

Making the most of undergraduate assistants

Undergraduate assistants can provide enormous benefits to students and make life easier for instructors, especially in large classes. To get the greatest benefit from undergraduate assistants, though, instructors must provide guidance and course materials in advance and think strategically about how to use their assistants. What follows is a synopsis of ways that instructors at KU have used undergraduate assistants (or undergraduate teaching fellows, as they are referred to in engineering), and some of the common problems that undergraduate assistants face.

- **Work the room.** Have the assistants roam the classroom and look for students who are struggling. Once this engagement begins, other students will grow more comfortable asking for help.
 - *What to watch for.* One challenge to this approach is that students on aisles or at the front of a room tend to get more attention. Instructors should point this out to undergraduate assistants and develop strategies for reaching students in the middle of rows and the back of the room.
 - *How to give feedback.* New assistants are prone to giving answers to students rather than helping them think through problems and finding answers on their own. Learning to guide students toward solutions takes time and guidance from instructors.
 - *Offering praise.* It's easy for assistants to focus on what students are doing wrong in a class, so encourage them to offer praise for good work. Praise goes a long way toward encouraging student engagement and making students feel a part of a class.

- **Monitor groups.** Many instructors break large classes into groups and assign undergraduate assistants as quasi-leaders. This helps the assistants focus on specific groups of students, make note of those who aren't in class, and make sure groups stay on task.
 - *Strategies to try.*
 - *Fixed groups.* An easy way to handle this is to assign fixed groups during a semester. This allows students and assistants to get to know one another and gives assistants a clearer sense of whom to monitor. Some instructors assign names to groups (as in houses from Harry Potter) or call them teams (giving students a symbolic sense of cohesion).
 - *Sections of the room.* Some instructors divide the room into quarters or smaller units and assign undergraduate assistants to those sections.
 - *Group size.* Group size should be appropriate for the complexity of the work students are asked to do. In general, though, smaller groups (six or fewer) are better. Smaller groups allow students to collaborate more easily and help students and assistants get to know one another better.



- **Keep students serious and open-minded.** Active learning often creates a sort of controlled chaos within a classroom as students discuss questions and work through problems. These chaotic interludes make it easy for students to lose focus or for groups to settle on quick, superficial answers. Undergraduate assistants can help keep discussions focused and challenge students to rethink answers or to bring in alternative perspectives.
- **Facilitate conversations.** Because of similarities in age and experience, students often feel more comfortable asking questions of undergraduate assistants than they do of instructors. That comfort level helps the assistants draw students into meaningful discussions, building confidence among both the students and the assistants. It also helps assistants draw out students who might be reticent, especially in groups in which everyone seems reluctant to step forward initially. Again, though, instructors need to help their assistants learn to coach students toward successful solutions rather than just giving them answers.
 - **Monitor board work and check student work.** In-class conversations often involve worksheets, work on whiteboards, and other types of assignments. Undergraduate assistants have proved invaluable in helping instructors monitor this work and spot potential problems that might otherwise be overlooked.
 - **Make classes more personal.** The anonymous atmosphere of large classes can make students feel distant from the instructor and the course content. That anonymity often discourages students from engaging with peers and with the course material. It can also make them feel as if they don't need to attend class. Undergraduate assistants can cut down on that anonymity and make large classes feel smaller. Using groups (see previous page) makes this easier.
- **Help with homework.** Some instructors have their undergraduate assistants keep office hours so that students can seek help outside class.
- **Proctor exams.** Undergraduate assistants sometimes provide additional monitors for exams or help free up instructors from sitting in on exams.
- **Monitor online discussion boards.** Online work is generally an important component of active learning. In classes that use online discussions, undergraduate assistants have been helpful in monitoring discussions and engaging students in much the same way they do in class.
- **Help with labs.** Labs are often overseen by graduate teaching assistants, but undergraduate assistants provide an additional resource for students.
- **Check exams in advance.** This can help instructors gauge the amount of time an exam will take and spot potential problems in the exams.



Advice from former assistants

Students who have worked as undergraduate teaching assistants or undergraduate teaching fellows have learned to negotiate the intricacies of that role and are a good resource for new assistants. Here's some advice that previous assistants have offered.

What assistants need from instructors

- **Communicate regularly.** Weekly meetings are important, but anything that improves communication will help undergraduate assistants succeed.
- **Provide an outline of lectures** and lecture slides whenever possible. This helps assistants prepare.
- **Share example problems** in advance to give assistants a refresher. Providing these a few days in advance will give the assistants time to work through them. If the problems are complex, consider providing them even earlier. Diagrams are especially helpful for complex problems.
- **Have short meetings after class** to review how things went and to allow assistants to bring up any issues they encountered.
- **Be flexible.** Some groups may not need as much help as others, so allow assistants to move to groups outside their assigned area.
- **Provide nametags.** This helps students get to know the assistants and helps the assistants get to know one another.
- **Encourage engagement.** This is especially important at the beginning of the semester when assistants are trying to get their footing in a class. Remind assistants to use the Socratic method when working with students and give them occasional pep talks. Learning to engage with students takes time.
- **Introduce assistants to the class** and remind students that the assistants are available during class. That help legitimize the assistants to students but also reminds students that they can and should seek help when they need it.

What former assistants want future assistants to know

- **Review before class.** That will allow you to help more people rather than spending time getting up to speed while students wait.
- **Don't be afraid to let students struggle with problems in class,** but don't leave them helpless.
- **Seek out students who aren't raising their hands.** They may be reluctant to ask for help but will respond when you offer.
- **Watch for omissions.** If you are seeing the same thing over and over, the instructor may have missed something during lecture or one of the readings may have been left out. Make sure the instructor knows.
- **Carry a marker.** That saves time and allows you to easily write on whiteboards when you are explaining something.
- **Remember the bigger goal.** The goal of a class is learning. You're there to help students learn, not just to solve an individual problem.



- **Reassure students about concepts.** If they don't get a particular concept immediately, that's OK. The smaller concepts work toward building a bigger picture of a discipline.
- **Bring in real-life examples.** Remind students that what they are learning will have application. Something may not seem important now, but it will be later in the course or in a career. One former assistant got students' attention by explaining that a concept they were learning in biology was on the most recent MCAT. Others have found that telling students about internships and other things they are doing helps create excitement about a class. Those sorts of examples help students understand that their learning is connected to bigger things.
- **Get to know the interests of other TAs.** That allows you to draw on others' expertise when you don't know an answer yourself.
- **Show your excitement about the course material.** When you do, students are more likely to ask for help.
- **Recognize how you learn.** Thinking back to your experiences in a class or to your struggles with a concept will help you help other students. A professor may show one way to approach a problem, but you may have other ways that can help.
- **Don't be intimidated by age similarities.** You can be a leader in one class and a classmate elsewhere.
- **Enjoy the experience.** "When you see someone finally get it, it's really cool."
- **As an undergraduate assistant, you are in a role of power.** You are a representative of the instructor, the department and the university. Don't let that intimidate you, but don't abuse the authority you have.
- **Have students explain.** When a student finishes a problem before everyone else, ask that person to explain the approach to others in the group. That reinforces the learning of the early finisher and helps others gain insight from that person's example. It also allows you to check the student's understanding. Similarly, if a group finishes quickly, ask group members about another problem or ask other questions to make sure they really understand the material.
- **Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."**
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help from the professor.** If a group isn't responsive or a student is creating difficulties, bring in the professor. You are part of a team and don't have to do everything yourself.

