



The Teaching Assistant Training Handbook

How to Prepare TAs for Their
Responsibilities

Edited By

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Ethical Dilemmas Confronting Graduate Teaching Assistants: Issues and Cases

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Overview

No longer “just students,” but not yet recognized as independent educators, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) occupy an ambiguously delineated territory within higher education. Whenever role boundaries are unclear, GTAs may be unprepared to meet the demands of what is expected of them as educators. Whenever GTAs overestimate the scope of their authority, the potential for committing ethical infractions also increases. Some impact on performance may also result from the recent unrest among GTAs. Protesting the low pay and sub-standard working conditions, GTAs are organizing to achieve increased status, wages, and other benefits (Leatherman, 1998a; Leatherman, 1998b; Perkinson, 1996). Whether this turmoil has any impact on the quality of GTA services and their ethical sensitivity to students and colleagues is not yet known.

Given the pervasive presence of, and reliance on, GTAs in postsecondary educational institutions, serious and consistent consideration of relevant ethical issues is imperative (Folse, 1991). Although a considerable literature exists on the ethical issues facing graduate level interns in fields such as clinical and counseling psychology and medicine, very little has been published about ethical issues confronting graduate students who teach. Similarly, the ethics of supervision of graduate level interns in clinical psychology and medicine has received a fair amount of attention, but the published literature about the ethical obligations of GTA supervisors is sparse. Institutionally generated materials for GTAs provide a natural opportunity to present ethical issues; However, Lowman and Mathie (1993) found that only 50% of their sampling of TA manuals did so. A national survey of TA training faculty was encouraging in that 72%

of the respondents did include instruction in ethical standards of teaching (Mueller, Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1997) although how much was not specified.

It is worth remembering that most new GTAs are not far removed from the undergraduate experience. Many may still harbor habits that are counterproductive in their new roles. Prieto (1995) described beginning GTAs as those who have had little teaching experience (and probably no course work on how to teach) and are, therefore, likely to be more similar to than different from their own students. They want to do well, and they try hard. They are excited, but anxious and sometimes more focused on themselves and their performance than on the needs of their students. They are not always clearly aware of their weaknesses or how their personal style affects their students. They may appear to have a high sense of self-efficacy, but this may decrease as the realities of teaching sink in. They may be rigid in their teaching approach, sometimes trying to emulate a favorite undergraduate instructor in an attempt to maintain self-confidence. Prieto's portrait describes a group that is very likely to make some ethical mistakes, albeit usually unintended ones.

In this chapter we emphasize ethical traps and conflicts that may face students new to GTA assignments. Specific risk zones covered include role ambiguities, differing perceptions of what constitutes an ethical dilemma, dual roles and other boundary crossings involving faculty and fellow students, loyalty conflicts, ethical ramifications of inexperience (such as abuse of authority, inappropriate disclosures in the classroom, and breaches of confidentiality), and ethical pitfalls related to relationships with regular faculty (such as dual role and power conflicts, exploitation, and poor role modeling). We also discuss the role that GTA supervisors can play to assist GTAs in developing the level of ethical maturity expected of academics. We make use of cases, based on actual incidents, to illustrate ethically risky predicaments.

This chapter could present many cases of egregiously unethical graduate students, such as the GTA who sold *A* grades to his students for \$100 each or another who, upset with departmental policy, burned down the building. However, this approach would not serve our purpose because, thankfully, such extreme cases are rare. Instead, we will focus on more common, everyday situations that can involve and ensnare GTAs (and graduate research assistants as well), even including those who are competent and morally fit. The reader will note that the GTAs' behaviors we describe often are not inherently unethical. Rather, situations that were not correctly perceived led to ethically problematic results. We aspire to alert GTAs and their supervisors to some of these situations so that they can be better prepared to handle them judiciously.

Ethical Danger Zones

Fallout from Ambiguous Roles

Ambiguous role relationships are always potential houses of cards. Only one element need go awry to bring the entire relationship crashing down. But, interestingly, almost nothing has been written about role relationship dilemmas faced by graduate students. The reasoning might be that graduate students are more mature than are undergraduates and in less need of protection from potential role conflicts. However, a strong case can be made that graduate students are even *more* vulnerable to the negative consequences of role conflicts. After undergraduate students leave academia, any problematic experiences they had with their educators typically leave with them. Although undergraduates can certainly be harmed by such experiences, their reputations and career opportunities are very unlikely to be on the line.

Graduate students, in contrast, can suffer indefinitely when role relationships with their educators go sour. The failed relationship may be with the only person who can facilitate the completion of the degree (e.g., the program chair or the sole faculty member in the student's specialty area), and so may hinder the student's professional aspirations. Consider the actual case of a GTA who engendered the wrath of her supervisor for allegedly failing to collect some data in a timely manner. The supervisor fired the GTA, dropped her as an advisee, told other members of the department that the GTA was inept, divulged personal information about the GTA that had been disclosed during supervisory sessions, refused to support her applications for employment, and continued to assail her competence long after she earned her degree. Although we most certainly question the actions of the supervisor on ethical grounds, the fact remains that the harm to the GTA probably would have been less extensive had the role relationship between the two been less complex.

GTAs' ambiguous status of student/educator allows others to define GTAs' roles in whatever ways fit their agendas or needs. One result is that GTAs can get very mixed messages.

Case 1: *Professor Trent asked GTA Suzanne to meet him in the faculty lounge to plan a teaching activity. While waiting for Professor Trent to arrive, Professor Snell entered the lounge and said in a stern tone, "I'm sorry, but students are not allowed in the faculty lounge. You need to leave now."*

The GTA felt belittled and embarrassed and did not know quite what to say. To inform Professor Snell that Professor Trent told her to meet him here might, in some way, reflect poorly on a superior with whom she wanted to maintain a positive relationship.

GTAs can also make easy targets for blame because they stand out. The next case illustrates how a GTA suffered later reprisals simply for carrying out his responsibilities.

Case 2: *GTA Juan agreed to serve as the student representative on the department's Resource Committee. Two groups of faculty members were fiercely scrambling for limited resources. When the vote was taken, one group received considerably more funds by a single vote. The losing group was cool and rejecting toward Juan because he voted for the other group.*

Sometimes awkwardness ensues, even when GTAs made concerted attempts to minimize conflict. The next two cases illustrate how, despite a GTA's best reasoning and efforts, discomfort (rightly or not) was created among the regular faculty.

Case 3 : *GTA Rodney had just started dating an undergraduate student who had already taken the only course he teaches. Furthermore, because the class was not in her major, he would never again be called upon to evaluate her academic performance. He felt fully satisfied that absolutely no conflict of interest existed. Rodney was stunned to hear that a number of the regular faculty in the department were upset that he would be bringing his girlfriend to the annual holiday party. As one confided to him, "You know, we all like to have a few drinks at these functions. The presence of an undergraduate student will spoil the party."*

Case 4: *Sociobiology has fascinated GTA Darwin since his sophomore year in college. He prepared and delivered three lectures devoted to sociobiology in his introductory psychology course. Professor Locke, a well-known proponent of environmental determinism, complained to the department chair that Darwin was polluting his class with bad theory.*

GTAs cannot possibly predict all of the ways others will interpret their actions. To the extent that GTAs may be unjustly viewed as overextending authority or making inappropriate decisions, their professional status may be affected. Will Professor Snell mention to colleagues that GTA Suzanne breaks the rules? Will GTA Rodney's reputation be smirched for ruining the party? Did Darwin spend too much time on a favorite topic, or is Professor Locke making undue trouble for Darwin based on his own biases?

Regular faculty should remain sensitive to the perils of role ambiguity inherent in the GTA status and take them into consideration whenever the actions of GTAs are being evaluated. Often it will be found that GTAs were caught in traps that were difficult to identify in advance or for which consequences might ensue regardless of how the GTA responds.

Differing Perceptions of Ethical Issues

GTAs may become embroiled in ethical dilemmas because their views of what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior may differ from those of regular faculty. Based on an unpublished survey comparing 123 GTAs and 124 regular teaching faculty mem-

bers (Keith-Spiegel, 1994), graduate assistants found the following behaviors as considerably *less* ethically problematic than did regular faculty:

- Giving easy courses to ensure popularity with students
- Teaching full-time and holding down another job for at least 20 hours a week
- Hugging a student
- Accepting a student's expensive gift
- Selling goods (such as a car or books) to one's students
- Teaching a class without being adequately prepared that day
- Choosing a particular textbook for a class primarily because the publisher would pay a "bonus" to do it
- Choosing a textbook because the publisher would give the department some free films and software
- Privately tutoring students in the department for a fee
- Taking advantage of a student's offer such as getting wholesale prices at a parent's store

Our interpretation of these findings is *not* that GTAs are less ethical than regular faculty members, but that they are less able to see the potential negative consequences of certain actions (such as role blendings) indicating their incomplete socialization into the academy. An interest in generating monetary gain is also apparent, probably reflecting a true need. However, these findings do suggest that GTAs need to be specifically instructed to avoid inappropriate and ethically risky ways of interacting with students or enhancing their financial status.

Dual Role Relationships with Other Students

GTAs (as well as new, younger faculty) often feel a closer kinship to their students than to tenured faculty members, making them vulnerable to dual role relationships with students. Cases 5 and 6 describe situations that illustrate how GTAs can become the victims of inappropriate expectations by their own students.

Case 5: *Gina, one of GTA Marsha's students, engaged in a conversation about clothing fashions as they were walking to class. Gina informed Marsha that her mother owned a dress shop in town. "I can set it up so that you can get a 50% discount on everything," Gina told Marsha. Marsha could not believe her good fortune and purchased a number of outfits at a greatly reduced price. When course grades were issued, Gina was furious with her grade of "C." She stomped into the GTA's office and yelled, "I expected you to give me a break in class like I gave you at my Mom's store. You betrayed me."*

Marsha was shocked by the existence of an implicit *quid pro quo*. She tried to explain the misunderstanding and her ethical commitment to equitable grading, but Gina

was clearly agitated. Marsha worried that Gina would cause problems in the department, perhaps by badmouthing her to other faculty members. Marsha also regretted that she did not recognize the potential for conflict when first presented with the alluring offer. We should also note that Marsha may have still faced criticism had Gina earned an A. Classmates who knew of the clothing shop deal might have suspected bribery. Thus, Marsha's acceptance of Gina's offer risked a bad outcome no matter how well or poorly Gina performed in the course.

Although it is impossible to avoid all dual role relationships, especially in smaller college and university towns, more seasoned instructors would have been wary of the type of situation described above. Gifts or the offer of favors from students *currently* enrolled in a class should be politely refused because the potential for misunderstanding or manipulation is ever-present. (Small gifts of appreciation from students after grades are turned in usually pose no problem.) Socializing with students in one's own class is also potentially risky. GTAs are probably wise to restrict socializing with undergraduates to department and campus-sponsored events, except, perhaps, when all students have an equal opportunity of being included.

Sometimes GTAs become closely linked with students who are not in their classes. Case 6 illustrates an awkward circumstance that created some tense times for a GTA and her student.

Case 6: *GTA Robin's student was in a rock band with Robin's boyfriend. The band members were in constant turmoil, taunting each other with threats to quit. Robin had mixed feelings towards her student who, according to Robin's boyfriend, was the main source of the group's dysfunction. Although Robin was not directly involved with the band's problems, she worried that the teacher/student relationship had been compromised. The student was often absent and never came to office hours despite her requests to see every student who was not doing well in her class. Robin worried that the student's grade was in jeopardy for other than academic reasons.*

Robin's supervisor suggested that she speak candidly to the student, informing him that she was not involved in any band matters and that she could separate out her role as academic evaluator from that of a band member's girlfriend. The student responded well to this reassurance.

Finally, students, while still GTAs, may experience their first dual role dilemma during unplanned situations. Case 7 involves possible danger to a third party and the dilemma of how far GTAs should intrude themselves into the situation.

Case 7: *George came to GTA Millie's office hours after a lecture on the physiology of anger. George started by complimenting Millie on her lecture, adding that the subject of anger was very meaningful to him because he and his girlfriend fought a lot. As he talked with Millie about her lecture, George became increasingly edgy and asked tangential questions about acting out anger, such as "How often do couples become violent with each other?" Millie was concerned and asked George several questions*

about his relationship and his behavior toward his girlfriend. George looked extremely uncomfortable, became more evasive, glanced at his watch, and excused himself from the room.

This difficult case illustrates a sticky dilemma involving balancing concern for the welfare of a student (or third party that the student might harm) and the appropriateness of intruding into students' personal lives. Millie did not learn whether George posed a threat to his girlfriend. We do not know if George left the room because Millie was getting too close to some truth or because he was upset by Millie's interrogation. Millie might have handled this situation better by answering George's question while adding additional information about battering and available resources that might be helpful to George should he and his girlfriend be on the verge of violent interactions. (For more about interactions with students that involve potential physical danger, see Case 16.)

Students often approach GTAs with questions about their personal situations, and GTAs must be careful to remain professional and suggest other resources should a problem require more than just a minor comment (e.g., "I hope you and your roommate can create a plan to share the computer in a way that satisfies both of your needs"). We know of an incident that got very messy when parents became involved after a GTA was asked by a tearful student whether she should get an abortion. The GTA gave his definitive opinion; one that was *not* the one favored by the young woman's parents. Whenever highly personal issues (especially those unrelated in any way to the academic course) would be best worked through with a counselor or other party, GTAs should limit their involvement to encouraging students to take those steps.

Loyalty Conflicts

GTAs can get themselves into situations where loyalties are stretched between regular faculty and their peers. GTAs may have to make ethical decisions that will favor one legitimate loyalty over the other, such as allegiance to friends versus allegiance to the department and its values or policies. The next case illustrates a form that these dilemmas might take.

Case 8: *GTA Fred learned that fellow GTA Marla is dating a student in her class and that GTA Harold is regularly cutting short his classes on Wednesdays so that he can play on a bowling team.*

Both students about whom Fred has knowledge are violating school policies and shirking their professional responsibilities. But, Marla and Harold are Fred's friends. Should Fred try to handle these matters with his peers by himself? Should he tell his supervisor? If he makes a formal complaint, how will other GTAs react? Will they admire his courage or banish him as a snitch? These are hard questions, and ones that regular faculty sometimes face regarding their colleagues as well. At the very least, GTAs should have access to a trusted contact, ideally the supervisor, with whom such

dilemmas can be discussed in confidence so that the best plan of action can be formulated.

Mishandling Ethical Matters Due to Inexperience or Ignorance

GTAs are teachers in training and should not be expected to be expert in everything they take on. However, GTAs are expected to do an adequate job, at the very least. Sometimes, however, their inexperience and lack of knowledge can lead to ethical problems.

Gaps in Competence

All college-level teachers struggle to maintain competence, and it is increasingly difficult to do an adequate job of it, even in one's specialty areas. Even the most experienced among us may have the most difficult time keeping up with a literature that is so vast and far removed from our own training. However, for graduate students who are often teaching introductory survey courses, the task of keeping up with an entire field while still in training can feel overwhelming. In addition, most GTAs (and most regular faculty) have not had training in the basics of competent, effective teaching. These include designing lesson plans and course objectives, assessing student performance, and selecting sound pedagogical materials and techniques.

Case 9: GTA Vance was bright but extremely shy and feeling insecure. Although Vance worked hard on his lecture preparations, he followed the required readings so closely that the students saw coming to class as superfluous. Exams consisted of general questions such as, "Describe the main facts from Chapter 6."

Vance needed more assistance and direction than his department offered. With adequate training in the techniques of lecturing and test construction, and with proper supervision, it is likely that Vance would have offered his students a far more satisfying and effective experience.

Teaching incompetence can come in other forms besides lack of content mastery. For example, lack of knowledge about the institution's rules and policies can raise questions of competence. In occasional cases, GTA incompetence is expressed as a result of a character or emotional disorder. In general, the program staff should attempt remedial steps, although sometimes it is necessary to remove such students from the program (see Procidano, Busch-Rossnagel, Reznikoff, & Geisinger, 1995). In such instances, institutional procedures must be followed carefully, and the GTA's rights must be protected.

Handling Sensitive Material in the Classroom

There is probably no substitute for classroom experience when it comes to handling sensitive subjects. With such wide diversity in student populations, it is even sometimes difficult for seasoned professors to avoid stepping on tender toes. One way all of us can unintentionally get into trouble is to make a joke, not realizing that it may be viewed as humiliating or a putdown to one or more students in the class. New GTAs may feel confident that they *know* students because they are closer in age and status. However, GTAs may be far more prone to possible censure than they realize. Their students view them as teachers, not peers, and may not be as accepting as GTAs expect them to be. The next case illustrates how an attempt to be clever with an analogy resulted in sexual harassment charges.

Case 10: *A GTA, while teaching students in a human sexuality class how to put on condoms quipped, "Like basketball players, men dribble before they shoot." An offended student argued that by "objectifying the penis" the graduate assistant had created a hostile learning environment (adapted from Leatherman, 1994).*

Whereas a proven way to put people at ease is to use some humor, GTAs should be informed about the danger zones. This is especially true when joking is used as a way of breaking the tension during discussions of touchy issues.

Self Disclosure in the Classroom

Students usually seem to enjoy personal stories told by their educators in class. Assuming the stories are related to the topic at hand, they can be effective pedagogical tools. However, personal disclosures in class must be done with some discretion.

Case 11: *While discussing the unit on substance abuse, GTA Bennie described his adolescent drug use, relaying dramatic stories about his misadventures while under the influence. Most of the students seemed riveted to their seats. Bennie felt good about how he was able to get the class "jamming."*

In general, stories that reveal too much personal information, especially if controversial or illegal behaviors are involved, are not appropriate to share with classes. Bennie's stories spread quickly, and his judgment and fitness to teach were called into question. Bennie was heavily reprimanded for his illegal substance use disclosures.

GTAs' Misuse of New-found Power and Status

For many GTAs, holding a teaching position provides the first taste of prestige and authority. It is a very special type of power because GTAs are now on the other side of a fence that has impounded them for most of their lifetimes. Occasionally, some GTAs get carried away with finally being in charge and overestimate or abuse their position in the process.

Case 12: *A student in the class informed GTA Lester that he saw another student cheat. Lester was outraged that anyone would cheat in his class and assigned the alleged cheater a grade of zero on the exam. When the student came to inquire why he received no points, Lester said, "It's because you cheated. And I have no mercy for cheaters." The student vehemently denied having cheated, but Lester refused to budge. The student went through the formal appeals process, and Lester acted as if he was in a life-and-death struggle. The hearing panel ruled that Lester had not accorded the student due process and found in favor of the student.*

Although no one should fault Lester for his willingness to deal actively with a possible cheating incident, his inexperience led to serious procedural errors. Lester would have fared better had he first carefully reviewed and then followed the academic dishonesty policy. Supervisors should ensure that GTAs know how to confront and manage academic dishonesty.

Teaching to Evaluations

Student evaluations of their instructors' competence and effectiveness can be a source of anxiety, especially for contract and untenured faculty. GTAs may also feel particularly vulnerable, believing that poor student evaluations could derail their longer-term career opportunities. As a defense, GTAs may be tempted to "teach to" evaluations. The next case illustrates how ethical complications can result.

Case 13: *Six members of the class made only half-hearted attempts to hide the fact that they were looking at their neighbors' papers during the exam. GTA Rhonda was shaken, and gave each of them stern looks during eye contact, but this deterred the behavior for only a few minutes. Although Rhonda was upset and angry, she decided to ignore the situation. She feared that if she confronted the students, they would retaliate by giving her negative ratings at the end of the term. She was also concerned that if she told her supervisor or her peers that her students were cheating, they would think that her students did not respect her.*

Because students believe that it is unethical for instructors to ignore obvious cheating (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, & Allen, 1993), Rhonda may get lower ratings anyway from disgruntled honest students. It is also unfortunate that Rhonda did not feel comfortable with discussing the situation with her supervisor. A supervisor or more experienced colleague could have reassured her that this dilemma was hardly unique, and offered her tips on how to control cheating in the classroom.

In a related vein, some GTAs may place being liked by students above their teaching responsibilities. This is most likely to happen among new GTAs when feelings of insecurity are high and socialization into the professional role has not yet taken root.

Confidentiality Breaches and Gossip

Secret-sharing, criticizing instructors, and school-related gossip are normative among undergraduate students. However, once students move into graduate assistant positions, the rules of propriety change markedly. New GTAs may not make the shift gracefully.

Case 14: *GTA Ho was invited to lunch with Professors Green and Cohen. During lunch, the two professors discussed some of the current, sensitive problems related to the departmental curriculum committee's decisions. GTA Ho used this information, completely undisguised, as an example in his next lecture on ineffective problem-solving strategies. Word of Ho's use of this example got back to Professors Green and Cohen, who expressed their dismay to Ho and concern about his professionalism.*

Ho used bad judgment. But, faculty members would do well to explicitly inform new GTAs when certain information is not to be widely shared. A contributing factor to confidentiality and inappropriate secret-sharing among GTAs is their ambiguous role status. The "student" in them may resort to viewing fascinating information as fair game for broadcasting to their peers or students. However, most faculty view GTAs as colleagues-in-training and may make unwarranted assumptions.

Confidentiality requirements are tricky but easily teachable. Confidentiality guidelines should be a part of GTA orientation. Asking GTAs to sign a confidentiality contract helps to formalize a commitment to restrict disclosure of certain types of information. The next case illustrates a common problem, namely sharing information that invades someone's privacy and violates presumed confidentiality.

Case 15: *When Professor Bumpers asked GTA Sandra to take over his classes for a couple of days because he was experiencing serious side-effects from his depression medication, Bumpers assumed that Sandra would hold this disclosure as confidential. Bumpers was shocked when the department chair called him in to inquire about his mental health.*

The next case represents a very difficult situation that arises rarely, but most academics are likely to run into a similar situation at least once or twice during their careers.

Case 16: *When GTA Aaron called Shalia in to discuss her failing test score, he was not prepared for her response. Shalia claimed that she could hardly study or sleep and was failing all of her courses. She then tearfully disclosed that her step-father was raping her when her mother went to work at night and that she wanted to leave home but had nowhere to go. Shalia didn't want to hurt her mother by telling her what was going on. She ended by saying that she wished she had the courage to kill her step-father because he was "no good," and "the family would be better off if he were dead."*

Some students are experiencing severe and deeply troubling difficulties that involve the potential for physical harm to others or to themselves. Students often confide

in their teachers, especially those who seem likely to be understanding and sympathetic. GTAs are often closest to undergraduate students in age, thus enhancing their attraction as confidantes. Although conversations between students and GTAs are presumed confidential, there are exceptions whenever threats or knowledge of potential bodily harm are involved. Therefore, it is important that GTAs understand the institution's policy regarding any duty to warn appropriate others of potential bodily harm. GTAs should immediately consult with an advisor whenever such an instance occurs. If danger appears imminent, the GTA should be knowledgeable about the appropriate response, including a duty to warn potential victims. GTAs should always know, in advance, the identity of a back-up for a supervisor who cannot be reached in case of true emergency.

Ethical Pitfalls Related to Relationships with Regular Faculty

Regular faculty, as we have already noted, have complex relationships with GTAs. Problems with potential ethical implications that arise most frequently involve one of two elements: mixing personal and professional roles and power structure issues. Often the two exist simultaneously.

Dual Role Relationships with Faculty Members

One of the significant differences between undergraduate and graduate student status is the nature of interpersonal relationships with faculty. Formalities, such as the use of formal titles rather than first names, often are dropped. Off-campus activities, including pure socializing, increase. GTAs are allowed into previously forbidden territories, such as the mail or coffee room, and are given access to special resources, such as the copy machine. They get keys. In the department's inner sanctum, GTAs become privy to more inside information. Activities planned specifically to promote graduate/staff interaction are commonplace. This enhanced status is usually welcomed by graduate students, especially those weary of feeling like little more than a line in a grade book for so many years.

The relaxation of role boundaries also gradually socializes GTAs into academic culture, a critically important aspect of their graduate school experience. When all goes well, everyone is satisfied and enriched; however, blended roles involving one group with more power than another always carry risks. The next three cases illustrate how faculty/GTA relationships can go awry.

Case 17: *Professor Love and GTA Jimmy discovered that they are both avid tennis players and decided to play each other. Jimmy turned out to be a very aggressive player, beating Love virtually all of the time and teasing Love about being "an old man." When their paths crossed in the department, Love became more distant. He was*

not so sure that he liked this young man. Love began canceling tennis games and eventually told Jimmy that he didn't want to play any more. Love also refused Jimmy's request to borrow some teaching aids.

Maybe Jimmy is not the type of person Love wants as a tennis partner (or a friend), but it is also possible that Love is punishing Jimmy-the-student because Jimmy-the-tennis-player humiliated Love on the courts. Love has every right to discontinue the more personal relationship, but he may be misusing his power to the detriment of Jimmy's academic and professional development.

Case 18: *At a department reception, GTA Richard and Professor Delaney's wife got into a rather heated argument about a political candidate's fitness for office. Both felt passionately about their positions which were completely opposite. The intense conversation culminated with Delaney's wife telling her husband, who had wandered over to see what the problem was, "How could you let this ignorant person into your program?" Although Professor Delaney was uncomfortably stuck in the middle, he never again mentioned the matter to Richard. However, the relationship between Delaney and Richard felt strained to both parties. Richard had hoped to work with Delaney during the following year, but decided to abandon that plan.*

Richard might have been wiser to avoid charged conversations with his educators (and their partners) regardless of his level of passion. Yet, the fact remains that the same conversation, replacing Richard with a colleague equal in status to Professor Delaney, would have probably resulted in uneventful sequelae. We believe that Professor Delaney should have initiated a discussion with Richard shortly after the incident, perhaps reassuring him that his choice of political candidates was not an issue in their professional relationship.

Case 19: *GTA Gary was running off quizzes on the duplicating machine for his next class. Professor Wait came in with a short article that she wanted to copy. Gary continued running off his exams, informing Professor Wait that he would be finished in just a few minutes. Wait later told the secretary, with colleagues within ear shot, "Gary is a very insensitive young man."*

Although it is not uncommon for people to allow others to cut in when a duplicating job will take a great deal of time, Professor Wait apparently believed that Gary should have, in deference, abruptly interrupted his job to allow her to copy her article. We take the position that Wait was not entitled to break in, but her place in the power structure allowed her to interpret the situation in a way that not only supported her position but justified a negative attribution to a person of lower status.

To our knowledge no research has been done on this topic, but there probably is a rather sturdy "glass wall" with regard to GTA (and, perhaps, contract faculty) status. At some point that might not be entirely explicit or visible, a GTA may overstep his or her bounds in the eyes of one or more regular faculty members. This phenomenon probably varies from campus to campus, and certainly among individual faculty members. GTAs

can easily be confused when the power hierarchy is not understood, as the next case illustrates.

Case 20: *GTA Eric enjoyed discussing his career and impending marriage to a fellow student with Professor Tork. After the first few conversations, Eric felt that he was being selfish because the conversations centered exclusively on him. He overheard Tork telling a colleague about moving to a new apartment after her husband left her for a secretary in the Provost's office. He decided to disclose to her that he knew about the situation and expressed his sympathy, expecting that Tork would welcome a two-way rather than a one-way personal relationship. Tork, however, dismissed the comment, and remained cool toward Eric for the remainder of his graduate career.*

Eric did not commit an ethical offense, but in an attempt to equalize the relationship he clearly overstepped Tork's tolerance for intrusion into her personal life. Tork apparently perceived this as a serious boundary violation. What Eric did not understand is that professors are used to one-way conversations with students, and to keeping their private lives to themselves. Given the ambiguity inherent in individual GTA and faculty member relationships, GTAs would do well to move into closer relationships with faculty with caution.

We would not want to leave the impression that we are advocating a position that GTAs need to accept their lower status and remain hyper-vigilant lest they offend regular faculty. Indeed, we believe that the regular faculty can be the ones who are ethically insensitive. However, we do mean to portray a realistic picture of what can happen so that GTAs can try to avoid situations that may work to their disadvantage.

Exploitation of Graduate Teaching Assistants

Occasionally, faculty members intentionally manipulate and exploit graduate students. However, professors may also misuse their influence and power without full awareness. Even so, exploitation is still at issue, as the next case illustrates.

Case 21: *GTA Hillman taught the four one-credit laboratory classes that accompanied Professor Dillard's two lecture courses. His required duties, as described by the department, were to supervise the students' lab work, grade their lab reports, and write and grade lab exams. However, Professor Dillard also required Hillman to collect articles for Dillard's lectures, create slides, arrange for films (including picking up and returning them), create and grade the lecture section exams, tutor students who were having problems with the lecture material, and keep attendance and grade books current for both the lecture and laboratory components. Dillard explained, "It will be a good experience for you to oversee the total picture." In the meantime, Hillman is having trouble keeping up with his own studies and the progress on his thesis is falling behind schedule.*

It appears that Professor Dillard is using his GTA to play a major role in teaching his own courses, although Hillman's formal job description (and pay rate) is only for lab

course supervision. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between offering a GTA an enriching opportunity and exploitation, and sometimes the difference is in the eye of the beholder. However, if Hillman is overworked with duties or believes he is doing too much, he might approach Professor Dillard with a request for a modification in his assignments. GTAs do, however, risk receiving a negative reaction which is why departmental guidelines for GTA duties, stated as specifically as possible, are highly recommended.

More subtle situations are rarely openly discussed. For example, graduate students are often the *only* people their educators know well who are both trusted *and* possibly available to perform certain non-academic tasks. Thus, hiring GTAs as house and baby-sitters, gardeners, private secretaries, dog walkers, and the like appears to be commonplace. In the absence of empirical evidence, it appears that such situations usually work out to the benefit of both faculty and students, and no one feels exploited in the process.

When faculty members, who have great power over the present and the future careers of graduate students, misuse their powerful advantage, GTAs may feel that compliance to any requests is the only option. Some GTAs, however, have sued their advisors for what they describe as academic hazing (Leatherman, 1997). In some cases it appeared that the faculty member became too informal, paying a GTA with a bottle of whiskey for example. In more serious instances, it looked as though professors treated graduate students as all-around servants.

We believe that it is important for GTAs to have someone to confide in when exploitation and other difficult matters arise. The GTA supervisor is the ideal confidante. It is unfortunate, however, that it can be the supervisor who is the exploiter, as we illustrate in the next section.

GTA Relationships with Supervisors

Many GTAs are not supervised at all, or are supervised only superficially and sporadically. Instead, they are left to their own resources which renders them very vulnerable. In this section, we discuss the role that GTA supervisors can play in developing the ethical and professional fitness of GTAs.

Role Modeling

First and foremost, supervisors must remember that they are role models for GTAs. Supervisor's conduct, problem solving strategies, and responses to ethical dilemmas will be duly noted and absorbed. On the other hand, sexually predatory, unethical, unavailable, uncivil, or exploitative supervisors create appalling role models for graduate students (Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997; Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Pope, Levenson, & Schover, 1980). The next case is somewhat ambiguous but illustrative of our point: