

## Resolutions for the New Year

Although the fall semester is winding to an end, the need to evaluate and strengthen your teaching skills continues. The winter break is a great time to step back, briefly reflect upon what you have achieved this semester, and consider the ways you can improve both as a teacher and a student. Below are a number of suggestions for New Year's resolutions that can help to develop your teaching skills.

- Because it is difficult to improve too many things at once, you will probably be more productive and successful by concentrating your efforts on just one area. Focus on one aspect of teaching—improve the way you lecture, lead class discussions, comment on papers or other assignments, or work with students one-to-one in office hours—and analyze the ways that others approach the task. Solicit suggestions from faculty members in your department, talk with other TAs, or contact the TAP office for resources (932-11TA).
- Arrange to meet with TAs in your program on a regular basis to discuss issues that come up as the semester proceeds. These meetings can be informal and do not have to be time-consuming. Let your graduate director know that you are interested in disciplinary-focused training, so that he or she can offer support. You may also be able to solicit the help of a faculty member to guide some of the discussions or to suggest topics that might be valuable to explore.
- Find a journal that focuses on teaching in your discipline and review several issues for articles which are relevant to your class. Copy an article you find interesting or provocative to discuss with other TAs at your regular meeting.
- Write a draft of a mid-semester evaluation over winter break based on what you expect to achieve the first half of your class next semester. While this evaluation is, of course, subject to revisions, at least you will have a draft to work from, making the middle of next semester a little less hectic. Consult the TA

## TAP/TA Liaison Committee Forming

The Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) is forming a TA Liaison Committee composed of representatives from all programs that have TAs, in an effort to expand the programming and enhance the effectiveness of the TA Project. Each program has been asked to appoint a representative from among their TAs. These representatives will insure a more direct communication link between the TAs in a program and the Teaching Assistant Project, by bringing to the Committee the questions and needs of students in their discipline and by bringing back to the students in their programs information about the services TAP has to offer. The committee will meet twice each semester to brainstorm about programs and to plan discipline-specific lectures and workshops for TAs.

TAs interested in serving as their department's TAP representative should contact their department chair at once. The first meeting of the committee will be in early February.

# Resolutions

(continued from page 1)

*Handbook* for sample mid-semester evaluations.

- Sign up to get yourself videotaped next semester by TAP and then review the tape with a faculty member or a TAP staff member. This will help you to see yourself from the students' perspective and will provide you with some concrete suggestions for improving your teaching. Call 932-11TA to schedule a taping.
- Keep a teaching journal. This may be the most personally meaningful way to assess the impact that your teaching strategies have in your classroom and on you, and to explore your reactions to what happens in class. Journal notes often prove to be an invaluable sourcebook and foundation for understanding your approach to teaching and can be quite helpful when constructing a statement of your teaching philosophy for a portfolio.

*TapTalk* is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-NB.

Editor:

Linda G. Schulze

Assistant Editors:

Stephanie Beardman

Rachelle Brooks

Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

*TapTalk*

25 Bishop Place

New Brunswick, N.J. 08903

(908) 932-7034

- Make your teaching portfolio an ongoing project. Complete your assessment and summary of this semester's class before the new semester begins, using the suggestions for organizing a portfolio provided by TAP (call or stop by the TAP office to pick up a portfolio instruction folder). Much of the work for your portfolio can be done as you are preparing for your class. It then requires only minimal work to keep it up-to-date as the semester progresses, with a final reassessment at the end of the semester.

- Plan to attend the workshops TAP schedules for next semester. Discussing teaching issues with others may inspire you to try new approaches and provide useful ideas for improving teaching. Specific information on dates, times, and locations will be published in future issues of *TapTalk*.

- Get on the internet and join a listserv for people interested in teaching. There are lists available for teachers in specific disciplines or for those interested in areas like instructional technology or writing across the disciplines. For example, "egrad," a forum for the concerns of graduate students in English and foreign language, is a site where teaching issues often come up. Many others exist, so start searching!



Call  
932-11TA

*Do I have to give a student a make-up exam if he or she misses the final exam?*

Students who miss the final exam should provide a documented excuse before they are allowed to make up the exam. Ask the students to provide a note from the Dean's Office of their college explaining their absence. Once documentation is provided, you then have the option of giving the same exam or one of comparable difficulty. When devising a final exam, write a few alternate questions which can be substituted in the event that you need to administer a make-up exam. Without documentation, or at least notification that a student is attempting to obtain a note from a Dean, you may calculate their grade with a "0" or "F" for the final exam. Temporary grades (TB+, TB, TC+, etc.) are given at the discretion of the instructor when the student has not properly completed the course work requirements. The letter grade following the T reflects what the grade will be converted to if no other work is completed for the course by the university deadline. A grade of TZ will be converted to an F if no action regarding the grade is taken. Students enrolled in College of Engineering courses must receive a TF grade if the final exam is not taken at the scheduled time.

(continued on page 4)

# IN THE PROGRAMS

On November 17th, Professor Roy Licklider, **Political Science**, presented a workshop for TAs on "The Use of Simulations in the Classroom" that focused on the technique of role-playing. By using simulations, students get immediately involved and can better understand difficult concepts. In addition to discussing the pros and cons of various methods of using simulations, Professor Licklider stressed the importance of de-briefing the students after a simulated enactment, and of requiring a written assignment to help them integrate what they have experienced with the material being taught.

Marion Yudow, Director, FAS Language Labs, coordinated a TA training program with the **Spanish, German, and Italian** programs, entitled "Teaching and Testing Speaking in Foreign Languages." The workshop, held on October 28th, was attended by more than 60 TAs from a wide range of programs. Speakers included Dr. Keith Mason, Princeton University, who suggested creative teaching projects to inspire TAs and Dr. Carlos Raul Narvaez, Rutgers University, who spoke on "How to Create a Teaching Portfolio."

# NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

## Arguing Points

Assigning grades can be one of the most difficult responsibilities of a TA, but if you have been clear from the start about your grading methods, there is little need for apprehension. Most students know how they have been doing in the class, and those who performed consistently throughout the semester can predict their final grade fairly accurately. The exceptions are the students with borderline grades and those who hope to salvage a low grade by doing very well on the final exam. Some of these students may choose to contest their final grades, so TAs should be prepared for such a situation if it arises.

As you design your final exam, devise a point or letter grade system which you can have ready to show students who challenge their grade. This is especially important for exams that contain an essay component or problems with multiple sections to answer. By planning ahead in this way, not only will grading be easier, but you will be able to justify a grade quickly, thus avoiding a lengthy confrontation.

TAs should plan to schedule *at least* one hour of office hours at the end of the semester after students' grades are posted. Schedule these hours for a

time when faculty members and other TAs will be nearby in case you need someone to arbitrate a potentially explosive situation. If a student seems upset or angry, remember not to react emotionally; remain calm and try to get the student to calm down and have a rational discussion. Because everyone is stressed at the end of the semester, do not say anything that would further inflame the situation. If the student calms down, offer to review the exam with him or her as a way of explaining the grade. If the student seems too angry or upset for a discussion, suggest that an appointment be made at a later date when a faculty member can also be present. A student who becomes loud or abusive should be asked to leave at once. Get assistance from a faculty member or fellow TA if necessary.

Do not be too quick to change a grade, even if you think the

*(continued on page 4)*

TA  
Helpline  
Call  
**932-11TA**  
Monday-Friday  
between the hours of  
**8:30-4:30**

## Resolutions

(continued from page 2)

• Finally, consider how to better balance your graduate studies with your teaching responsibilities. Think about using your time more effectively; set realistic goals for what you can accomplish each week. Maintain a regular schedule that includes both work and relaxation time. Give yourself a break and take time for the things you enjoy—you may end up less stressed and more productive by the end of the semester.


## Arguing Points

(continued from page 3)

student may have a legitimate complaint. State that you are willing to take their points into consideration and re-evaluate the exam, perhaps with someone else who can be more objective, but do not make any promises. Give yourself time to think about the student's comments when you have some distance from the conversation—otherwise, you may make a hasty decision you will regret later. Always strive to be fair, in grading, in listening to the student's side of the story, and in making the final decision about the grade.



## December

- 13 Last day of classes 
- 15 Fall exams begin
- 17 Happy Hanukkah!
- 22 Fall exams end  
Winter Solstice
- 23 Winter recess begins
- 25 Merry Christmas!
- 26 Boxing Day (Canada)

## January



- 1 New Year's Day
- 15 Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Day  
Winter recess ends
- 16 Spring term begins

### Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean  
Graduate School—New Brunswick  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903  
(908) 932-7034