

2006-2661: A COMPARISON OF TA'S ACTIVITIES BETWEEN UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA AND UNIVERSIDAD CATOLICA DEL NORTE CHILE

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A comparison of Teacher Assistant activities between University of Florida and Universidad Catolica del Norte Chile

Abstract

This paper is intended to compare Teacher Assistant activities in the civil engineering undergraduate programs in two different universities: University of Florida and Universidad Catolica del Norte. Furthermore, the objective is to show that more TAs are assigned to course instructors in Chile as compared to the United States.

The responsibilities of Teacher Assistants in these two universities are different. Teacher Assistants at the University of Florida are paid. They sign a contract per term that waves their college tuition, and \$17,000 a year payment. In the Chilean system there is no compensation related to tuition and little financial support is considered.

At the University of Florida Teacher Assistants are always graduate students selected from the pool of qualified graduate students. In the Universidad Catolica del Norte undergraduate students can teach a particular class if they passed the same class successfully.

Even though appreciable difference can be found between these two systems, both respond to cultural factors that affect not only the education process but also the ways how Teacher Assistants perceive their responsibilities. Becoming a Teacher Assistant at University of Florida helps student's financial needs and prepares those who want to pursue an academic career. For Chileans, being a Teacher Assistant is considered a high prestige.

Introduction

Teacher Assistant (TA) activities play an important role in the education of civil engineers since students learn and have the opportunity to interact with their fellow students. TA's activities include performing assigned class duties, office hours, assisting students in the laboratory, field trips, and grading. The emphasis in each activity is a function of the type of topic covered by the course. Theoretical subjects need more solving-problem classes, whereas lab and field trip consider more interaction with student groups. This paper is intended to show the differences in TA's activities in two different universities both culturally and economically different. TA's responsibilities in the Department of Civil and Coastal Engineering at the University of Florida are compared to the Department of Civil Engineering at the Universidad Catolica del Norte, located in the north region of Chile. The comparison between the two departments includes the requirements, financial support, selection process, level of activities, and student evaluation.

Requirements

Even though most of the TAs at the Department of Civil and Coastal Engineering at UF are graduate students, there is no special requirement in terms of level of studies to become a TA. TAs have the advantage of gaining more experience in both teaching and research, which help them in better understanding the different subjects covered in the lectures. They also perform better doing research particularly in the topics that are related to the subjects they teach. However, most of the graduate students in the Department of Civil and Coastal Engineering (CCE) at UF are international students and it becomes a challenge when teaching those subjects in which they have no background like soils mechanic or construction methods and management. American students have a better knowledge of the local environment and they have a better grasp of the subjects. It is required that TAs in the CCE at UF, have a grade point average (GPA) greater than 3.0. International students who have English as a second language have to pass the Spoken English Test or take additional English Spoken class to be appointed as a TA.

At the Department of Civil Engineering (CE) at UCN, a TA must pass the subject they are intended to teach with a grade greater than 5.0 (in a scale from 1 to 7). They also have to get the approval of the faculty member who teaches the subject. There is no special requirement of keeping a certain GPA. Because the CE at UCN does not offer any graduate program and almost all the students are Chilean citizen, there is no rules for international students receiving a TA appointment [1].

Financial Support

At the CCE at UF, a TA receives a tuition waiver as well as financial support in terms of salary based on 10 or 20 hour per week. The salary varies from \$14/hour to \$15/hour. Depending on the type of subject and the number of students being taught, the TA is hired for 10 or 20 hours per week [2].

At the CE at UCN, TAs do not receive any tuition waiver. However, they teach twice per week and their hourly rate varies from \$9 to \$12, depending on TA's experience and the type of course they teach. For example if the TA activity is to teach a laboratory, then the hours assigned to the activity is increased based on TA's required time to prepare material and equipment used in the laboratory.

Selection process

The TA selection process at the CCE at UF consists of an interview with the course instructor. The selected student receives a letter of appointment, which outlines TA activities and responsibilities [2].

At the CE at UCN the selection process starts with the candidate application submission. The application form includes the passing grade in the relevant course and a statement indicating his or her skills for the position. In general, the instructor who teaches the respective class makes the final decision to select a candidate for his/her lecture. The position is assigned to a student who received the highest grade in the respective course at least two years prior to the assignment. Once a candidate is selected he or she receives an official letter of appointment.

Activities

TA's activities in the CCE at UF include teaching classes, helping students during office hours, preparing labs for running experiments, and grading both laboratory reports and tests.

At the CE at UCN, TAs teach classes specifically solving problems. They also grade assignments, homework and quizzes. There is a close relationship between the TA and the instructor, since the problem-solving sessions are supposed to reinforce the concepts presented in the lecture. TAs teach two classes per week and their participation in the course account for 2 out of 10 credits hours assigned to the course. Courses that include laboratory sessions are normally 12-credit hours.

Evaluation

At the CCE at UF there is no formal student-TA evaluation. However, there is a student-teacher evaluation at the end of each semester. At the CE at UCN the student-teacher evaluation is required at the end of each semester. It includes both the lecturer and the TA in either problem-solving or laboratory sessions. The evaluation form includes aspects such as TA's knowledge of the subjects, preparedness, and punctuality. If the TA evaluation does not reach an acceptable level, he or she will not be considered for teaching the same course again.

Comparison

Notable differences can be observed in the TA's activities in both UF and UCN Department of Civil Engineering.

It is important to note that almost all courses at CE at UCN have at least one TA, whereas in CCE at UF, a small number of courses have TAs and most do not have problem-solving sessions.

The problem-solving sessions at the CE at UCN prepare undergraduate students for professional jobs upon graduation. The courses at the UCN are strongly practical-

oriented, because, unlike UF, students from the UCN get their engineer's licenses immediately after completing the undergraduate program requirements.

Conclusion

TAs activities at the Department of Civil and Coastal Engineering at UF and the Department of Civil Engineering at UCN are quite different. Ninety percent of the courses at CE at UCN have a TA, as compared to 30% of courses with TA at the CCE at UF.

With respect to the financial support the difference between the two institutions are mainly based on tuition waiver. A student at the CCE at UF can support him/her by only maintaining the status of a TA. On the other hand, students at the CE at UCN do not have such a financial support opportunity.

Differences in the TA activities are remarked by the differences between the two undergraduate programs. In Chile, the problem-solving sessions play an important role in the preparation of students for the real world situation. At CE at UCN, a course normally has 10 credit-hours assigned and TA's activity accounts for 2 of those 10 credit-hours. The duration of the civil engineering undergraduate program and the dual responsibility of preparing engineers in the United States (university and private and public sectors) have led to the fact of having less problem-solving sessions, and giving more weight to the concepts presented in the lectures. However, in Chile more TAs enable instructors to improve the course content and do more research. Unfortunately in many institutions in the United States instructors are heavily burden without the TA's support.

References

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