What does it mean to be in a partnership with a faculty member?

What are my roles and responsibilities in this partnership?

In preparing for a TA assignment, keep in mind that you are working in partnership with another instructor (or with many other instructors) and – most importantly – you are not the senior partner in the relationship! Working with faculty means understanding the role that your supervising faculty member expects you to play in the class. You must think about your assignment as part of a team effort and then ask yourself:

• What are my responsibilities in this team?
• How do I make sure that I perform these responsibilities in a way that serves the interests of other members of the team?
• What can I do to make the overall team effort effective?

Answering these questions requires you to make three important commitments:

1. Early coordination;
2. On-going communication; and
3. Presenting a united front.

These commitments can lead to a successful classroom experience.

**Early Coordination**

As early as possible – preferably well-before the first day of class – you must meet with your supervising faculty to discuss and clarify your role and responsibilities in the class. In many fields the basic responsibilities of TAs are familiar and consistent across classes; for example, in social science classes that have discussion sections, TAs are expected to lead discussion sections and participate in grading papers and exams. But do not assume that these generic descriptions of your responsibilities are enough to understand the role you will play in a particular professor’s class. These responsibilities can be expanded or contracted depending on the teaching style and philosophy of an individual professor and so it is vital that these issues are explicitly clarified as soon as possible. You do not want to find out at the last minute that you are expected to give a lecture to the entire class.

Keep in mind that, while professors always have particular understandings of your role, they are not always good about clarifying this question. Left to their own, some professors will not think about setting up initial meetings to coordinate responsibilities. If the professor is not taking the initiative, you need to be prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to get your questions answered.
Finally, it is important that you also understand what responsibilities are considered an acceptable part of your job description and what are not. Professors have the right to clarify your role as it relates to your teaching responsibilities in class, but you are not to be treated as their personal assistants on a variety of unrelated matters. If you have questions or concerns about your role in a class, please ask your Chair, Director, or Graduate Adviser, or contact CET at usccet@usc.edu.

On-Going Communication

After responsibilities are clarified and you start carrying them out, it is vital that you keep in touch with your supervising faculty in order to assess the class and share important information.

Two issues in particular deserve regular discussion. The first involves the pedagogical goals of the course. How are the students reacting to class and are they benefiting from your efforts? Because you and the professor are working as a team, you should make it a point to keep the professor informed about your work and its effectiveness; and, of course, you should also seek input or guidance as you continue to think about the best strategies to use in the classroom. Also keep in mind that your supervising faculty member may not have as much contact with students as you have, and you may be his or her best source of feedback from students about the overall goals of the course.

The second issue involves your work with individual students. It is inevitable that particular questions, problems, or challenges might arise in the course of the one-on-one work that you do with particular students, and every effort should be made to coordinate your strategies with the supervising faculty. You may know how best to proceed, but in many cases the greater experience of a supervising faculty member can come in very handy, and you should take advantage of that by bringing to her or his attention the special cases you encounter.

United Front

Finally, it is very important to act as a team when teaching a course. There may be some disagreements among faculty and teaching assistants about the meaning of the course material or about the most effective way to deal with a particular student. It is fair for you to share your thoughts with your supervising faculty member, but once a decision is made it is also vital to put on a united front. Students want to know that professors and TAs are working together, and it can be very frustrating and demoralizing for students if they have the impression that a TA and a professor are at odds. In this regard you must act as a professional and do your best to make the approach and policies of the supervising faculty work. This means, for example, not sharing with students your critical views of the professor’s approach to the material and not telling students that you think the grade assigned by the professor is inappropriate.

Of course, no one expects you to sit idly by if you believe that a professor’s conduct is unethical. In that case you have other avenues to pursue. But disagreements about matters of discretion must be resolved in favor of the professor. After all, as you recall, you are not the senior partner on this team.
Working with Faculty: The Teaching Assistant’s Checklist

- Do I know who is my direct supervisor?

- Have I exchanged telephone numbers and email addresses with the professor and the department’s administrative staff?

- Do I understand what I am supposed to do and how to do it?

- Have I become familiar with the daily classroom schedule?

- Do I know for which activities outside the classroom I am responsible (e.g., grading, discussion leading)?

- Do I understand the professor’s methods for the course?

- Do I know where the instructional materials for the course are kept?

- Do I know how to operate classroom equipment?

- Do I know where to get equipment?

- Do I know where supplies for the department are kept?

- Do I understand how I am to divide my time among tasks?

- Do I know whom to notify if I am going to be late or absent?

- Do I know what to do if the professor with whom I work is absent?

- Do I know how to take initiative and be a self starter?
Questions for Understanding Teaching Assistant Responsibilities

Teaching assistants in different departments may be assigned widely differing roles. Some may only grade, duplicate materials, or take care of equipment. Others may hold office hours, meet with students individually, or answer questions in laboratories under supervision of professors or “Head TAs”. Still others may be in charge of labs or recitation sessions or may substitute for professors as lecturers. Some TAs (also called Assistant Lecturers) may take complete charge of a course and be held responsible for all aspects of teaching the course. Remember, it is your responsibility as a TA to ensure you understand fully what is expected of you. The following sets of questions should help you.

A. Tasks to Be Done

What types of tasks am I expected to do:
___ Type or duplicate course material
___ Set up or maintain lab equipment
___ Create lab or homework assignments
___ Answer questions in lab
___ Help individual students during the lab or class
___ Lead lab sessions
___ Run recitations
___ Lead students in discussions
___ Plan and give short presentations
___ Help students solve problems
___ Administer tests or quizzes
___ Create tests or quizzes
___ Grade papers
___ Make decisions about grading
___ Take full responsibility for a course and prepare the syllabus
___ Hold office hours or tutorials
___ Other tasks not included above. What are they?

B. Support Given by the Department

What kind of support do TAs in the department receive to help them perform those tasks:

Mentoring:
___ Regular (weekly?) meetings for professor’s feedback after teaching has started
___ Regular communication with TA coordinator

Evaluation:
___ Class or lab observation by professor or Head TA?
___ Discussion of mid-semester student evaluations of TAs?
___ Written constructive feedback to help TAs do their job well?
___ Semester-long TA training program offered by department to encourage TAs to develop their teaching skills??
___ Other forms of help: what exactly are they for this department?