Welcome to TapTalk

In a large university like Rutgers, life is often compartmentalized and, at times, can be very isolating, especially for the teaching assistant. Even when departments share the same building, TAs in one department know very little about TAs in any other. This monthly newsletter, TapTalk, has been created to establish a link among TAs throughout the university by focusing on the common elements of the TA experience, and by raising questions and discussing problems that confront all TAs. TapTalk, the first issue of which you hold in your hands, will aim at keeping TAs informed about issues of importance to them and opening a line of communication among all of the TAs in the university.

This is a newsletter for TAs, and their interests and ideas should be reflected in its pages. We welcome suggestions from TAs about topics for the newsletter. In addition, any TAs who would like to share their own experiences as a TA—positive or negative—with others in the same position, please contact us and we will do our best to include your thoughts in the “Notes from the Field” section. This newsletter can succeed only if it becomes a forum for TAs, a place where they can voice their concerns as teachers and students, and find answers to their questions and support with their problems. We look to you, the TAs, to help us define our mission by offering suggestions when possible and criticism when merited.

TapTalk is just one element of TAP, the Teaching Assistant Project at Rutgers-New Brunswick, which has been established to improve the quality of undergraduate and graduate education in the university through the professional development of its teaching assistant staff. Among the other elements of this multi-tiered project are:

- The development of training programs, both general and discipline-specific, for newly-appointed and experienced TAs;

- Production of the Teaching Assistant Handbook, an informational handbook that is currently being distributed to all TAs;

- Presentation of lectures and discussions, throughout the year, on various topics relevant to the TA experience.

The Teaching Assistant Project looks to all TAs in the university to work together to improve the quality of teaching at Rutgers. Please tell us what you would like to know, whom you would like to hear from, and what you have to say about being a TA.

300 Attend First TAP Conference

Early in the morning, on September 1, 1988, approximately three hundred people gathered at the College Avenue Campus Center for a full day of discussion on the problems and rewards, joys and sorrows, of being a Teaching Assistant at Rutgers. The 250 newly-appointed TAs for whom the conference was organized were presented with a variety of viewpoints on the mission of TAs, on what the TA could expect at the university, and what the university expected from the TA.

The participants were greeted by Provost Paul Leahy, who stressed the importance of teaching assistants to the university and the value of the teaching assistantship to the TA. Professor Catharine R. Stimpson, Dean of the Graduate School-New Brunswick and Vice-Provost for Graduate Education, and Professor Arnold Hyndman, Director of the Minority Advancement Program, followed with broad discussions of the mission of the teacher in the university, focusing on the image of the teachers in this society and the necessity for TAs to recognize their role as a witness to a body of learning, a vision of reality. Both emphasized the necessity of TAs committing themselves not only to teaching but also to their own learning and to

(continued on page 3)
Testing: One, Two, Three...

With midterm exam period now upon us, it is an appropriate time to consider a few of the questions that inevitably arise when a teacher designs an exam. Most teachers agree that the object of testing is not merely to rank students in relation to their classmates; tests are also valuable diagnostic tools, ways of measuring student performance in order to facilitate learning. Well-designed tests help students and teachers evaluate the effectiveness of a class, giving both an opportunity to review and, if necessary, revise their methods for the rest of the semester. A good exam is fair, a challenge to the students, a reflection of the goals and materials covered in the course, and an accurate index of the ability of each student in the class. They do not just happen but are the result of careful planning and thought, with, perhaps, a little bit of luck.

Although each exam will be different, its final form determined by subject matter and course goals, there are some common issues which confront all instructors when they make up an exam. Three of these crucial issues that influence the composition of any test are raised below.

1. First and foremost, the teacher should be clear about what he/she wishes to test. Is the test meant to measure knowledge of specific facts? Is it meant to demonstrate the students' ability to deal with certain facts or theories in an original and comprehensive way, their ability to make connections among a group of texts or ideas? The answer to these questions will usually determine the type of test, objective or essay (or possibly a combination of the two). The teacher should also try to determine beforehand the value of each answer and the range of acceptable responses to each question.

2. How important should the midterm be and how much weight should it carry in the course grade? The midterm exam will seem most threatening to students for whom this exam and the final exam will largely determine their grade for the class. Many educators feel that it is more beneficial to students to give several tests over the course of the semester, making each test equally important, thus eliminating the "do or die" element of only one or two significant grades. Tests given on a regular basis are also aids to the teacher who wishes to know if indeed the majority of students are keeping up with the class. Another advantage is that when a student's entire grade does not rest on one or two major exams, there is less likelihood that the student will feel pressured to cheat on the exam. Here, too, the instructor will need to consider the relative difficulty or ease of questions on the test. A too-easy exam will turn off the smarter students, just as one which is unrealistically difficult will turn off the average one. A range of questions may be the best solution. Some teachers suggest that every test should contain some questions which all of the students in the class will be able to answer. These questions will act as positive reinforcement to the slower students in the class and give them some needed encouragement to persevere in the course.

3. How can the teacher make sure that the exam will be beneficial to the student? Tests can be an effective way of providing feedback to the students on the work they are doing in your classroom, but, in order for this to happen, the student must be motivated to look beyond the letter grade assigned for the work. A student who just looks at the grade and then files away the exam is not gaining anything from the exam. Arrange for students to come and speak to you in your office about the exam. Use class time to go over those questions that a large number of students answered incorrectly. Be aware of the fact, however, that this may be less an indication that the students do not know the material than that your question was ambiguous or misleading. Some teachers suggest letting the students participate in making up the exams. The ability to form a good exam question is an indication that the student has a full understanding of the course material and of the goals of the course, and their input gives them a greater investment in the exam. You may not wish to do this on the midterm, but certainly by the time the final exam comes around, your students should be prepared to help write the exam. Essay exams lend themselves to this kind of pre-test exercise. Some teachers even use this as part of the exam itself.

(continued on next page)
Testing
(continued from previous page)

asking the students to formulate a good exam question and then answer it.

These questions all lead, of course, to other more difficult ones, far too complicated to be considered in this brief space. A more wide-ranging discussion of issues of testing and grading will be offered on October 11, 1988, when five experienced testers and graders will share their knowledge, experience, and insights with TAs at 4:30 at the Busch Campus Center. Bring your problems and questions and a willingness to share your own experiences to this discussion.

Conference
(continued from page 1)

their program. Dean Stimpson clearly defined this dual responsibility: "We fail our students if we do not stay at the edge of our field."

Moving away from this broad philosophical discussion, a panel of two Rutgers faculty members and one Assistant Provost provided a detailed description of the undergraduate experience at Rutgers along with their own philosophies of teaching. Professor G. Reginald Bishop, for many years Dean of Instruction, Rutgers College, provided a brief history of the university and a remarkably clear description of its complicated structure. He also offered a formula for good teaching, describing it as a combination of "fear, bluff, persuasion, and exaggeration." Professor Michael Moffatt, author of the soon to be published Coming of Age in New Jersey, gave the audience an honest and often humorous profile of the undergraduates, based on his anthropological research in the Rutgers residence halls. Assistant Provost John E. Creeden, in describing the composition of the undergraduate population, reminded the TAs not to overlook the quieter students and exhorted his audience to pay attention to the underachievers, to try to help the "passive learners."

During the lunch break at Brower Commons, members of the faculty and staff as well as veteran TAs circulated among the new TAs to answer questions and try to help them resolve problems they were having in getting settled at Rutgers. Representatives from the Housing, Parking, and Financial Aid Offices, Graduate Admissions, the Office of the Dean, and others were there to provide on-the-spot assistance when needed.

Dean Catharine R. Stimpson convened the afternoon panel, which consisted of experienced TAs and faculty members who provided their own personal views of teaching.

Notes From the Field

Each month, this space will contain the words of TAs, speaking about their own experiences on a common subject. For this first column, however, we would like to share some of the comments addressed to TAs at the September TAP Conference on teaching.

As teachers, we are speaking to other people . . . We are speaking to human beings. We must teach them with dignity, honor, and humor . . .

Catharine R. Stimpson

All that we can do as teachers is to set the stage and point the way. We can demonstrate, converse, explain, but until that other intellect comes to grips with the subject and absorbs it, nothing can happen.

G. Reginald Bishop

. . . we're in this together--faculty and teaching assistants, and the goal for each of us is to provide the right kind of environment which is conducive to good student learning . . .

Nathan Hart

This is a big university and you are, in some ways, the front line, and you can, at this level make a very positive impression.

Seth Golpin

Attention All TAs
College Teaching:
Critical Issues in Testing and Grading
Tuesday, October 11, 1988
4:30 p.m.
Busch Campus Center

Coming in the November Issue
of TapTalk:
Academic Integrity
Conference
(Continued from page 3)

Golpin, Dean of Freshmen, Rutgers College, also focused on the undergraduate view of the TA: "What I want to tell you today is to care... What the student cannot forgive is not caring."

Following this panel, instructors from seventeen different programs, chosen for their university-wide reputations as excellent teachers, held master classes for small groups of students in their own disciplines. These classes shifted the TAs away from the day's more general discussions of things that all teachers should know to a more directed demonstration of how a teacher in a specific discipline would proceed in a class.

Finally, a reception at the end of the day gave the TAs an opportunity to relax, meet with the day's speakers, introduce themselves to their department chairs, and exchange ideas with other TAs.