

SEP GTA Toolkit

Establishing a community grounded in student experience and belonging



Establishing the GTA Community

Why a Community of Practice

The SEP model engages instructors in a community of practice to learn new practices and grow their skills over time. This structure is important for supporting a “learn-do-improve” approach where practices are implemented in a real-world setting shortly after learning about them. Regular meetings within a community of peers provides a collaborative space for reflection, sharing ideas, and to practice continuous improvement. Such communities are frequently cited as a cornerstone for instructors’ success, not only in transforming teaching practice, but also in boosting instructors’ own sense of belonging and satisfaction.

Our results indicate that GTAs benefit from a similar approach. When learning about and implementing practices with a community of peers and faculty advocates, GTAs sense of preparation and use of evidence-based teaching practices increased substantially over only one semester (of 17 ETPs, the percentage of GTAs using for the first time increased 24-61% per practice). Other benefits were also seen: greater sense of collaboration and community among their cohort, greater confidence and less isolation. This finding is particularly important given what we know about high rates of isolation among graduate students nationally contributing to dropout (Sowell, Allum & Okahana, 2015).

“Over time, as I have gained more experience as a teacher, my perspective has shifted from “managing the classroom” to building classroom community and helping students connect with each other/with me as the instructor.” – UNM GTA

Designing a Community of Practice for GTAs

A GTA community of practice can be established in a number of different ways to fit your context. It can be built into an existing or new course for incoming GTAs where they receive course credit. It could be provided through a hybrid training with in-person workshops and online or in-person small groups to provide support for GTAs with implementation and making meaning of the student feedback they receive. You can review case studies from [CU Denver](#) and [UNM](#) to learn more about their communities of practice.

When establishing a community, we recommend that you design it to optimize the following:

- **Building connections and camaraderie:** Engaging in a sustained community of practice can help GTAs form lasting connections, and the trust built through regular meetings can help GTAs be more honest and vulnerable in discussing challenges. Consider ways to use this community to strengthen connections among GTAs and with faculty mentors and to create an environment where GTAs feel comfortable being their authentic selves and growing together.

- **Positioning teaching as a pathway to improving student success:** There is a large body of research demonstrating that improving belonging can contribute to improved student outcomes. Graduate students, particularly those who are newer to the institution and to teaching, may not be aware of the impact that relatively small changes to the classroom environment can make on students' ability to succeed. When GTAs participate in a community of practice, they can grow their teaching skills over a sustained period and become partners in the institution's broader student success goals.
- **Implementing practices and iterating just-in-time:** The community design should support GTAs to learn about new practices, and then implement them soon after alongside their peers. GTAs can feel more supported in using the practices if they know they will have support from the group in preparing and reflecting. Sometimes participants feel confident immediately after learning about a practice, but can struggle with how to apply it in a real-world scenario so it feels authentic to themselves and fits their context and role. Through the community of practice, participants can receive just-in-time tips or adaptations from mentors that can make the difference for successful implementation. It also makes it easy for facilitators to observe successes and challenges across

Foundational Knowledge

Before GTAs learn about the teaching practices, it's important to establish a solid basis for understanding how the practices contribute to improved student outcomes and what GTAs can and can't do within the limits of their role. SEP practices are not formulaic exercises, but rather practices that GTAs try, adapt, and eventually make their own. To be successful, GTAs need to understand the research behind their efficacy and the context in which they will be used. In this section, we share best practices for equipping GTAs with knowledge of student-centered teaching, fostering a culture of continuous learning, and helping GTAs understand students' lived experiences.

Research on Belonging and Student Experience

The SEP's approach to improving student experience is grounded in decades of social-psychology research. Studies show that when learning environments are designed to promote social belonging and communicate that instructors have a growth mindset about intelligence, students are more likely to take advantage of campus resources to support their success and persist through challenges. The practices that GTAs will learn about through the community of practice and use in the classroom are informed by this research and specifically designed to boost students' experiences and outcomes.

Engaging GTAs early and often with this research base can help them understand the impact of the practices, and prime them to consider how they can best use the practices in their specific context. At UNM and CU Denver, GTAs reviewed SEP videos and other resources that outline key research studies demonstrating the link between student experience and academic outcomes. The SEP resources included throughout this toolkit contain background information on this research base, which GTAs should be encouraged to review and discuss. Additionally, GTAs benefitted from learning from faculty at the institution who had previously used SEP practices. Beyond the SEP context, GTAs can benefit from understanding the presence of the broader scholarship of teaching and learning, and can learn from education researchers and other faculty engaged in research on teaching improvement.

“The research background on student experience changed my viewpoint on teaching entirely. Instead of it being this ambiguous, challenging space where I felt like I didn’t really know what was happening with my students, it gave me a structure where I could understand how my actions as a teacher directly impact my students. It empowered me to take on teaching actively and creatively rather than passively relying on my previous experiences with instructors or what others have told me about teaching” – CU Denver GTA

Establishing a growth mindset culture for continuous improvement

The SEP model is designed to engage GTAs in continuous improvement process to improve their teaching over time. This approach involves learning about new practices, implementing them soon after first exposure, reflecting on the experience, and considering improvements for the future. It is important to intentionally create a growth mindset environment in your community of practice; GTAs will benefit most from participating in the community of practice when they are comfortable sharing their successes as well as their challenges. Learning and implementing new practices can be a challenging and vulnerable process, and facilitators play a key role in normalizing these new experiences.

Understanding institutional context

Many GTAs are new to their graduate institutions, without knowledge of the demographic makeup and experiences of the undergraduate student population. For GTAs to be able to support their undergraduate students, they must understand the student population and how students’ lived experiences contribute to the learning environment. For example, at many urban universities, students may be first generation students or adult learners who have full time jobs outside of their academic lives. With knowledge of the student population, GTAs can consider how different aspects of students’ backgrounds can be an asset to their success, rather than a barrier.

You can use your community of practice sessions to introduce GTAs to the student population by reviewing institutional demographic data, speaking with faculty about their experiences supporting undergraduates, or hearing direct testimonials from undergraduate students. For example, GTAs at CU Denver examined institutional statistics together and did activities to reflect on their own identities to better understand those of their students. At UNM, GTAs watched a video where numerous UNM students from different backgrounds talked about their journeys to college and how their lived experiences impact their academic experience. This can also be a powerful opportunity for GTAs to reflect on their own experiences and how it impacts them as both a student and teacher.

“Understanding my students’ perspectives and what they might be balancing outside of my classwork helped me be a more flexible and empathetic instructor.” – CU Denver GTA

Cultivating GTAs' investment in teaching

Teaching is a skill that requires practice and growth, yet GTAs often do not receive any teaching training. Without this structured development, instructors often rely on their own past experiences as students to inform their teaching strategy, which may not result in positive outcomes for all students. Training in evidence-based teaching practices can help create learning environments that support growth for all students. Given the many demands on GTAs' time, it is important to convey how teaching improvement can grow critical skills and lead to career growth. This can help GTAs see the value of learning these new skills and engaging in the community of practice. Improving teaching skills can benefit GTAs not just in the classroom, but in other aspects of the graduate student experience as well. Contrary to messages that GTAs may hear about teaching taking time away from research, we know that teaching and being a researcher are not mutually exclusive; GTAs gain skills in the classroom that can ultimately help them in the lab, in their relationships with mentors, and in their careers after graduate school (Feldon et al., 2011, Shortlidge and Eddy, 2018). Training on SEP teaching practices can develop many transferable skills, such as public speaking, cultivating a positive group environment, and providing feedback. Additionally, spending time on teaching improvement can help GTAs understand their own role and identity in the context of their graduate programs, and can shape their expectations about relationships with professors and mentors.

"As I went through the workshops, I realized how much my students are affected by their learning environment and instruction. I was also able to take what we were learning and apply them to my own learning and experience as a graduate student. This helped me develop more empathy towards my students and their experiences as well as towards myself as a student."
– CU Denver GTA

