

Teaching Assistant Handbook
Department of Religion

Florida State University
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Introduction

Graduate students who receive funding from the Department of Religion as a Teaching Assistant are funded usually for one of three positions: Instructor (that is, the lead teacher of a course), Teaching Assistant in a class taught by a faculty member or a graduate student, or Research Assistant assigned to help a faculty member. For purposes of this handbook, all three positions are called “TA.” The Religion Department sees as one of its missions the training of graduate students to become effective teachers. Thus a person who is selected as a TA participates in courses normally under the supervision of a faculty member during the first year and after achieving 18 graduate credit hours in Religion, is eligible for placement in a classroom as an instructor of record in his/her second year.

Also note that there is a PIE (Program in Institutional Excellence) Handbook that lays out guidelines for teaching by graduate students throughout FSU. A copy can be found [here](#).

Financial Assistance

In return for financial support, assistant TAs are required to work for twenty hours per week, on average, for the department. First-year M.A. students normally serve as graders or teaching assistants who help instructors of large lecture courses. Ph.D. students and on occasion upper-level M.A. students often teach their own sections of courses. Teaching assistants who are assigned chief responsibility for a course must already have taken a minimum of 18 hours of graduate coursework in Religion. In exceptional cases, when the first-year student has significant teaching experience at another institution, the Department may allow this student to teach before they have met the above requirements.

More detailed information on financial assistance can be found in the Departmental Graduate Student Handbook.

Teaching Assistant Positions & Responsibilities

Teaching assistants in Religion may receive appointments that may require a variety of tasks. A TA may be an Instructor, that is, assigned primary classroom responsibility for a particular course. A TA may be assigned grading duties under the guidance of a faculty member or another graduate student. Research Assistants aid a faculty member in his or her research or perform departmental service.

The standard appointment for an assistantship is 0.5 FTE, i.e. an average of twenty hours work per week.

The following lays out the basic responsibilities of graduate instructors of record and teaching assistants in the Department of Religion.

1. Instructor of Record - Full Responsibility Classroom Teacher

An “instructor of record” is the main instructor of given course and has full responsibility for it.

An instructor of record must have the following qualifications:

- At least 18 hours graduate work in Religion.
- One year of teaching experience as a teaching assistant in the Religion department (can be waived under rare circumstances)
- Attended both days of the PIE conference

All instructors of record must achieve level 4 according to the standard for the certification of teaching assistants, a description of which can be found in the Departmental Graduate Student Handbook.). The supervisor of an instructor of record who is a graduate student is his/her advisor.

Following are the responsibilities of an instructor of record:

- Full classroom responsibility
- to write the syllabus and all assignments for the class he or she teaches (graduate students shall work out with the faculty of their track provisions for faculty review and approval of their syllabi) (also note that there are provisions below regarding required language in syllabi)
- to order textbooks in compliance with FSU’s deadlines regarding book orders.
- to make the syllabus available to the students on the course by the first day of class and to discuss at that class meeting the core elements of the syllabus with the students.
- to be familiar with the university’s teaching policies
- to grade and return exams and papers within no more than 2 weeks
- to inform his/her advisor and/or the director of graduate studies and/or the chair if he or she has problems which impede their best performance in the classroom
- to arrange a substitute when necessary

Additionally, if you are teaching an on-line class:

Contact the Testing Center (<https://distance.fsu.edu/testing>) the semester before your class begins to reserve a time for when the students will take tests. There is a form to be filled out, which can be found here (<https://distance.fsu.edu/request-services-assessment-testing>). Note that if you have not taught this class previously, you will NOT receive notice from the Testing Center that you need to reserve your exam time slots in advance.

In terms of creating new sections of existing on-line classes, this is done by copying over the content of previously taught classes to the newly created sessions. This copying process would have to be carried out by the instructor of record of the previous course.

The rights of instructors of record include the following:

- to receive notice of his or her teaching assignment
- to be notified as soon as feasible of any changes in his or her teaching assignment

- to receive timely feedback after any teaching observation
- to discuss with the faculty of their track, the director of graduate studies, or the Chair of the department if he or she has any concerns about their work

2. Teaching Assistants—Assisting an Instructor of Record

To be certified as a teaching assistant, one must have attained level 2 of the certification standards, a description of which can be found in the Departmental Graduate Student Handbook. A key provision of these standards is that the TA has attended at least day 1 of the PIE conference. The supervisor of a teaching assistant is the instructor of record of the course to which he/she is assigned.

The responsibilities of a teaching assistant include:

- to do complete twenty hours, on average, per week as specified by the instructor of record (who is often a faculty member but may be a fellow graduate student)
- to grade and return major assignments within 1–2 weeks
- to attend all classes
- to grade major assignments in accordance with the lead instructor’s guidelines
- to check with the lead instructor, at a reasonable time before the lecture, to see if anything is needed
- to prepare the room before the lecture, especially in the case of courses taught in technologically enhanced classrooms
- to come to lectures and to inform the lead instructor if he/she will not attend a lecture
- to monitor students’ behavior during lecture
- not to do his or her homework during lecture
- to bring to class materials from previous lectures (e.g. handouts, exams, papers, etc.)
- to, with instructor supervision and permission, teach some of the class lectures.
- to bring immediately to the instructor’s attention any potential problems with students
- to apply consistently the instructor’s directions and policies when dealing with students
- to assist the instructor with proper administration of student evaluations (see “Student Evaluations” section below)

Depending on the class’ needs, you may be assigned to it as a grader. In this case you should still attend class regularly, but the grader’s responsibilities for the class will be reduced to essentially grading student work.

The rights of a teaching assistant include:

- to receive notice of his or her teaching assignment before the end of the preceding term
- to be notified as soon as feasible of any changes in his or her teaching assignment
- not to devote more than 20 hours per week, on average, as a grader
- to receive specific grading guidelines from the lead instructor for every assignment
- to give a lecture or presentation in the course, as deemed appropriate by the lead instructor
- to seek help or advice from the lead instructor if he or she has difficulties meeting the grading deadlines
- to receive timely feedback on performance of assigned duties

- to discuss with the graduate teaching supervisor or the chairman of the department if he or she has any concerns about their work with the lead instructor
3. Research Assistants

Research assistants are not covered by the certification standards mentioned above that shape the teaching responsibilities of graduate students.

The responsibilities of a research assistant include:

- to devote no more than twenty hours per week, on average, on the assigned tasks
- to complete the assigned work within a timely fashion
- to communicate with the professor if he or she is not able to complete a specific task or meet a deadline
- to clarify with the professor where and when he or she should work on the assigned tasks

The rights of a research assistant include:

- to devote no more than 20 hours per week, on average, on the assigned tasks
- to receive specific guidelines from the professor for each assignment
- to discuss with your advisor, director of graduate studies or the chair of the department if he or she has concerns about their work with their supervising professor

Faculty Evaluation of Teaching Assistants

An assigned faculty member (typically determined by the track to which the graduate instructor of record belongs) shall attend and critique at least one class meeting every academic year. The faculty member is encouraged to discuss the class with the graduate instructor afterwards. This may involve a written evaluation. In the case of team taught classes, both graduate student instructors should have their teaching evaluated.

Program for Instructional Excellence [PIE] Conferences

In addition to the PIE conference described above which is critical for the certification of graduate students (see the Departmental Graduate Student Handbook), the PIE Office conducts numerous workshops throughout the year designed to enhance the teaching performance of graduate students. More details can be found here <http://pie.fsu.edu/>.

Awards

It is possible for outstanding graduate instructors to win awards that recognize their achievement. These are run by the PIE program. More information about this can be found here: <http://pie.fsu.edu/Outstanding-Teaching-Assistant-Award>.

Office Hours

All teaching assistants must set up office hours and be available during those hours for student meetings. If the TA teaches a three credit hour class, he or she will schedule at least one office hour per week. If there are students who have conflicts with the scheduled hour, the TA should be flexible in setting up alternative meeting times. TAs are assigned office space based on availability and courses being taught. In most instances offices must be shared, and in some cases graders may need to share a desk with one other grader.

Plagiarism and Honor Code Violations

Florida State has developed a policy that should be followed in the case of plagiarism and other violations of the FSU Honor Code. The details and relevant forms can be found here <http://fda.fsu.edu/Academic-Resources/Academic-Honor-Policy>. You will also find there resources designed for prevention of plagiarism and education of students on this issue. Also note these guidelines developed by Strozier Library (<http://guides.lib.fsu.edu/plagiarism>).

The key steps of the process are the following

- Call the Office of Faculty Development and Advancement (at 644-6876) to see if the student has a prior incident on his/her record (if he/she does the Office will instruct you on how to proceed).
- Fill out the Step 1 Agreement with the student when you discuss the issue with him/her (see the link in the above paragraph for the appropriate form).

Graduate instructors are to use anti-plagiarism software in their courses. Such resources are likely available on Canvas.

Graduate instructors and teaching assistants should also be aware that the department of Religion has established a set punishment for cases of plagiarism. The following text should appear in your syllabi:

The policy of the Department of Religion is that all violations of the FSU honor code, even first offenses, will result in a grade of 0 for the assignment and will be reported to the Office of the Dean of the Faculties. Additional sanctions may be imposed by FSU as part of the procedure for resolving academic honor allegations.

If you have questions concerning a specific case, within the department you should contact the faculty member who is Director of Undergraduate Studies or the Director of Graduate Studies. You could also call the Office of Faculty Development and Advancement.

Required First Day Attendance Policy

University-wide policy requires all students to attend the first day of class meeting of all classes or which they are registered. Students who do not attend the first class meeting of a course for which they are registered will be dropped from the course by the academic department that offers

the course.

You are therefore required to note which students on your roster are not in attendance on the first day and have them dropped. You can do this by sending a message to registrar@admin.fsu.edu. Please include the student's name, EMPLID, the course prefix and number and the course section number. You may also give a copy of your first day attendance roster to Jon Bridges, who will drop the appropriate students.

Please refer to 'Class Attendance' in the "Academic Regulations and Procedures" chapter in the Graduate Bulletin for additional information.

Student Evaluations

Undergraduates now fill out evaluation forms on-line. They are no longer filled out in class.

If the course has teaching assistants, ask the students to give feedback regarding them (there is no slot on the form specifically designed for evaluating TAs)

The SPOT forms are not returned to the TA until the following semester.

Further information on course evaluations can be found here:

<https://distance.fsu.edu/instructors/course-evaluations>.

Final Exam Policy

(from the PIE teaching handbook)

The University Undergraduate Final Exam Policy states:

- Final examinations in all undergraduate courses are discretionary within any given department.
- All students enrolled in an undergraduate course having a final examination, including graduating seniors and graduate students, are required to take the examination at the time scheduled.
- The scheduling of a final examination or a test in lieu of a final examination at any time other than the regularly scheduled final examination period is a violation of University policy.
- A test covering a portion of the semester's work which is given in lieu of a final examination, sometimes called "a unit test," must be given in the regularly scheduled final examination period.

The **final exam schedule** is published on the Registrar's Web site (see below) and is based on the regular class meeting time or is a block examination in which all students in certain courses take final exams at the same time, regardless of class section. Exceptions to this schedule for individual students are made by the academic dean of the unit teaching the course (in response to a written request from the instructor). Exceptions to hold the entire undergraduate course exam at a time

different from the published exam schedule are considered by the Undergraduate Policy Committee of the Faculty Senate, in response to a written request received at least three weeks in advance.

Examination papers of students should be kept by faculty members for one year after the end of the semester. Faculty members leaving the University before the completion of that year should leave the examination papers in the departmental files. Registrar's Web site: <http://registrar.fsu.edu/>

Grades

(from the PIE TA Handbook)

FSU uses the following grading system:

Grading System A 4.00 A- 3.75 B+ 3.25 B 3.00 B- 2.75 C+ 2.25 C- 1.75 D+ 1.25 D 1.00 D- 0.75 F 0.00

The University employs a plus/minus grading system where grades earn the quality point values. Instructors must explain, in writing, an evaluation (grading) statement that will be used to determine grades in each course. Final grades should be reported to the Registrar's Office by the deadline set each semester and in accordance with the procedures that will be communicated by each academic department. "Incomplete" ("I") grades should be recorded only in exceptional cases when a student, for documented reasons, has failed to complete a well-defined portion of a course, but was passing the course up until the time he or she failed to complete the work. Even under these circumstances, the authority for determining whether to grant an "Incomplete" rests with the instructor. Graduate Teaching Assistants must have approval from the supervising faculty member to grant an "Incomplete." (One exception to this guideline occurs when an "Incomplete" is applied as a result of allegations of academic dishonesty that have not been resolved by the end of a semester.) Deans' offices usually provide guidance to instructors regarding individual cases. Unless an extension of time is requested by the instructor, "Incomplete" grades turn into "Incomplete Expired" (computed as "F" or "U" grades, depending on the course grading format) at the end of the next semester in which the student is enrolled. For this reason, it is critical that faculty work closely with the student and with department staff regarding the clearance of an "Incomplete" grade.

Please see the General Bulletin sections on grading policies and grade appeals at: <http://registrar.fsu.edu/bulletin/undergraduate/>.

Medical "Excuses"

(also from the PIE handbook)

Documentation regarding missing class because of illness must be provided by the student to the instructor in a timely manner. Instructors may further specify deadlines for documentation

submission in their syllabi. The University Health Services will issue a signed document attesting to the fact that the student received medical treatment at the Wellness Center. These documents, or other medical information submitted by the student, should be used by instructors in making decisions regarding whether an absence is excused but should not be construed as a “medical excuse.” Ultimately, the authority for deciding whether the documentation presented by the student justifies an excused absence rests with the instructor.

Privacy Rights

The PIE conference will give you training with regard to knowing student privacy rights. Information on this topic can be found here:

<http://registrar.fsu.edu/records/ferpa/definitions/>

You can also learn more about this issue by consulting the PIE teaching assistant handbook.

To ensure FERPA compliance, graduate instructors are to give all exams, course papers, and student lists to the staff (Susan and Jon) at the end of each academic year. They will be stored under lock and key and eventually disposed.

Sexual Assault/Harassment

The PIE conference will also give you training on FSU’s policies and procedures relating to sexual misconduct on campus.

Information on this topic can be found here:

<https://knowmore.fsu.edu/>
http://www.hr.fsu.edu/?page=eoc/eoc_sexual_misconduct&CFID=11099532&CFTOKEN=e801b8bc7a5a695c-6DDE6C3F-F014-3D61-B9E0F008E7737728

You can also learn more about this issue by consulting the PIE teaching assistant handbook.

Student Grade Complaints

If a student has a complaint involving a teaching assistant or faculty member, s/he should first approach the teacher. If there is no resolution, then a student should make an appointment with either the director of undergraduate studies or the department chair. If a student has a complaint about a staff member, one should contact the chair. If you have any doubts about where to go or where to send a student, you should ask the chair.

Required Language for Syllabi

All FSU liberal studies courses are categorized into six broad headings, with specific requirements for each type of course. The six groupings are: Quantitative and Logical Thinking; English Composition; Social Sciences/History; Humanities and Cultural Practice; Ethics and Social Responsibility; Natural Sciences.

Religion courses fall under several of these groupings. While most of our courses use the “Humanities and Cultural Practice” grouping, we also teach courses that use the “Social Sciences/History” and “Ethics and Social Responsibility” groupings.

Your syllabus must conform to these new standards, which means that it must contain certain kinds of language. Follow this step by step guide to build your syllabus accordingly:

1) find out what kind of grouping your course uses. You can do that by looking at the liberal studies update website, which can be found here: https://java.odl.fsu.edu/Curriculum_Request_Form/main.jsp.

- sign in; use the “search for existing curriculum” section to find your course by putting in REL and the number of the course (e.g. REL1300); under search results click the course; then go to “view” the latest version (indicated by the date in the “effective term” field); you have now found the “curricular request review” site for your class; under the “competency certifications” section you can see what liberal studies designation it has been given (e.g. “Liberal Studies Cultural Practice (LS-CUL) is the designator for the “Humanities and Cultural Practice” grouping).

In the same area of the website you will also see what other competency certifications it may or may not have been given. Take note of those as well.

2) find out what specific requirements go along with the broad liberal studies designation of your course. You can explore the above mentioned site by clicking on the liberal studies designations. This will allow you to see what general requirements exist for your course.

This information can also be found in the “learning outcomes” section of this website: <http://liberalstudies.fsu.edu/LiberalStudies.html>

Note that some of these have recently changed (2016-17). You may modify your competencies (and thus the wording of your course objectives) accordingly:

1 Humanities and Cultural Practice

Original Competencies	Current Competencies
(1) Interpret a variety of works within a cultural context. compare and interpret a variety of intellectual and/or artistic works within their cultural milieu(x).	1. Interpret intellectual or artistic works within a cultural context.

(2) Compare and model cultural artifacts. compare, interpret, and create or model cultural artifacts that function as widely varied reflections of human perspectives and/or practices.	2. Use a cultural, artistic, or philosophical approach to analyze some aspect of human experience.
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The current Competency 1 (“Interpret intellectual or artistic works within a cultural context”) is nearly perfectly coextensive with the previous Competency (1). Assessments of (1) may be taken as valid assessments of 1 with no further comment.

Competency 2 (“Use a cultural, artistic, or philosophical approach to analyze some aspect of human experience”) is analogous to the previous Competency (2), but somewhat less restricted in scope. (2) focused on “cultural artifacts” as “varied reflections of human perspectives and/or practices.” 2 shares the same end goal (i.e., “to analyze some aspect of human experience”), but it does not require that this be mediated through an experiential comparison and modeling of cultural artifacts as with (2). Rather, the analysis may take any cultural, artistic, or philosophical approach. Thus, a valid assessment of (2) remains a valid assessment of 2. However, many instructors will likely feel that the “cultural artifact” requirement was a forced addition to a class where such a strategy was not an appropriate fit. In such cases, instructors are welcome to drop that assignment and identify some other assessment mechanism to measure Competency 2.

2 Ethics

Original Competencies	Current Competencies
(1a) Evaluate ethical problems and positions. identify, comprehend, and resolve ethical problems and their ramifications in a thorough and responsible manner; ...	n/a, or 1.
(1b) Evaluate ethical problems and positions. ... and evaluate ethical positions.	1. Evaluate various ethical positions.
(2) Address the contexts of ethical perspectives. recognize and evaluate the historical and/or cultural contexts that shape ethical perspectives.	2. Describe the ways in which historical, social, or cultural contexts shape ethical perspectives.
(3) Articulate the importance of social responsibility. articulate views on the nature of social responsibility and its importance.	n/a, or 2.

The current Competency 1 (“Evaluate various ethical positions”) shifts the focus away from the applied ethics emphasized by the original competency (1) (evaluate ethical *problems*) and towards its meta-ethical and normative-ethical aspects (evaluate ethical *positions*). A thorough assessment of (1) should encompass both, and to the extent that (1a) can be taken as presupposing (1b), an assessment of the original Competency (1) in its totality may be taken as a valid assessment of the new Competency 1. However, there must some aspect of evaluating ethical *positions* in the assessment—assignments or activities that are exclusively focused on responding to applied ethical *problems* without explicitly engaging with the underlying *positions* will not constitute a

valid measurement of Competency 1.

Competency 2 (“Describe the ways in which historical, social, or cultural contexts shape ethical perspectives”) is concerned with descriptive or comparative ethics. This maps more-or-less directly onto the previous Competency (2) (address the contexts of ethical perspectives).

The original Competency (3) (articulate the importance of social responsibility) does not map directly onto the current competencies and may be disregarded. However, it may also be mapped onto Competency 2, if desired and appropriate.

3) find out what additional competency certifications may or may not have been given to your course. Most of the courses that graduate students are teaching with either have no additional competencies that they are expected to fulfill, OR they will have either the “X” competency (in which case it is a “Cross-Cultural Diversity course”) or the “Y” competency (making it a “Diversity in Western Culture course”). There are a few other competencies that we deal with in our department – the “scholarship in practice (SIP)” – but unless you are teaching REL 3180 or REL 3541 you will not have to figure that out (but if you happen to be teaching either one of those courses, you need to figure that one out).

If your course fulfills the X or Y competency, then you have to add what is called a “substantive writing assignment” to your syllabus. Basically, you need to have a writing assignment that will be (at least) 25% of the final grade for the course, and will have the students submit some sort of first draft upon which you will comment and return to them before they turn in a final copy. Note that “first draft” has been interpreted liberally, and could mean that you ask the students (for example) for as little as a thesis statement, upon which you will comment. It could – of course – be more than that (i.e. an actual first draft), or something in-between. Use your better judgment here in balancing what will help your students with your time constraints.

Some courses also fulfill the W (i.e. “Writing”) designation. As such, there are certain course and syllabus necessities that you need to follow. If your course fulfills this designation make sure that you include content and statements in the syllabus as follows: a statement about writing skills as a part of the course description; at least one course objective that specifies satisfactory writing as a measurable learning outcome; descriptions of graded assignments that total a minimum of 3,000 words (excluding in-class exams or other assignments for which students do not receive feedback on the quality of their writing); descriptions of ways in which students will receive feedback on their writing in order to improve their performance in subsequent assignments; a grading rubric that provides indicators of standards for satisfactory written work

Note also that the following grading statement must be incorporated in the syllabus: In order to fulfill FSU’s Writing Requirement (“W” Designation) credit, the student must earn a “C-” or better in the course, and in order to receive a “C-” or better in the course, the student must earn at least a “C-” on the required writing assignments for the course. If the student does not earn a “C-” or better on the required writing assignments for the course, the student will not earn an overall grade of “C-” or better in the course, no matter how well the student performs in the remaining portion of the course.

4) Make sure that your syllabus has the required language in it. The new liberal studies curriculum courses are **required** to have certain sections in them. In the “curricular request review” website (the one mentioned in step 1 above) you can also view a sample syllabus.

a) We recommend cutting and pasting – very nearly verbatim – the language used in the course objectives (you may modify them according to the revised guidelines above, as well as the liberal studies for the 21st century paragraph. While these sections have boilerplate language, they have also been tailored to your particular course.

b) You should also have a clearly outlined breakdown of your grading percentages, as well as a clearly articulated attendance policy.

c) Cut and paste – verbatim – the academic honor policy, ADA requirements, religious holidays and syllabus change policy paragraphs. You simply must have the first two (honor policy and ADA) in your syllabus, and they must be exactly worded as they are in the sample syllabus. Religious Holidays and Syllabus change policy are highly recommended. They can be found below for your convenience:

Academic Honor Policy:

The Florida State University Academic Honor Policy outlines the University’s expectations for the integrity of students’ academic work, the procedures for resolving alleged violations of those expectations, and the rights and responsibilities of students and faculty members throughout the process. Students are responsible for reading the Academic Honor Policy and for living up to their pledge to “be honest and truthful and... [to] strive for personal and institutional integrity at Florida State University.” (FSU Academic Honor Policy at <http://fda.fsu.edu/academic-resources/academic-integrity-and-grievances/academic-honor-policy>).

The policy of the Department of Religion is that all violations of the FSU honor code, even first offenses, will result in a grade of 0 for the assignment and will be reported to the Office of the Dean of the Faculties. Additional sanctions may be imposed by FSU as part of the procedure for resolving academic honor allegations.

ADA requirements:

Students with disabilities who need academic accommodations should: 1) Register with and provide documentation to the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC); 2) Bring a letter to the instructor from the SDRC indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done within the first week of class. Note that this syllabus and other class materials are available in alternative format upon request.

For more information about services available to FSU students with disabilities, contact: Student Disability Resource Center, 874 Traditions Way, 108 Student Services Building, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4167, (850) 644-9566 (voice); (850) 644-8504 (TDD). Email: sdrc@admin.fsu.edu. See also <https://dos.fsu.edu/sdrc/>.

Religious Holidays:

As stated in the *Florida State General Bulletin*, University regulations stipulate that no student shall be penalized for missing class due to a religious holiday. Please notify the instructor in advance if a religious holiday you plan to observe falls on a day scheduled for class.

More on Excused Absences:

Excused absences include documented illness, deaths in the family and other documented crises, call to active military duty or jury duty, religious holy days, and official University activities. These absences will be accommodated in a way that does not arbitrarily penalize students who have a valid excuse. Consideration will also be given to students whose dependent children experience serious illness.

Syllabus Change Policy

Except for changes that substantially affect implementation of the evaluation (grading) statement, this syllabus is a guide for the course and subject to change with advance notice.