Troubleshooting II. In the Beginning

There are no materials for class

First, speak to your professor. He or she may have your copies of the text and other necessary materials. Next, speak to your department administrator. He or she should be able to locate everything you need for the course. Be aware that acquiring materials can take some time. You will never be required to spend your own money for basic materials and equipment.

The professor tells me to deal with students’ registration issues

You will have to remind your professor, graciously, that graduate student teachers are not authorized to make any final decisions or approvals to drop, add, or withdraw from a course. In all cases, students must get the professor’s, advisor’s, or Dean’s signature on the appropriate forms. Graduate student teachers are also not authorized to change the size of the enrollment in a course, although once a course size has been changed, a Graduate student teacher may inquire about being assigned to a new room by calling the Office of Room Assignments (998.4220).

The professor can’t meet with me regularly

First, be sure that you set up an initial meeting with your professor and ask him or her extensive questions about the course requirements and your responsibilities. The checklist Clarifying Faculty Expectations will help you make appropriate inquiries. If your schedules truly do not mesh, try to set up a regular e-mail correspondence, so you can both check in with each other about the course. While in-person meetings are preferable, conveying information by e-mail is a worthwhile alternative and will usually suffice. Even if your professor takes some time to respond, it is vital that you regularly send updates about the class to keep the professor informed. If you are having difficulties getting important questions answered by your professor, seek advice from other graduate students. If all else fails, see your Department Chair or Program Director for additional guidance.

Students are not distributed equally in sections

While it will be tempting to urge students to sign up for a different recitation, several factors can prevent this from happening. First, other sections may be closed due to enrollment and space limitations in the classroom. Second, students may not be able to change sections because of their own time constraints. Third, as having fewer sections means being responsible for fewer students, this may unfairly distribute the workload for other graduate student teachers. Keep in mind that low registration on the first day is not necessarily indicative of the final numbers in your class. Remember that students often
“shop” for courses during the first few weeks of a semester and may not immediately register for any recitation. As a result, you may find that your class list of 3 has suddenly jumped to 15 by the third week. While the University does have some guidelines for minimum course enrollment, it is ultimately up to the professor of the course to decide whether a recitation section may be dropped. If after several weeks you find your recitation very under-attended, discuss the situation with the professor. You may jointly devise an alternative plan that can accommodate those few students’ needs (e.g. having some students simply miss recitation but meet with you regularly to discuss important concepts).

**Students act rudely during the first class session**

It is never too early to set clear standards for the classroom. If any student does not act appropriately on the first day, ask the student to come see you during office hours that week. During that meeting, ask the student if he or she is aware of the problem behavior or attitudes you observed. Regardless of the response, explain what you felt was inappropriate for the class. Be tactful, as it is possible that the student does not know what is expected in that particular kind of recitation or lab section. Nevertheless, make your expectations for the future, and the consequences for lack of adherence to these expectations, crystal clear.

**Students ask me questions about the professor’s teaching ability or personality**

Despite the way they sound on the surface, students usually tend to ask these questions to get a sense of how difficult the course will be rather than to get a sense of the professor’s real personality. For example, when a student wants to know if a professor is “nice,” he or she is often really asking if the professor is a stickler about deadlines and grades. As a result, the best way to answer these types of questions is to tell your students how long the professor has been teaching this course and what he or she tends to emphasize (assuming you know these things) and to assert that the professor sticks to the guidelines outlined on the syllabus. If, in fact, students want to know specific details about the professor, you can suggest they meet with him or her during office hours. Do not get into discussions about the professor’s personality with your students, as this can easily cross the boundaries of professionalism and respectability you seek to maintain in the triad.

**A student was added to the class late and is now two weeks behind**

First, consult with your professor to ask if he or she wants to make any special provisions for this student. If a student has come to a course this late, there may be extenuating circumstances that require special attention. Beyond this, you may want to give the student some suggestions about the relative emphasis to place on specific sections of the text or additional readings. If you do this, be sure to stress to the student that he or she is still responsible for all of the
material. In addition, be sure to urge the student to come to office hours with questions about the material. Finally, be supportive. Students typically can catch up with a little encouragement, but will not try if they feel they cannot do it.