

# CSE Teaching Assistant (TA) Handbook

Department of Computer Science and Engineering

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## 1 Introduction

This policy document describes the responsibilities and expectations for teaching assistants in Computer Science and Engineering at the University at Buffalo. You should read and familiarize yourself with this document.

Your position as a teaching assistant in our department is an important and valuable role. Many of our courses can operate only because of the efforts of teaching assistants. As such, this is a position of responsibility that carries with it certain important requirements, which are outlined in this document.

Failure to comply with these policies may lead to dismissal from your teaching position. In all but the most egregious circumstances, your course instructor will contact you regarding any problems and give you an opportunity to explain the situation and/or remedy the problem. However, this opportunity is at the discretion of the instructor, and repeated violations or violations of an extreme nature may not be given a second chance.

This document is subject to revision at any time, and is intended to represent the current best practices in the department.

## 2 General Expectations

Certain things are expected of all TAs in the department. As a teaching assistant for CSE, you are an ambassador for the department and part of the professional face of the University at Buffalo. These are not expectations that are specific to any course, but rather to professional comportment and responsible membership in a team.

### 2.1 Be Respectful

Respect the students and the other course staff members, both the instructor(s) and your fellow TAs. This includes language, both verbal and written; body language; common courtesies; modes of address; and other forms of respect.

- You must never demean or degrade any student, faculty member, fellow TA, or other department or course staff member, whether it is in public or private.
- Be civil at all times.
- If you have a professional disagreement with another staff member that you cannot easily resolve, bring it to the course instructor. Avoid the appearance of fighting in front of students.
- If you have a personal disagreement with another staff member, pursue it out of the view of students. If you cannot resolve it personally, bring it to the course instructor (who probably will not solve it for you, but may help you find ways to work equitably with the other staff).
- If you have a technical disagreement with another staff member, course materials, or similar sources, discuss the disagreement with course staff and the instructor before bringing it to the attention of students. Maintain a unified front on technical issues unless there is an issue of immediate concern to be dealt with (e.g., the given code will not compile, a handout is sufficiently misleading to cause students to make implementation errors in lab, etc.).
- Try to remember how students prefer to be addressed, and address them as such. The HUB student information is often incorrect or confusing, particularly for international students.

Remember to remain respectful and professional regarding instructors and staff members in other UB courses, as well as this course. You may not enjoy the teaching style of all of your instructors, but while you are a staff member on any course in the department you should treat all CSE staff members with respect. Be respectful of all members of the UB community.

Be respectful of all students, student and professional organizations, and courses of study, regardless of your personal feelings. Other students will be different from you, have different priorities, come from different backgrounds, and pursue different goals. It is inappropriate to demean or disrespect such differences. For example:

- It is inappropriate to make statements like “that professional organization is useless, I could never put that on my resume” because the organization in question targets a demographic to which you do not belong. It may not be an organization in which you wish to participate, but such statements degrade the organization in the eyes of those students for whom it is intended.
- It is inappropriate to suggest that any student or class of students, or any professional or class of professionals, is unsuited for any major or calling.

It is **never appropriate** to suggest to a student that they should seek another major, that this course may be too difficult for them, or that they are not of the right personality, culture, gender, or other characteristic to be a Computer Scientist or Engineer. It may be the case that certain students are unprepared for this course or are not naturally disposed to computational thinking, but *TAs should not address this*. If you believe that a student needs help or guidance, contact a course instructor.

Failure to be respectful to all students, staff, and professionals with whom you interact *will* be cause for dismissal.

## 2.2 Be Responsible

In particular, if you are asked to do something as part of your TA duties, *do it within a reasonable or agreed-upon time frame*. If for some reason you cannot do it, *notify the instructor as soon as practical* so that it can be reassigned. If you tell a student that you will do something, *do it*. If for some reason you cannot, let the student know as soon as possible that you cannot, and do your best to pass the task along to someone who can.

- Be on time to labs, office hours, meetings, and appointments.
- If you have not understood instructions or requests from the instructor or other teaching staff, communicate this clearly and promptly.
- Check your UB email and any other routine course communication tools (Piazza, Keybase, etc.) regularly. Unless you are given other guidance, you should check these resources at least once on any day you are scheduled to work.

If you know that certain parts of the semester will be busy for you, contact your instructor immediately and let them know what your schedule looks like. This includes travel, interviews, large projects for other courses, publication deadlines, etc. The sooner you can let your instructor know, the sooner arrangements can be made with other assistants to fill in your duties.

## 2.3 Be Professional

This position is a job, and should be treated as a job. Students and your fellow teaching staff may be your friends — and that's great — but they are also your professional colleagues. Maintain separation between professional and private interactions.

- Be mindful of sensitive or potentially offensive topics, and avoid them in interactions with students and TAs. Your fellow TAs are your coworkers even when they are off the clock, so remember that inappropriate interactions may be particularly uncomfortable.
- Use complete sentences, properly-spelled words, and good grammar in communications.
- Use titles and surnames as appropriate (some individuals may not prefer this, or may not insist upon it, and that's fine). Address people (staff or student) as they prefer to be addressed.
- Dress appropriately.

## 2.4 Be Passionate

Students will read and adopt our attitudes. You don't have to like *everything* about the course or curriculum, but try to adopt and project an attitude of passion for topics relevant to the course and computer science and engineering in general. We want students to understand and believe that, not only are these things important, we think that these things are important.

## 2.5 Be Mindful

Remember that this position is a job *in addition* to your duties as a student and as a human being. If you let it, it can become more than you can handle. Guard your time and your schedule, take breaks when you need them, and be proactive about your mental health and comfort. Ask for help if you need it! The University has various services that can help you with this. Speak to your instructor or visit [the student life health and wellness pages](#) for more information.

## 3 Course Responsibilities

You will have course-specific responsibilities as a TA that will be communicated to you by your instructor. It is your instructor's duty to make your responsibilities clear, and it is your duty to inform your instructor if your responsibilities are unclear.

In all cases you are expected to abide by the policies in this document, as well as:

- Understand the course content to the extent necessary to execute your duties. If this requires attending lectures or reviewing lecture notes, completing homework assignments or required readings, *etc.*, then this is a discussion you should have with the instructor.
- Know what the course instructor expects of the students and what the students are expected to be capable of, versus what you are expected to help them with.

Your instructor may provide you with an addendum to this document or a separate policy document, if it is appropriate to do so.

## 4 Academic Integrity (AI)

Familiarize yourself with the course AI policy, the [department AI policy](#), the [university AI policy](#), and the AI clauses in the syllabus. Academic integrity is critically important to the value of a degree from an academic institution, and as course staff you must do your utmost to preserve the integrity of the course and the students' learning experience.

### 4.1 Teaching Assistant Integrity Responsibilities

As a TA, you have two primary responsibilities with respect to AI:

- ensuring the integrity of your own actions, and
- monitoring the students' activities for integrity concerns.

Of the two, *the former is more urgent*. You must ensure that your conduct in the course is impeccable with respect to academic integrity. This means that you must maintain discipline in the following:

- You may not give a student answers to a graded assignment, lab, or exam. You may, and should, lead students toward answers on assignments and labs (but not exams) if they are struggling.
- You must treat all students fairly and equally, and offer the same assistance to any student who comes to you for help.

- You should not encourage students to seek help from dubious or disallowed sources, such as Stack Overflow or GitHub repositories. If you are in doubt as to whether a source is allowed, check with a course instructor.
- You must not distribute or “leak” non-public course materials, including assignment handouts and given code that does not appear on the course web page.
- You must not distribute confidential course materials, such as assignment or exam solutions.

Any TA violating these policies will be dismissed from the course and reported to the department, which will affect eligibility for future teaching positions, and may find themselves subject to AI proceedings.

If you notice a student who has violated the course academic integrity policies, it is your duty to report this to the course instructors, who will deal with it accordingly. When you discover an AI violation, you should note the date and time, what student or students are involved, and the nature of the violation, then promptly submit a report. Promptness is necessary due to the University AI procedures, which require that the student is notified of the nature of their violation within 10 academic days of its discovery. Your prompt notification to the course instructors allows time for the case to be examined within that 10 day window.

It is easy to feel guilt or discomfort over taking an action which may lead to serious sanctions of another student, particularly a student who may be your peer or friend. However, remember that a) AI violations are not a “victimless crime”, and other students will be hurt by the culpable student’s actions; and b) the ultimate decision and sanction is made by the course instructors, and out of your hands. It is possible that the instructors will determine that the violation is not severe enough to pursue or that only a reprimand is in order — and if they decide otherwise, it is almost certainly because the AI violation truly merits the sanction.

Remember also that students are, in many cases, still learning what is and is not appropriate treatment of intellectual property and what may be a violation of academic integrity. By overlooking violations of academic integrity, we appear to be implicitly condoning harmful behavior. It is better for the student to learn that a line has been crossed now, in a relatively safe environment, than farther down the line where it could cost them their job or even their career.

## 4.2 Example Assistance Scenario

Here is an example scenario to help you understand the kind of help that you can give to a student, and what kind of help is too much. Note that there is sometimes a gray area between what is enough help and what is too much that depends on the student’s understanding of the problem; do your best to judge the situation and act appropriately.

Suppose that a student comes to you with the following code (simplified from an actual student interaction):

```
/* x is protected from simultaneous thread accesses by mutex */
extern int x;
extern pthread_mutex_t mutex;

/* Increments the variable x and then returns its post-incremented
 * value. */
int increment_x() {
```

```
pthread_mutex_lock(&mutex);
x++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&mutex);

return x;
}
```

This code has a bug, in that the variable `x` is accessed outside of any locked critical section. It is therefore possible for the value of `x` to change between the `x++` and the `return x` statement. Simply telling the student, “you access `x` after unlocking the mutex that protects it” is too direct, as it is simply giving the student the solution to the problem. Alternate, better approaches might be:

- “What does the mutex protect in this code?”
- “How do you protect the variable `x` from simultaneous access?”
- “Are you protecting all of your shared state in this function?”

These responses encourage the student to think through what the function *should* be doing versus what it is doing. If the student asks something to the effect of, “should the `return x` be protected by the mutex?” then this offers another opportunity to guide the student toward the right solution by reminding them that the mutex must also be unlocked before returning, for example.

### 4.3 Violations in Other Settings

Teaching assistants in this department are expected to comport themselves with integrity in their own coursework. TAs who are found in violation of the AI policy of another course will be immediately terminated, and students who have an AI violation in the previous semester will not be eligible for a TA position. More information is available in the [departmental academic integrity policy](#).

## 5 Student Interactions

We have already outlined some expectations for TAs in student interactions (*e.g.*, be respectful, appropriate levels of help), but there are also expectations for *students* in interactions with TAs, and you must encourage and uphold these expectations. If a student fails to uphold their end of these expectations, you should let them know and, if problems persist, contact an instructor.

### 5.1 Courtesy and Respect

Just as you must respect the students, they should respect you and the other course staff. If a student is behaving rudely or disrespectfully, you may politely decline assistance and let them know why. If you observe a student behaving rudely or disrespectfully toward another staff member, you may notify them that their behavior is unacceptable and *should* notify a course instructor of the problem. Any situation involving rude or disrespectful behavior is likely to involve (or engender) high emotions and some level of discomfort. If you are not comfortable confronting a student directly or immediately, this is a situation where it is appropriate to defer to a course instructor. In particular, you should only get involved in an interaction between a student and another course staff member if you believe it is possible to de-escalate the situation.

Any time you observe student behavior that is inappropriate or disruptive, whether toward yourself, another TA or staff member, or another student in the course, you should notify the course instructor. Attempt to positively identify the misbehaving student (by name, UBITName, etc.) if possible, and provide a concise statement of the problematic behavior and the identities of other involved parties and witnesses.

Some strategies for defusing combative or disruptive situations include:

- Calmly and quietly asking the student to join you in a more private conversation (perhaps stepping away from the group in open office hours, or entering a breakout room in online office hours), then telling them that their behavior is disruptive and asking them politely to follow the established procedures.
- Acknowledging the student's question or comment and establishing a specific timeframe in which their concerns will be addressed. For example, stating "I am assisting another student right now, but I will be with you when I am done," or "I will be with you when your turn comes."
- Referring the student to the course instructor for further assistance. You might say something like "I can see that you are upset about this, I suggest that you talk to the professor," perhaps with a reminder of when open office hours are or how to contact the instructor directly.

If you find yourself in a situation that you are not prepared to handle, protect yourself, your fellow TAs, and other students in the class to the best of your ability. This may include asking the disruptive student to leave, requesting the assistance of a faculty or staff member, or, in the extreme, contacting campus security or emergency services.

## 5.2 Preparedness

You should expect students to be prepared for their interactions with you. This does not mean that they know exactly what they need or how to ask for it, of course! It does mean, however, that they have formulated some sort of question or can pose an example problem, and they are prepared to discuss it. If a student approaches you and simply says "I don't know how to do this project," for example, it is appropriate to ask them to explain what problems they are having or what part of the requirements they do not understand, rather than attempting to read their mind and answer the unspoken questions.

Some students may be unable to articulate their needs due to lack of experience or a poor understanding of the preceding subject matter. While course prerequisites should minimize this problem, and TA assistance is intended primarily for students who are properly prepared, if time permits you may find that you can help such students find their questions. Start by asking them to describe the problem they are trying to solve in their own words, and then work backwards until you identify where their firm understanding moves to more uncertain ground. If you identify a student who does not appear to have mastered the material required to understand the current course material, notify the course instructor and encourage the student to approach the instructor directly. You are not expected to provide extensive assistance in material that does not directly pertain to the course for which you TA.

## 6 Grading

You should observe all of the same guidelines regarding respect and professionalism when grading student work as you would during any other student interaction. Be mindful that the solutions that

students submit represent their best understanding of the work, and as such it is easy for them to identify with the comments made on their work. Avoid unnecessarily harsh comments such as “terrible” or “this is completely wrong.”

If hand-written comments on student work are provided, they should be legible. Avoid very small notations that may be difficult for some students to read, or easy to miss. Take care that numerals are clear and unambiguous.

You are responsible for *understanding the work that you grade*. If you do not understand the assignment, it is very difficult to assign fair grades. Seek assistance from your instructor if you need it. This is particularly important when grading answers that may depart from the “expected” solution and still be correct. (For example, there may be more than one way to calculate a value, or more than one method of proving a theorem.)

It is important that grading is consistent. Similar errors should result in similar point deductions. This is particularly important when more than one TA or instructor is involved in grading; pay close attention to any rubrics or guidelines provided by your instructor, and make sure you *understand the student answer* before assigning marks. If you notice an error in your grading, you are responsible for ensuring that it is corrected across all of the assignments that you grade.

## 7 Personal Information

As a teaching assistant, you will have access to a variety of personal information regarding the students in the course. For example, their names, email addresses, person numbers, schedules, and course performance. This information is all private and protected, and must be treated responsibly. There is Federal regulation (FERPA) regarding the management of this information, as well as [relevant University policy](#). In particular, you should be aware that:

- Student enrollment in a particular course is protected information. Do not discuss the course roster with persons outside of the University (or outside of the course and CSE faculty, to be safe).
- Student grade information is private. Do not discuss individual student grades with anyone but other course staff members, even if you have concerns about student performance and are trying to help. Bring those concerns to the course instructor.

Ensure that any discussions of protected information take place in an appropriate setting. For example, a TA meeting with a closed door is appropriate, but office hours in a public location in Davis hall (even empty office hours) would not be. Even if there are no students or non-course-staff present, they may be nearby.

Protected information should be shared with your fellow TAs only on a need-to-know basis; it is not appropriate to discuss students’ course performance, personal situations, or any other private information except as it pertains to the conduct of the course. Avoid the practice or appearance of gossip. If you are unsure whether something is appropriate for discussion among TAs, consult with your course instructor.

## 8 Other Obligations and Mandatory Reporting

As a teaching assistant in the CSE department, you are an employee of the University and of the State of New York, and the University at Buffalo considers you an instructor. As an instructor, you are a “Responsible Employee” with respect to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to the United



States Code, which concerns discrimination on the basis of sex in higher education. Title IX gives you certain responsibilities. You also have responsibilities with respect to accessibility and other discrimination matters.

You can read more about Title IX [on the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion web page](#), including some of the requirements for Responsible Employees.

In particular, as a Title IX Responsible Employee, you are required to report any situation addressed by the [University at Buffalo Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#). This means that if you observe any violation of this policy, or any student or other instructor reports any such violation to you, you **must** report this violation to the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

You must also provide reasonable and practical accommodations to any student who requests an accommodation or who is “demonstrating performance problems” related to a medical condition or disability. If you are unsure how to handle this situation, or unsure whether a request for accommodation is appropriate, contact your course instructor for support.

Any responsibilities or reporting related to this section are protected by the students’ rights to privacy. As described in Personal Information, you are required to keep students’ private matters private. In the case of Title IX reporting, you should report *only* to the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and to your course instructor, never to other teaching assistants. In the case of accommodations for disability or medical conditions, you should restrict sharing of these accommodations only to those teaching assistants who need to know in order to provide the necessary accommodations.

## 9 Conflicts of Interest

Student assistants are put in the sometimes uncomfortable position of having power and responsibilities over their peers. It is important to separate work and personal concerns, both in the interest of fairness to the students and in the avoidance of appearance of favoritism or bias. If you have a relationship with another student that could affect your ability to assist them or grade their work fairly (or provides the appearance of such an issue), you should notify your instructor and leave grading and assistance of that student to other course staff.

In general, you are the best judge of whether a given student represents a conflict of interest for you. For example, merely being scheduled in the same course as another student during the semester may represent a conflict of interest for one student, but not for another, depending on your routine interactions with the student in question. If in doubt, let the course instructor know about a potential conflict of interest and seek advice.

### 9.1 Examples

Some examples of situations where there is a conflict of interest or an appearance of conflict of interest are:

- Family members, significant others and exes: you should not grade the work of family members or significant others at all, and you should be careful in how you assist such individuals. Assistance should be handled by other course staff members where possible, and limited to public office hours and scheduled assistance in public places where not. Determining what constitutes a “family member,” in particular, can be difficult, but it should be construed to include all immediate family members and any extended family members with whom you live or have lived, as well as any other family members, in-laws, or close family friends whom you feel fit this category.

- Roommates, housemates, and students in your floor section, *etc.*: these individuals should be treated similarly to family members. In particular, make sure that you are not providing extra assistance to such students on your “off time,” as this gives the impression of favoritism or an extra advantage to those students.
- Group members in other courses: students with whom you are *actively working as a group member in another course* provide a conflict of interest, and you should not grade their work. Separate work time for the course you are taking together from working as an assistant for this course, and interact with those students in your capacity as a course staff member only in public places and during scheduled office hours or arranged assistance times.

## 9.2 Other Conflict Types

Interpersonal conflict is another possible source of conflict of interest. If you should find that you cannot get along with a student in the course, notify the course instructor and either ask the student to seek help from other course staff members or request that the instructor do so.

It is inappropriate to enter into an intimate relationship with any student in any class for which you are an assistant during the academic term. This is both to protect the students and to protect the teaching assistants. TAs who are found to have begun dating or otherwise become intimate with students during the course of the semester will be dismissed.

As discussed in Other Obligations and Mandatory Reporting, as an employee of the University and a University instructor, there may be legal or employment implications involved in intimate relationships with students in any course that you TA.

## 9.3 Students Who Are Also TAs

Many students TA for more than one course in our department, and we have many students in our department. This leads to circumstances where two students are TAs together on one course, but one of the TAs is a student in a course in which the other TA is also a TA. This presents a conflict of interest in appearance, even when it is not a conflict in practice.

Consider two students, A and B. Both students A and B TA together on course C1, but Student A is also a TA for course C2, which Student B is taking as a student.

### 9.3.1 Guidelines for Student A

Treat Student B as you would treat a roommate or housemate. Avoid any appearance of either favoritism or a negative bias. Restrict your discussions of any C2-related course material to official office hours for that course. Make sure to report this conflict of interest to the instructors of both C1 and C2. In addition, ensure that your interactions with Student B during C2 office hours are professional and related only to C2 material; do not fraternize during these times.

### 9.3.2 Guidelines for Student B

Avoid the appearance of privileged access to C2 course material by discussing C2 material with Student A only during official C2 office hours. Ensure that your actions with Student A are professional and polite; your TA status on C1 does not give you the right to take liberties with Student A during their duties as a TA for C2. This includes office hours, Piazza interactions, *etc.*

### **9.3.3 Guidelines for Both Students**

Be mindful of your public interactions even outside of official course duties, particularly when students taking course C2 are present. Your TA duties do not preclude friendship, or even fraternization, but they do require you to maintain an air of professionalism. It is easy for Student A to give the impression of favoritism toward Student B, and it is easy for Student B to undermine the authority of Student A.