

SEP GTA Toolkit

UNM Case Study



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW MEXICO

Institutional Background and Department Context

The University of New Mexico (UNM) is a Research I, Hispanic Serving Institution and Carnegie Community Engaged Institution, with a minority majority undergraduate student population (64% of undergraduates belong to an ethnic minority group), and a significantly larger population of graduate and professional students of color than peer institutions (33% Hispanic, 4.5% American Indian, 2.3% Black or African American, 11.2% International, 39% White). UNM faculty participated in the Student Experience Project as part of efforts to support the diverse undergraduate student population. Originally, 110 faculty participated in SEP training, including 6 highly dedicated faculty from the Department of Biology, where we conducted this pilot project. Recently, a collective bargaining agreement between UNM graduate workers and the UNM administration requires the university to provide training for GTAs, and this training can help fill that gap.

Training Design and Implementation

UNM's Biology Department had no pre-existing required GTA training program, so it was necessary for the project team to create a training format that would engage GTAs throughout the semester while being mindful of their existing commitments and busy schedules. 27 GTAs participated in the training pilot program in fall 2023, which consisted of monthly, in-person workshops and asynchronous activities in an online learning management system. During workshops, GTAs engaged in activities and participated in small group discussions to help them implement SEP classroom practices and learn from their peers' experiences and feedback. In the intervening weeks, GTAs watched videos, read background materials, and completed personal reflections that helped them connect theory to practice. To encourage participation, GTAs received a stipend for completing the training.

The monthly training workshops consisted of high-engagement sessions facilitated by the lead Biology GTAs. Training agendas were crafted collaboratively by the entire interdisciplinary project team. Sessions balanced the presentation of content with hands-on activities (including worksheets for adapting and personalizing teaching practices, virtual and physical whiteboards for sharing experiences and perspectives, etc.) that helped participants reflect upon and apply content individually and in small groups, with ample opportunity for peer feedback and borrowing of ideas.

The lead GTAs scaffolded content to frame each activity including presentations by and interactions with faculty guest speakers, who presented on specific topics of expertise on equity-based practices. Engaging faculty expertise (experiential and data-informed knowledge) from the very first workshop set the tone for the training experience and community of practice, and modeled approaching new classroom experiences through a growth mindset lens and leaning on peers as a key way to grow self-efficacy as an instructor. At the end of the semester, participants submitted a portfolio consisting of their individual reflections and materials they had prepared over the semester as a toolkit to take away from the training.

- **Workshop 1 (Pre-Semester Orientation):** Introduction to SEP practices (Belonging and Growth Mindset) with faculty speakers; small group activities to design icebreaker activities
- **Workshop 2:** Preparing to collecting formative feedback from students; preparing to deliver wise feedback; group activity to craft wise feedback statements
- **Workshop 3:** Debrief formative feedback from undergraduates; discuss practices to create a welcoming classroom environment
- **Workshop 4:** Increasing diversity in science; group activity on syllabus and course policy revision
- **Workshop 5:** Collaborative syllabus and course policy revision with faculty supervisors.

Lessons Learned

Insights from this pilot project included that providing regular opportunities for GTAs to reflect with faculty and their peers were important for them to feel confident in addressing challenges and making adjustments in an inclusive manner. The community of practice format was valuable as it allowed GTAs to get support from their peers and work through common challenges together. GTAs often don't have dedicated time or space to discuss teaching with their peers as colleagues, and the community of practice that they built provided an opportunity for this. Additionally, for training on equitable teaching practices to be impactful for GTAs, it needs to be designed with careful consideration of GTAs' specific needs, which are different from those of faculty. Having our workshops co-designed and led by GTAs, faculty, and members of the UNM Center for Teaching and Learning ensured that we were supporting GTAs' experiences and adhering to best practices for teaching and learning.

Additionally, having experienced GTAs facilitate workshop activities and discussions allowed participants to be more vulnerable than they would have been with faculty or administrators who lack shared experiences and with whom a power differential may exist. Thirdly, we recognized that GTAs, particularly those teaching for the first time, need support and guidance from faculty. We invited faculty who have been active in the Student Experience Project at UNM to meet with our GTAs; they shared their experiences using SEP practices and spoke to the importance of working to improve their teaching. Seeing faculty demonstrate a growth mindset about teaching helped GTAs adopt this attitude themselves. Finally, we found that implementing new teaching practices does not have to be time-consuming or complicated. GTAs appreciated practices that brought immediate and visible changes in the classroom – for example, when GTAs reframed “office hours” as “drop-in hours” and this led to more students attending, GTAs felt energized by the connection with their students

