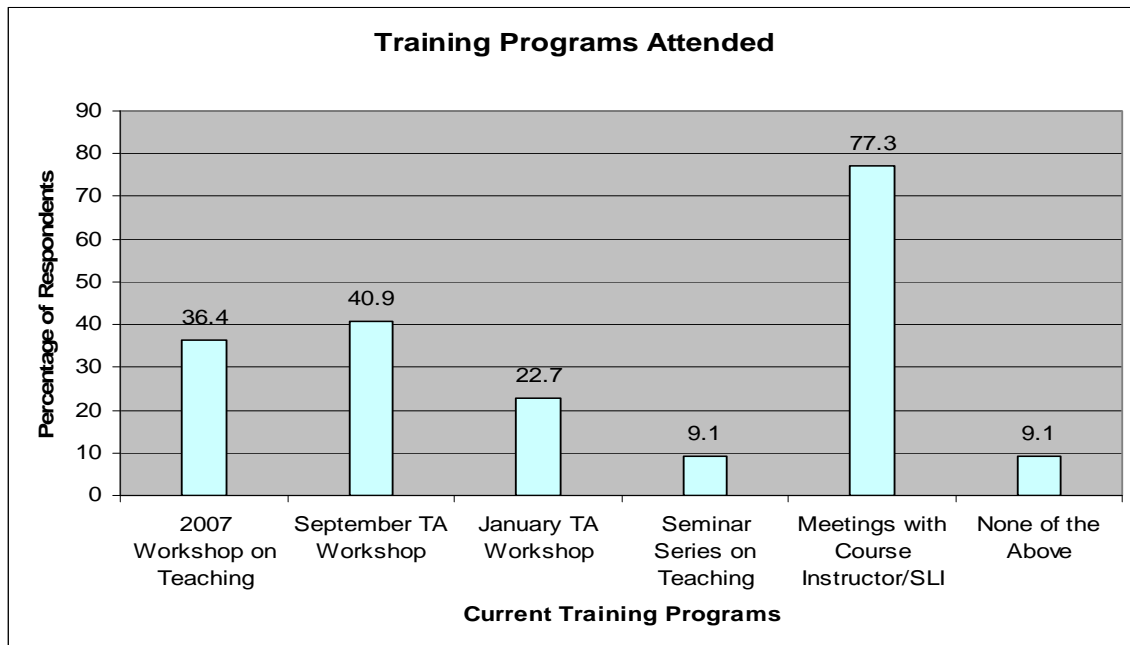
**36.4%** (**8**) attended the 2007 Workshop on Teaching.

**40.9%** (**9**) reported attending the September session of the TA Workshop. **22.7%** (**5**) attended the January session.

**9.1%** (**2**) reported attendance at the Seminar Series on Teaching Workshops.

**9.1%** (**2**) reported no training at all.

Figure 3: Training Programs Attended



→ Meeting with course supervisor/senior lab instructors

**59.1%** (**13**) reported meeting with course instructor/SLI on weekly basis.

**27.3%** (**6**) reported meeting two or more times a week.

**9.1%** (**2**) reported meeting once a month.

**4.5%** (**1**) reported meeting with course instructor/SLI once/twice a semester.

→ Question 9 asked the respondents to select which topics were covered adequately through training programs and/or meetings with course supervisor/SLI. Question 10 used the same options as question 9 but the respondents were asked to select which topics they would like see covered in more detail.

TA Training Methods/theories	Q9	Q10
1. Content knowledge required to teach tutorial/lab	54.5	27.3
2. How to develop and present lessons/lectures/labs	54.5	<b>50.0</b>
3. Motivating students	40.9	<b>45.5</b>
4. Strategies for the first day	68.2	18.2
5. How to lead classroom discussions	40.9	36.4
6. Teaching methodologies (for example active learning)	36.4	<b>45.5</b>
7. Grading and marking strategies	68.2	31.8
8. Academic integrity policies	45.5	22.7
9. Learning theories (for example learning styles)	22.7	36.4
10. University teaching resources	40.9	27.3
11. How to use student evaluation feedback for improving teaching	31.8	22.7
12. Managing classroom conflict and student behaviours	36.4	<b>40.9</b>
13. Use of technology in teaching	31.8	13.6
14. Handling office hours	54.5	18.2

The top four topic areas which TAs would like to see covered in more detail are:

1. How to develop and present lessons/lectures/labs (**50.0%**)
2. Strategies for Motivating Students (**45.5%**)
3. Teaching methodologies (for example active learning) (**45.5%**)
4. Managing classroom conflict and student behaviours

→ Question 12 asked what topic areas should be covered in order to make TA training more effective.

TA Training Methods/theories	Q12
1. Content knowledge required to teach tutorial/lab	<b>77.3</b>
2. How to develop and present lessons/lectures/labs	<b>86.4</b>
3. Motivating students	59.1
4. Strategies for the first day	36.4
5. How to lead classroom discussions	<b>63.6</b>
6. Teaching methodologies (for example active learning)	54.5
7. Grading and marking strategies	<b>68.2</b>
8. Academic integrity policies	54.5
9. Learning theories (for example learning styles)	36.4
10. University teaching resources	45.5
11. How to use student evaluation feedback for improving teaching	45.5
12. Managing classroom conflict and student behaviours	54.5
13. Use of technology in teaching	40.9
14. Handling office hours	36.4

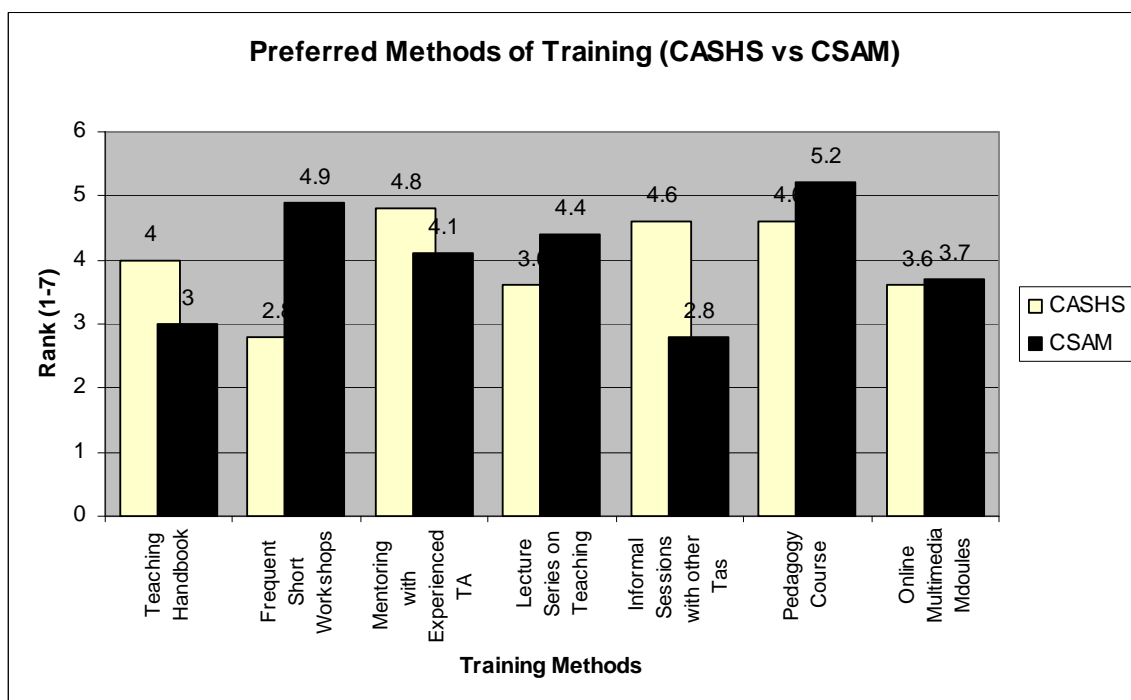
→ Question 7 asked respondents to rank order their preferred methods of receiving information regarding TA training.

Figure 4: Preferred Methods of Training



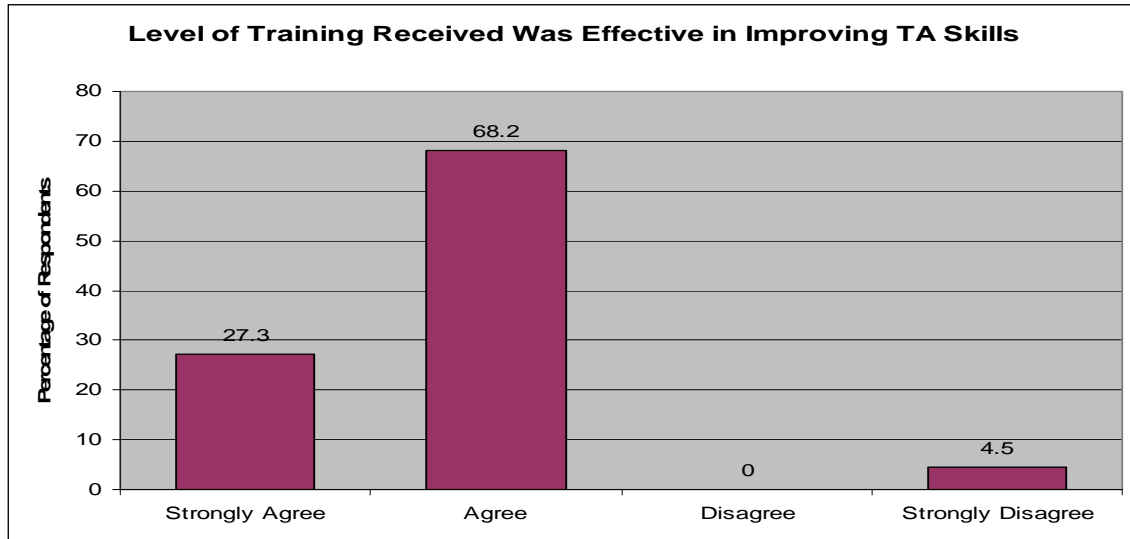
It should be noted that differences in preferred methods of instruction were noticeable between the respective colleges.

Figure 5: Preferred Methods of Training (CASHS vs. CSAM)



→ Question asked if the level of training teaching assistants received was effective in improving skills as a TA.

Figure 6: Level of Training Received Was Effective in Improving TA Skills



→ Question 4 asked if respondents were aware of the services offered to teaching assistants by the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, **72.7%** (**16**) answered yes, while **27.3%** (**6**) reported being unaware of the services offered by the CTLT.

### **General Comments of Respondents**

Since no survey can capture the richness of individual experience, the comments given by respondents are reproduced here.

1. Although I realize that a willingness to participate is essential for successfully learning from TA workshops, couldn't those workshops be made a mandatory part of TA training (i.e. included as part of TA hours)? So few TAs attend, yet the workshops are very valuable.
2. For me, the most effective training I received had nothing to do with being a TA. My graduate seminar course gave me experience in presenting materials in a variety of ways, which really helped out in the classroom. I don't know if the approach our class took is typical of seminar courses, but I think it should be; regular short presentations, discussions of learning styles and feedback sessions (Jennifer Hyndman ran the class). During courses, regular TA meetings were useful too.
3. I enjoyed the experience very much. It helped me become a much better public speaker and has made me feel a lot more confident presenting ideas to people.

4. I found that I was missing key information as a TA; particularly around content, marking scheme and teaching strategies (i.e. how to vary presentation of material). This resulted in a lot of extra work outside regular TA hours because I had to look course material up myself or constantly speak to the professor to confirm grading policies, etc. I feel that a TA should expect and receive the following: 1. Prior to teaching: Content training from professor (i.e. schedule of tutorial topics, syllabus, grading schemes), Mock tutorial/lab (i.e. taught about first day, actual practice in the classroom). 2. During teaching: TA workshops once a month focusing on timely issues (i.e. review midterms, marking, motivating students to come). Online resources (i.e. lesson plans, chat board, etc in a central location). 3. After teaching: Evaluation from students and professor. Debrief with other TAs (i.e. workshop) TAing was a fantastic experience but much more work than expected to do a good job for professor and students.
5. I found the TA Workshops helpful the first semester I was a TA. After that I found my previous experience and talking with other TA's were equally helpful.
6. I thought the experience I gained as a TA was very rewarding. It allowed me to get a sense of what it would be like to be an instructor and also allowed me to review and learn information that was presented to me in my undergraduate degree. I would definitely like to TA again.
7. I would have preferred more instruction on how to mark because the training – either the TA training & instructor feedback was insufficient for me.
8. It was a new and good experience. There was a lot to learn from this, especially if you want to pursue your career in academics. I feel it is a must have.
9. It's good to see that something is being done to increase TA training. Good job CTLT.
10. My only complaint is that all TA's should be allowed to use power point in all classes if they choose.
11. TA gives me good chances to improve my teaching skills, communicate with people, improve my language (I am an international student, English is my second language). I know the experience as TA will help me a lot in my research area.
12. Teaching assistant training at UNBC is an excellent program to develop teaching skills, and communication skills.
13. The tutoring position is not a good opportunity to improve teaching skills, especially because students usually don't go to the tutoring sections and because we spend basically a lot of time marking. Running lab sections is much more constructive for teaching skills.

14. Training could be more effective if not so generalized. Short specific workshops to deal with specific skills are useful than long generalized workshop in September. Knowing and keeping in contact with other TAs “formally” as on a listserv or online group could facilitate a comfortable space to ask questions that may be too “simple” to bother instructors with. Online group could also provide a list of FAQs that may be of help right away. Better promotion of TA specific resources.
15. Training was adequate considering how expectations and experiences differ depending on the class assigned. Perhaps instructors should be aware of what material their TA’s were given prior so they will know of any gaps they need to fill in terms of what the TA should expect for that particular class.
16. Very good experience, however the number of students per class very high (34 for my section), increase a lot the marking time as well as decrease the availability of the TA for each student. Smaller class would make the TA experience more efficient for its own experience as well as for student education.

## **Recommendations**

1. One important issue that may have affected response rate was the timing of the survey. The survey was not made available until April 7, 2008, two days before the last day of classes of the Winter semester. Since many of the TAs had finished actively teaching lab and tutorial sections by that time, it maybe possible that many were not aware or lacked the desire to complete the survey due to their own coursework and/or research deadlines. It is recommended that if the survey is held again it be distributed well before the end of classes.
2. TAs should be given regular feedback on their teaching from course supervisor and students. (CTLT is currently working on a Mid Term Evaluation for TAs)
3. The existing TA program should be strengthened by offering regular workshops, on the topics TAs expressed interest in:
  - Developing and presenting lessons/lectures/labs
  - Grading and marking strategies
  - How to lead classroom discussions
  - Teaching methodologies (for example active learning)
4. It is recommended that the Colleges be asked to make attendance at the TA Workshop mandatory for their TAs. ESM recently made such a move.

