Many graduate students are expected to engage in instructional roles, primarily as teaching assistants, during their graduate careers. However, some academic institutions extend the opportunity of an associate instructor role to skilled graduate students. Such roles typically entail teaching lower- and upper-division courses. As a fifth-year graduate student, I have had the opportunity to teach courses as an associate instructor and, therefore, have compiled a list of essential information for those who will soon be doing the same. So, what should you familiarize yourself with before starting your teaching journey?
Cultivate a course syllabus

One of the most important documents that associate instructors need to create is a course syllabus. A syllabus is an agreement between the instructor and their students. Be sure to include everything you want your students to know in order for them to be successful throughout the course. Two important pieces of information to include are notable dates and a grading scale. Remember, the more detail you can incorporate into the syllabus, the fewer questions your students will have. Equally crucial is including details pertaining to accommodations, such as mental health considerations and additional support mechanisms for students who may require assistance during class attendance and exam-taking.

Request materials from faculty

Organizing your course content is one of the more challenging parts of teaching. Prior to your course preparation, consider reaching out to faculty who have taught the course to see whether they would be open to sharing their materials. Faculty dedicate extensive time and effort to prepare their classes. If you have their permission to utilize their materials, you can save yourself some time, allowing you to concentrate on your teaching.

Prepare well in advance
Relatedly, course preparation takes extensive time and effort. Start your preparation at least a month early to prevent last-minute rush and stress. Starting early can also give you the flexibility to experiment with different teaching styles and materials to help ensure that a diverse group of students can benefit from the content. Having more time also enables you to reflect and consider how different components of the course align with each other. For instance, a topic that has been covered earlier in the course can be revisited again later. This not only reminds the students of the topic itself, but also helps them to see how different concepts can be interconnected.

**Embrace feedback**

Receiving feedback from both faculty and students can contribute to your ongoing professional development and help you improve your teaching pedagogy. During your time teaching, be open to receiving feedback from your students and/or senior faculty in your department. Invite faculty members to attend a session or two to observe your teaching. For instance, faculty might suggest making more eye contact with your students or teaching at a slower pace, which can help you connect with your students more effectively and improve your presentation skills. In addition, incorporating feedback from students also demonstrates your commitment to a more student-centered approach in your classroom.

**Maintain a faculty–student relationship**

An additional challenge faced by some graduate student faculty is the small age difference between them and their students. For this reason, some graduate student faculty have difficulty building an authoritative relationship with their students. How should graduate student faculty interact with students to avoid building a relationship resembling that of friends or peers? How should they be kind but firm at the same time? One method that I have found to be helpful is to set clear expectations at the beginning of the semester.

Be sure to outline your expectations regarding student–faculty relationships. These expectations can also be added to the syllabus as a reminder for your students. Maintaining professional language and behavior when interacting with your class is also beneficial. For instance, avoid sharing personal information that might erode the boundary between you and your students. If a student begins sharing about their personal life in a way that suggests they may need emotional or personal support, consider referring them to campus resources.

With all of this in mind, it is equally important to be there for your students and show that you care about their academic success. Be sure to provide constructive feedback on their academic work to build a healthy faculty–student relationship.

**Steer away from artificial intelligence software**

Artificial intelligence (AI) has the power to write essays and complete homework assignments—which can take a human several days to prepare—within a matter of seconds. For example, ChatGPT is trained...
to provide complete answers to questions asked. The software excels in providing definitions for concepts and real-world examples, which could potentially pose a problem for faculty teaching psychology courses that heavily depend on such content (e.g., courses on sensation and perception). Although numerous software applications attempt to detect AI content and check for plagiarism, their reliability has been questioned (Liang et al., 2023).

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So, what can be done to minimize the use of AI software applications? First, if possible, include more in-person class work that can be completed as a group. In-classroom collaboration both minimizes the chance to use AI software and allows students to work as a team. Next, avoid administering exams online if you can. Having in-class exams may add to your grading load, but it also encourages students to use their own knowledge when answering questions. Lastly, consider having an open conversation with your students about the drawbacks of using ChatGPT for coursework. One important drawback, for instance, is that it often generates incorrect information, leading users to believe false information, which can be useful for your students to know.

Find fulfillment in teaching

Last but not least, enjoy your time teaching. Recognize that your role as a graduate instructor can inspire curiosity and critical thinking among your students. As you witness the growth of your students, I hope it generates a sense of joy and pride for you.

Following these tips can help graduate student faculty to connect more with their students while maintaining a professional relationship. Holding graduate student faculty positions can also allow graduate students to enhance their professional development skills, making them stronger candidates for tenure-track faculty positions.

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