



Srinivas Srivatsa is a graduate teaching assistant for the Department of Mechanical Engineering. DEREK DEMERE/THE BATTALION

Graduate assistants pull double weight as students and instructors

BY STEPHEN WELLS
Staff writer

The first experience Texas A&M students may have had with student teachers was in high school — a game known as “Sink the Sub.” In this intellectual-bankrupt but liberating pastime, the object was to ke the teacher storm out of the classroom and report rylene to the principal.

Now, A&M students are seeing more student teach- than from their high school days without stooping sink them.

In general, there are three types of graduate student istants: the graduate assistant teaching (GAT), the duate assistant non-teaching (GANT) and the gradu- assistant researcher (GAR).

Thirty-six percent of all graduate students at A&M rk for the University in one of these roles.

Dan Robertson, director of graduate studies, deb- the schedule of an A&M graduate assistant.

“The first requirement is that the student is a full-time duate student,” Robertson said. “In the catalog, if they a graduate student working toward a masters or doc- ate, they must be enrolled in nine hours of graduate- el classes. Half of their life is as a student, the other half, out 20 hours a week, is as a graduate assistant.”

Rich Newman, a GAT for Statistics 325, said the ad- ntages to becoming a graduate assistant outweigh the advantages.

“In the math department, we have what is called an assistantship,” Newman said. “You do either research, ading or teaching. Every month we get a stipend,

which is like a salary you can use to pay your rent and living expenses. I also get my out-of-state tuition waived, so I’m just like a student from Texas as far as tu- tion is concerned.”

Robertson said the advantages of gaining experience also outweigh the workload.

“If you’re applying to teach at university X, Y or Z, it helps to say, ‘I’ve got a doctorate and I’ve taught a class. Here are my evaluations,’” Robertson said. “That gives the graduate assistant an advantage over the applicant who can only say, ‘I’ve got a doctorate.’”

Texas A&M is not typical compared to other large uni- versities, who often use graduate teaching assistants (TAs) to fill in for classes without professors.

“When I talk about teaching assistants, you must un- derstand that Texas A&M takes a different position from other universities,” Robertson said. “People think that Texas A&M is such a large university that many graduate assistants will have full classroom responsibility, but the opposite is true. Most of our graduate assistants are what you would call laboratory TAs.”

Brian Green, a sophomore accounting major, said he believes giving lab jobs to graduate students fixes some problems but creates others.

“A TA may know enough to manage a lab but some- times can’t communicate well enough to really teach the students what they need to know,” Green said. “I’ve heard a lot of complaints about TAs that don’t speak well enough for a student to understand, and that can create a problem.”

“On the other hand, some grad students that teach can relate more to a student because they have classes, too.

They understand that their class is not the only one a stu- dent is taking.”

Not only can a graduate assistant relate to their un- dergraduate students better, but they can learn from their experience as well.

“It is actually very true that to learn something, you have to teach it,” Robertson said. “It’s not a student- teacher relationship, but a student-student relation- ship. Some of the best teachers are students who ask good questions because the graduate assistant must be prepared to answer them and explain them.”

“It was only when I got the opportunity to teach for the first time that I realized that teaching was what I wanted to do. Being a graduate assistant changed my life forever.”

DAN ROBERTSON
Director of graduate studies

Newman said not all graduate assistants are as understand- ing as a student would like them to be.

“I think the biggest fault that they (teaching assis- tants) make is that they’re graduate students, and their expectations are so high for their graduate work they

pass those expectations on to their undergrad stu- dents,” Newman said.

Developing a lesson plan is the most time consuming aspect of teaching a class, and for a graduate student, lost study time can be costly.

“Making a lesson plan can take up a lot of time,” New- man said. “But for me, after my first time teaching it was easy because I already had my notes and my lesson plan.”

Newman said as a graduate student coming from an- other university, he was on the outside looking in when he first arrived at A&M.


“It was definitely a strange experience,” Newman said. “I didn’t realize how serious the Aggies are about some things. My first year here, I was always telling my class how Florida would crush them in football, and that didn’t make me very popular with them. But I picked up on the traditions real quick because people wanted to talk about them and I wanted to learn.”

Being a graduate teaching assistant can have a pro- found impact on the life of a graduate student.

“I worked for seven years in industry, and I never thought I wanted to be a teacher,” Robertson said. “When I went back to school, I was sure I would come back to in- dustry, and I only took a leave of absence. It was only when I got the opportunity to teach for the first time that I realized that teaching was what I wanted to do. Being a graduate assistant changed my life forever.”

Even if a graduate assistant is not planning to make teaching a career, working with undergraduate students is a rewarding experience.

“I love what I do,” Newman said. “Because I enjoy my job, I don’t see it as a constraint on my life.”




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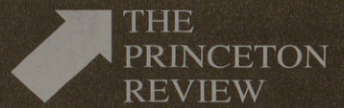
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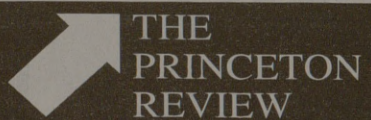
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