

# Preparing New Psychology Instructors to Teach Undergraduates: Developing Confidence and Competence

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*In this article, we review approaches to prepare future faculty for their teaching responsibilities and summarize best practices with regard to training topics, methods, and resources. We present longitudinal data regarding new psychology instructors' confidence in their ability to perform teaching related tasks. We complement this quantitative data with TAs' narratives about their first teaching experiences as they highlight perceived strengths and challenges.*

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Professionals committed to the growth of teaching assistants (TAs) ultimately hope to enhance both the competence and confidence of the students with whom they work (Meyers, 2001), and thorough preparation programs have been shown to do so. More specifically, TA training promotes skill development and improves classroom performance (Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989). Training has also been shown to promote TAs' self-efficacy, or their confidence in their ability to perform relevant teaching behaviors (Prieto & Meyers, 1999; Wimer, Prieto, & Meyers, 2004). This is especially the case when training incorporates experiences that graduate students perceive as satisfying and effective (Prieto & Scheel, in press). In this article, we briefly summarize best practices in preparing TAs for their responsibilities and present longitudinal data that assesses the extent to which a college pedagogy class increased psychology TAs' confidence in their ability to perform different teaching tasks. We complement this data with narratives from three graduate TAs in which they describe their growth as a function of their training and experience.

## Training Options and Opportunities

### *Training Topics*

Rigorous training typically broaches topics that are central to new instructors' classroom responsibilities. This preparation most often addresses planning a course, successfully using different teaching methods, creating a supportive and inclusive environment, as well as evaluating students' learning and one's own performance. Specific tasks in each of these areas are provided in Table 1 (each of these tasks is assessed by the Self-Efficacy Towards Teaching Inventory-Adapted, SETI-A; Prieto & Altmaier, 1994). Other topics frequently addressed in training programs include institutional issues (e.g., understanding university and departmental policies, academic honesty), incorporating technology into teaching, and assorted issues such as learning styles, preparing for the first day of class, or active learning (cf. Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002; Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Marincovich, 1998).

**Table 1. Training Topics as Listed on the Self-Efficacy Towards Teaching Inventory**

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Planning your course
Stating goals
Planning lectures
Writing a syllabus
Planning discussions
Planning class exercises
Selecting textbooks
Selecting other readings
Stating grading criteria
Integrating readings and lecture
Successfully using different teaching methods
Delivering lectures
Initiating discussions
Drawing students into discussions
Communicating at the appropriate level
Asking open questions
Communicating consistently
Responding to students' questions
Creating a supportive and inclusive environment
Encouraging participation of women and minorities
Responding to individual differences
Managing student-instructor disagreements
Showing respect for students' ideas and abilities
Responding in a timely manner to students' difficulties
Responding to students' emotional reactions in class
Demonstrating ethical behavior
Evaluating students' learning and your performance
Developing assignments
Constructing essay questions that require higher-order skills
Scoring and interpreting exam performance
Evaluating students' assignments
Using exams as teaching tools
Providing feedback on exams and assignments
Using students' evaluations of your teaching
Using self-evaluation in teaching
Arranging for peer feedback regarding your teaching

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### ***Training Formats***

Training in each of these areas can occur in different settings or formats. Whether sponsored by a university-wide office or a department, TAs often learn about teaching through (a) orientation programs, (b) lectures, seminars, and workshops, (c) readings and resource materials, (d) peer discussions, (e) mentorship or supervision, and (f) coursework on effective college teaching (cf. Meyers & Prieto, 2000a;

Wimer et al., 2004). Model programs also exist that provide training experiences spanning multiple academic years that integrate teaching-related coursework and supervised teaching occurring at different colleges (cf. Benassi & Fuld, 2004; Korn, 2004; Saville, 2004); these programs culminate in appropriate recognition of graduate students' efforts through a degree or certificate.

## ***Training Activities***

The most effective training techniques for developing new instructors' confidence and competence towards teaching are highly related to their instructional duties, promote active engagement, and involve direct practice (Prieto & Scheel, in press). Meyers and Prieto (2000b) described a range of exemplary active learning strategies to improve TA training. For instance, they facilitated teaching assistants' self-reflection by having trainees complete questionnaires that articulate course goals, maintain a structured journal, and develop a teaching portfolio. In addition, they encouraged new instructors to analyze and critique representative materials (e.g., syllabi, sample assignments, case studies presenting teaching dilemmas) to refine skills.

Another set of recommended activities centers around obtaining performance feedback. In microteaching, TAs perform a specific teaching task (e.g., lecture, facilitate discussion, use active learning) in front of peers for a short period of time, receive immediate feedback, and incorporate these suggestions as they re-teach the material (Maslach, Silver, Pole, & Ozer, 2001). Similarly, new instructors can gather feedback from videotaping their teaching, self-critiquing their performance, and subsequently receiving detailed feedback from supervisors or mentors (Prentice-Dunn & Pitts, 2001). Finally, TAs can obtain quantitative and qualitative ratings of their teaching performance from their own students during the semester and at the conclusion of the course. Undergraduate students can effectively comment on the comprehensibility of TAs' presentation, provide their appraisal of the effectiveness of teaching techniques used, and share their suggestions for improvement (Jones & Makinen, 1991).

## **A Small-Scale Longitudinal Investigation of Training and Self-Efficacy**

Based on these best practices for TA training, the first author designed the Instructor Development Seminar (PSYC 681) in the Department of Psychology at Roosevelt University in 1997. Doctoral students in our clinical psychology program complete this three-credit course prior to or at the same time as they have full instructional responsibility for an un-

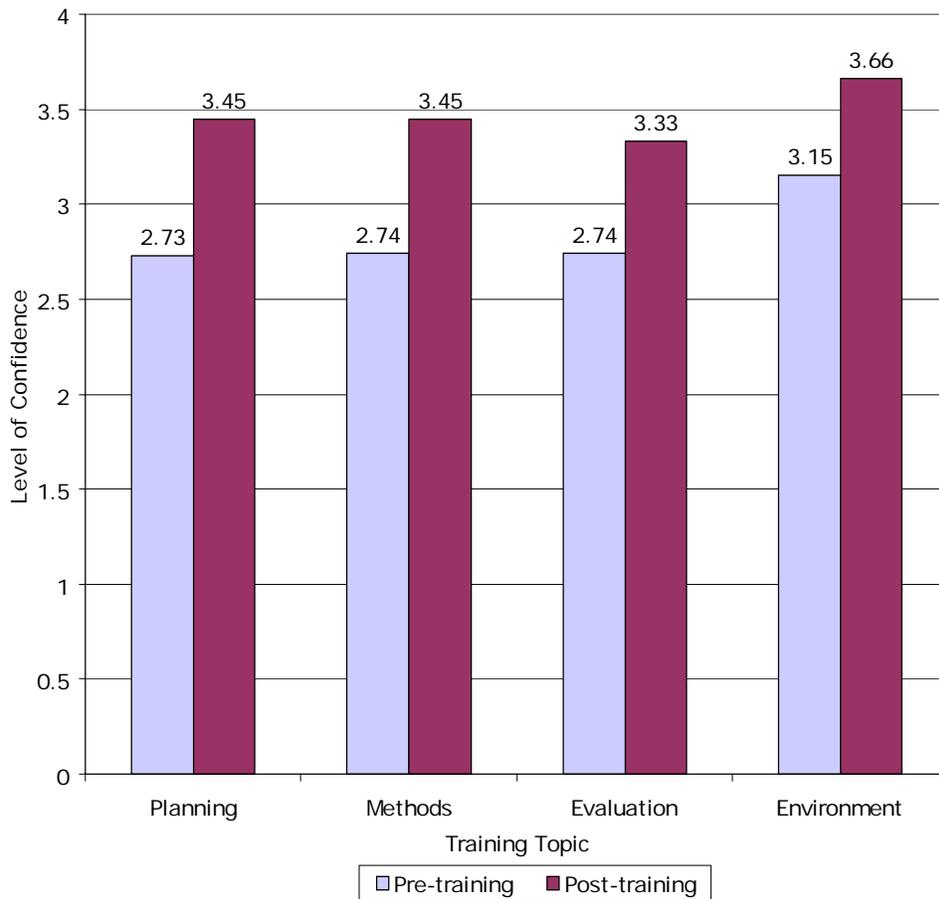
dergraduate course for the first time at the university. This pedagogy class addresses most of the topics listed in Table 1, using many interactive teaching techniques described above. A complete syllabus for the course can be found at <http://faculty.roosevelt.edu/meyers/idp.pdf>.

The present investigation describes a small-scale longitudinal study of whether this pedagogy course influenced new psychology instructors' confidence in their ability to perform their teaching duties. Previous studies have compared levels of self-efficacy of those instructors who have had various levels of training and experience with those who have not (Prieto & Meyers, 1999). Instead, we compared psychology graduate students' pre-training/experience self-efficacy ratings with those obtained following completion of the semester-long course and undergraduate teaching assignment. The examination of self-efficacy as a construct is important because it is associated with instructor effectiveness and student learning (cf. Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Saklofske, Michayluk, & Randhawa, 1988).

Participants in this study included 19 students from the Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) program at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. All students were enrolled in the Instructor Development Seminar, taught each year by the first author since 1997.

Students completed the Self-Efficacy Towards Teaching Inventory-Adapted (SETI-A) on the first day of class and the last day of class of the semester in which they were enrolled in the teaching seminar. The SETI-A is a 32-item self-report measure that assesses the degree to which respondents feel comfortable in their ability to execute specific teaching behaviors across different areas: planning a course (9 items), using a range of teaching methods (7 items), evaluating students and self-evaluation (9 items), and creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment (7 items). Items have a 4-point Likert scale format, using anchors of 1 (*not confident*) to 4 (*completely confident*). Previous research has documented a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .93 for the instrument as a whole (Prieto & Altmaier, 1994; Prieto & Meyers, 1999).

We present participants' mean scores for each of the four SETI-A scales in Figure 1. The first bar for each training area represents scores prior to graduate students' training and experience, whereas the second bar represents average scores following training and experience.



**Figure 1. Self-efficacy towards teaching among psychology TAs.**

Paired-samples *t*-tests confirmed that training and experience were associated with significant increases in TAs' self-efficacy regarding course planning ( $t[16] = 9.11, p < .01$ ); using a range of teaching methods ( $t[16] = 6.28, p < .01$ ); evaluating their students and their own performance ( $t[16] = 9.70, p < .01$ ); and creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment ( $t[16] = 6.52, p < .01$ ). Two students did not return their questionnaires at the conclusion of the course, which accounts for the reduced sample size in these longitudinal analyses.

Those TAs with higher self-efficacy at the start of the semester generally had higher self-efficacy following their training and experience. This observation was supported by significant bivariate correlations between pre and post self-efficacy ratings in the areas of planning ( $r[17] = .52, p < .05$ ), using various teaching methods ( $r[17] = .62, p < .01$ ), and evaluation ( $r[17] = .65, p < .01$ ). The correlation be-

tween pre and post ratings for creating a supportive and inclusive class environment did not reach the level of statistical significance ( $r[17] = .43, p = .09$ ).

## TAs' Narratives of Changes in Their Self-Efficacy and Development

To complement these statistical results, the first author contacted three doctoral students who recently completed both the teaching seminar and their initial college teaching assignment. He requested that these graduate student co-authors address a particular thematic area assessed by the SETI-A in the form of a first-person essay describing their personal experience as they progressed through training and teaching for the first time. These qualitative narratives docu-

ment in detail the graduate students' growth and development. Across the different essays, the new instructors describe an introspection process that involves acquiring a "third eye" in their classroom. They comment not only on periods of uncertainty, but they also highlight their successes and reinforce the lessons they learned from the challenges they encountered.

### ***Planning Your Course<sup>1</sup>***

My first college teaching experience was an intermediate-level course entitled *Coping with Stress*. By design, this class has clearly delineated goals: to help students become aware of the stressful factors in their lives and to equip them with stress management techniques to reduce the impact of those stressors.

As a lifelong student myself, I know that a well-designed syllabus alerts students to what lays ahead and can keep a class on schedule. After taking the Instructor Development Seminar, I realized that the syllabus is, in actuality, a contract between instructor and student. In delineating my expectations (for both myself and my students), I became more mindful of the ramifications of whatever I decided to put into print.

One important aspect of my syllabi is the definition of academic honesty. This provides me with the opportunity to highlight the importance of crediting every source as well as to explain that plagiarism includes paraphrasing without crediting the source. This clears up many misconceptions from the outset of class. I have also learned to flesh out my attendance policy so that students understand the criterion I use to determine excused absences and to decide when make-up work will be accepted. Whether excusing an absence or assigning extra credit, I have learned that anything I permit for one student must be applicable to the entire class.

I have also learned the value of including a safety valve in my syllabi that states, "The instructor reserves the right to revise this schedule." Students rarely mind if the instructor eliminates a requirement, but they will protest if a new objective and additional assignments are annexed onto the preexisting course responsibilities.

Upon reflection, I now see that the instructor has a working relationship with students. I have heard it said, "For every hour of course credit, plan on spending at least three hours in preparation." I realize this

anew each semester as I craft my courses. I also remember that my students may spend the same amount of time grappling with assigned readings and encoding lecture notes. Like me, they try to balance the competing demands of home, school and work. I must be careful in regard to the work I assign.

While many students purport to be primarily concerned about the cost or the length of the textbook, I have learned to choose readings that complement the material I present in class. The text must accurately and succinctly present the information using language that my entire class will understand, because I now realize that at least one fourth of my students do not have English as their first language. More is not necessarily better.

My classroom experiences and preparation for teaching have reinforced the idea that students expect the reading assignments, lectures, and class discussions to be factored into examinations—otherwise some students perceive them as a waste of time. I also have refined my ability to capitalize on the self-reference effect when I teach, which emphasizes that students are more likely to remember material that can be applied to their own lives. Ultimately, many students really want to know "what's in it for me," besides a grade. I have learned that it's up to me to help them discover that.

### ***Successfully Using Different Teaching Methods<sup>2</sup>***

The implementation of different teaching methods is an essential component in a successful instructor's repertoire. Prior to my initial teaching experience, I was quite naive about what successful teaching entailed. I think we are all comfortable with the notion of lectures. This approach has been the cornerstone of my, as well as many others', academic experience. However, as useful and effective as lecturing is, I quickly realized I could only depend on this method sparingly.

I was very thankful to the Instructor Development Seminar for broadening my understanding of how information can be conveyed in styles other than lecture. Referring again to my initial teaching experience, once some time had passed, I realized how extensively I lectured. I began to question this and realized it allowed me a certain amount of ease by limiting my interaction with students. This decreased my anxiety but detracted from my students' learning of

the subject matter. I realized I could only talk *at* my students for so long before they became uninterested, unable, and unwilling to retain the information being presented.

Instead, I needed to talk *with* my students. The use of discussion was a great complement to lectures. Prior to teaching I learned about different teaching methods, but my anxiety as a neophyte teacher inhibited my use of these tools. As the weeks passed, I became more at ease in the classroom and began to incorporate discussions, which dramatically increased students' interest.

Despite this advantage, I noticed that a pattern began to emerge: the same students participated each time. My new problem became how to engage the less extroverted or even the uninterested students. Initially, I presented a topic for discussion in a plain and simple manner. I talked about the topic and then asked who had a relevant experience. I then waited for someone to raise his or her hand, or I randomly called on a student. Individuals who raised their hand tended to elaborate, whereas most students picked at random would answer in a very brief manner. Thinking back to the Instructor Development Seminar, it was apparent I needed to use open-ended questions to elicit greater participation. A few class discussions later, I learned this approach was more effective. In addition to asking open-ended questions, there were other adjustments I needed to make.

I learned that communicating at an appropriate level is an essential aspect of being an effective teacher, but it is easier said than done. After more than 22 years of being a student, I experienced difficulty gauging the skill level of students in an introductory or intermediate level class. I realized that I might have overshot the mark when I incorporated neuropsychological terms into an introductory stress management class. I quickly learned that it is best to transmit the essential facts and then use discussion to fill in the gaps. I also learned that consistency in communication is critical. At times I have a tendency to drift in and out of topics. This was a problem at first in the classroom and my students did a great job of letting me know.

Finally, I learned the importance of successfully responding to questions posed by the students. Communication is a two-way street. It would be unfair for me to ask students to participate and answer all of my questions without me doing the same. To cultivate an egalitarian environment, I was mindful to ask

my students to do only as much as I was willing to do myself. There were times when I did not know the answer to a question, similar to those times in which the students did not know the answer to my questions. This mutual understanding allowed for a sense of community and respect, which made the class more cohesive.

### ***Creating a Supportive and Inclusive Environment<sup>3</sup>***

Teaching has reaffirmed my commitment to celebrating individual differences and has provided me with the opportunity to find ways for students to learn from each other's experiences. I have learned the importance of incorporating interactive teaching techniques into my classes, but I also now use these as venues for establishing a supportive community. For example, one of the classroom activities that particularly intimidates and frustrates students is the dreaded presentation. However, I set the stage by openly addressing their concerns and reminding students that "It's just me; don't worry." By this point in the semester, the way that I have responded to students' comments should have demonstrated that this is a safe place to explore new ideas and to freely contribute to class discussion. Immediately following the presentation, I assess their work and publicly acknowledge several positive aspects.

The second project that worries students involves group work. I explain that communication and cooperation are vital to success in the workplace; therefore, group work is inescapable. However, negotiating responsibilities when working in groups can be very challenging. No one enjoys working with a micromanager who doesn't trust anyone else's contribution. Similarly, it is frustrating to partner with a student who shirks responsibility and relies on the rest of the group to earn the grade. I have learned the importance of promoting open communication to reduce these conflicts. On the first day of class, I tell students, "If you have a problem with me, then come to me before taking the matter to anyone else. In like manner, if you have a problem with a classmate, then talk to him/her before involving me." I have learned the importance of explaining the purpose of the group project and discussing the level of cooperation I expect. I now reinforce this idea on my syllabus through a mnemonic using the word RESPECT (Respect, Equal responsibility, State expectations, Plan ahead,

Empathy, Consideration of all contributions, Tell others when you cannot participate).

During class exercises, I try to model the behavior I hope they will demonstrate toward each other. A respectful, accepting attitude preempts a lot of discord. I welcome debate, but I do not allow students to label each other or to denigrate each other's ideas or belief systems. But I still wonder how much I should intervene when community breaks down. One rule of thumb I use is, "If it happens in class, then fix it in class." If a student shows open disrespect for another, then it must be addressed immediately.

I have also learned that other matters need to be addressed privately. I try to email several students each week to follow up on something they said in class or to thank them for a particular contribution. This habituates them to receiving communication from me. If I have established a trusting relationship with them, then they will be more likely to take my feedback to heart. Whether by phone or email, I try to acknowledge their unique experiences then encourage them to channel them in such a way to help other students learn from them as opposed to be polarized by them. The learning community is fostered by the manner in which the instructor demonstrates a respectful attitude and models ethical behavior in the classroom.

### ***Evaluating Students' Learning and Your Performance<sup>4</sup>***

In Fall 2004, I taught Tests and Measurements to undergraduate psychology students for the first time. I looked forward to teaching this class because I really like statistics; however, I began to feel nervous about how I would develop assignments, exams, and projects to evaluate my students and how I would evaluate my own performance.

Before teaching, I was overwhelmed because I did not know what type of evaluation techniques to use. I contemplated how many exams or assignments there should be, whether I should give weekly quizzes, whether assignments might be too easy or too difficult, or whether students might find the assignments boring and lose interest.

Considering students learn in different ways, I decided that the best strategy to evaluate them was to use a combination of methods. For instance, in the first 15 minutes of each class I distributed review questions and students worked in groups to answer

them. I also used a midterm, one paper, a presentation, and four take-home assignments. Each task required different levels of application to ensure that students learned the basic terminology and theories but also involved analysis and synthesis. Despite the colossal task of preparing, I was still not sure whether my evaluation approach was going to be as effective as I envisioned.

As I started to teach, I observed that students actively were engaged in their group review questions every week and appeared interested in what they were doing. The experience of seeing the students working productively made me feel more confident about my ability to construct adequate assignments. To evaluate their comprehension I also randomly called on students to answer questions or to comment on the material; as they responded I actually witnessed that learning was taking place. For me, this was one of the most rewarding feelings that increased my confidence. As I saw students' progress, I started to think about how much anxiety and insecurity I had initially and how much better I felt after each class period. The fact that I now possess and can apply those skills increased my self-esteem because I now believe that I am competent.

I was also enrolled in the Instructor Development Seminar while I was teaching this course. Two of the requirements included videotaping myself teaching and gathering evaluations from students during the semester. Initially, I was nervous about videotaping myself, and I was even more worried about what the students' evaluations would be like. After watching the first taping, I was actually excited because I was able to see myself doing some things better than I had expected, and I was able to pinpoint my weaknesses.

The students' evaluations of my performance were also extremely helpful in identifying what they perceived as my strengths and weakness and how they thought the class could be improved. Although the thought of bringing my weakness into the light was initially scary, the fact that I did it helped me develop ideas to improve the weaker areas and to improve the students' learning.

In general, the insecurity and worry that I felt initially derived from the fact that I was doing something for the first time and I was not sure whether I had the skills to do it adequately. Only through the experience of actually teaching was I able to acquire

the necessary skills and to determine which strategies are effective when evaluating students' learning and my own progress.

## Conclusions

These quantitative and qualitative findings can be interpreted on two levels. First, these data provided pertinent information regarding the effectiveness of our college teaching seminar. Increases in graduate students' self-efficacy ratings as well as their narrative elaborations supported the notion that a teaching course helps develop relevant skills (cf. McElroy & Prentice-Dunn, 2005) and reflected the accomplishment of several goals of the Instructor Development Seminar. Moreover, this work is an illustration of how the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990) can be applied to the study of TA training and can yield helpful data for program developers, despite small sample sizes. Further research along this line can assess the extent to which training affects the development of specific teaching skills (e.g., developing lectures, leading discussions, creating effective means of student assessment) over time as a complement to our examination of self-efficacy.

In addition to these program-specific conclusions, our study underscores more general themes pertinent to the development of TAs' sense of confidence as they progress through training and their first teaching experiences. First, these new instructors often contended with self-doubt and uncertainty when they first assumed their instructional responsibilities. They were confronted with many different choices and the right option did not always appear self-evident. TAs often looked to their history as a student as a starting point. This involved TAs examining their previous experiences and reflecting on their own values and priorities. This inward focus and uncertainty regarding their new role are consistent with Prieto's (2001) Integrated Developmental Model for Graduate Teaching Assistants (IDM-GTA). In particular, Prieto suggested that beginning TAs are preoccupied with their classroom performance because of their inexperience and often have a restricted focus because of their anxiety. TAs develop a greater awareness of their students' needs as they gain experience and acquire a more sophisticated understanding of the teaching/learning process. Similarly, the graduate students described how they became increasingly attuned to their

students' level of understanding, degree of engagement and interest, emotional responses, work and family responsibilities, and learning styles as the semester progressed. These insights informed their teaching practices, promoted greater self-efficacy, and enhanced their classroom effectiveness.

Second, TAs suggested that learning how to teach often is a trial-and-error process facilitated by careful reflection. TAs were sometimes surprised by and learned from their successes. They also diagnosed their struggles and developed plans to overcome their difficulties. Introspection promoted teaching self-efficacy; these graduate students increasingly became reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). In other words, TAs' self-examination was helpful for developing confidence above and beyond merely performing the requisite tasks. Moreover, such contemplation appeared to sensitize TAs to broader issues in college teaching, such as the importance of relationships in the classroom, engendering a sense of fairness, and how TAs, like all instructors, are role models for their students.

Third, formal training interacted with TAs' classroom experiences to produce growth. Several TAs suggested that a concept that we reviewed in the seminar made sense only after a related difficulty occurred in their classrooms. Conversely, others indicated that they preemptively implemented a recommendation from the teaching seminar and received reinforcement when they encountered success. This interplay between supervision and teaching experience suggests that TAs may sometimes need to be "ready" before an idea appears relevant and salient. Moreover, the timing of specific feedback or pedagogical instruction may need to be adjusted depending on TAs' developmental level and changing needs (Prieto, 2001).

Finally, TAs assessed in the present investigation shared an increased sense of confidence in their teaching abilities; however, they also highlighted unique and individual factors that contributed to this change in the narratives. More specifically, these instructors sometimes had idiosyncratic revelations specific to their personalities, their students, or the content matter that they taught, which ultimately led to increased confidence and competence in the classroom. For instance, the TAs' essays often indicated different tasks about which they were especially concerned; they also revealed divergences in those experiences that they found most helpful or critical. Regardless of the particular nature, insights fostered by training and

experience helped consolidate the professional identities of graduate students as scholars-in-training and may ultimately account for the changes in their self-efficacy.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Section written by Marti Livingston Lansu.

<sup>2</sup>Section written by Jasdeep S. Hundal.

<sup>3</sup>Section written by Marti Livingston Lansu.

<sup>4</sup>Section written by Stacy K. Lekkos.

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