

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants: A Learner-Centered Model for Enhancing Student Engagement in the First-Year Experience

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In this paper, we provide an in-depth view of the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) program at Virginia Commonwealth University as a potential model for other large research universities who might wish to implement similar learner-centered initiatives in their first-year experience courses. Unlike graduate teaching assistants, whose primary objective in the classroom is to assist the professor, the UTAs assist the students by facilitating student engagement, offering peer-to-peer assistance, and modeling successful academic practices. The UTA program, founded in 2008, is integrated through all levels of VCU's University College. This paper explores the benefits offered to all stakeholders: faculty, students, and undergraduate teaching assistants.

"This won't cut it in college!" is a refrain students hear throughout high school, reinforcing the already-present fear that college will be an uphill battle beginning the first day of class. Indeed, the stereotypes of college professors in the American university are etched into our collective imagination: wounded artist, pedantic taskmaster, solitary genius with a red pen. Clearly, the teacher-student relationship in college courses is frequently framed as adversarial.

The Focused Inquiry Program at Virginia Commonwealth University was created in part to combat this all-too-common perception by increasing student engagement through the learner-centered model first posited by Barr and Tagg (1995) and later taken up and built upon by Weimer (2002). Barr and Tagg's (1995) model posits that the traditional "Instruction Paradigm" (p. 12) wherein the teacher is the repository of knowledge, dispensing it to students primarily through the traditional lecture format, should give way to the "Learning Paradigm" (p. 12) in which learning becomes an experience driven by the learners themselves.

Integral to Focused Inquiry's learner-centered environment is its departmental commitment to an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) program. The UTA program, founded in 2008, is integrated through all levels of VCU's University College and offers clear benefits to all stakeholders: for UTAs, the program yields credit and experience; for faculty, the program offers the opportunity for student feedback on classroom practice and pedagogical strategies; for the first- and second-year students enrolled in Focused Inquiry courses, the program offers a means for greater student engagement. In this paper, we describe our program as a potential model for other large research universities who might wish to implement similar programs in their first-year experience.

Review of Literature

Universities have long relied upon graduate teaching assistants. The traditional purpose of these

graduate teaching assistants has been threefold: to staff introductory courses, to relieve faculty of grading and other administrative duties, and to provide graduate students with teaching experience. More recently, universities have been experimenting with the use of undergraduates in this role.

Some models for undergraduate teaching assistants relied on UTAs in the same capacity as graduate teaching assistants: a source of cheap labor. Osborne, Norman, and Basford (1997) recount how, reacting to the economic decline of the early 1990s, they began training undergraduates as teaching assistants as a way to staff large classes without hiring new faculty. Similarly, Hogan, Norcross, Cannon, and Karpiak (2007) describe the way that the University of Scranton, faced with the problem of a Psychology department that did not rely on graduate teaching assistants, created a program in which UTAs were used for tutoring and "organization, management, record keeping, evaluation and other such teaching functions" (p. 188).

Other institutions have utilized UTAs as more than mere cost-cutting measures or administrative helpers; indeed, more progressive approaches have expanded the use of UTAs in order to enhance teaching and learning. For example, Herreid and Kozak (1995) discuss how UTAs observed teaching and provided feedback in order to promote curriculum reform. The authors found that students "can be led to discuss serious pedagogical issues if they are made to feel like partners, rather than mere receptacles, in the educational process" (Herreid & Kozak, 1995, p. 28). They add that faculty, in turn, "gain insight into the educational process when their own presentations are dissected in detail by students" (Herreid & Kozak, 1995, p. 28). Gray and Halbert (2010) recount an experience at New Mexico State University wherein Gray taught a Criminal Justice course with Halbert, an undergraduate, as her co-teacher. They found that, relative to co-teaching with another faculty member, teaching with an undergraduate "leads to a more

student-centered classroom” (Gray & Halbert, 2010, p. 150). Finally, Jacobs, Gutzman, and McConnell (2002) have written extensively about the use of UTAs to enhance participation in courses, finding them to be an invaluable tool both theoretically and pedagogically.

These models of UTA programs—whether economically pragmatic or pedagogically progressive—are the efforts of individual instructors. Conversely, the Focused Inquiry Program at VCU has embraced and institutionalized its UTA program as a means of facilitating student engagement, thus making use of peer teaching as a means of creating the learner-centered environment that is at the core of the Focused Inquiry first-year experience. This article will explore the goals and benefits of involving UTAs in this comprehensive approach to the first-year experience.

The University College at VCU

For both student and institution, the first year can present a host of frustrations and problems. Some of these challenges are universal, such as newly acquired individual freedom, different modes of learning, and the struggle to balance academic and social obligations.

However, at Virginia Commonwealth University, some challenges are unique to this distinct institution. First and foremost, the 32,000-student campus is in the heart of Richmond, in an area of the city that is perennially challenged by crime and poverty. Second, the institution has gone through rapid changes in its 43-year history, shifting from what was initially conceived as a regional commuter school into what is currently a university that draws from all corners of the state, as well as nationally and internationally. Since VCU was established to serve a commuter population and has evolved into a residential university, it is now tasked with providing adequate housing and helping students from rural and suburban areas of the state adjust to life in the city. Additionally, many first-year students are perplexed by the social and racial diversity that is readily apparent on the urban campus. Others are challenged by the decentralized academic environment of the university, which is currently home to nineteen different colleges and schools.

In response to these challenges, in fall 2006, Virginia Commonwealth University opened the doors to University College: an entire program aimed primarily at first-year students and poised to increase and maintain student engagement in learning. University College works to facilitate student engagement through a variety of support services including comprehensive and mandatory first-year student advising, tutoring, and group study through the Campus Learning Center, as well as writing assistance through the Writing Center. University College also houses Focused Inquiry, a two-semester course

sequence that takes the place of traditional freshman Composition and is required for all incoming first-year students.

Focused Inquiry’s UTA Program

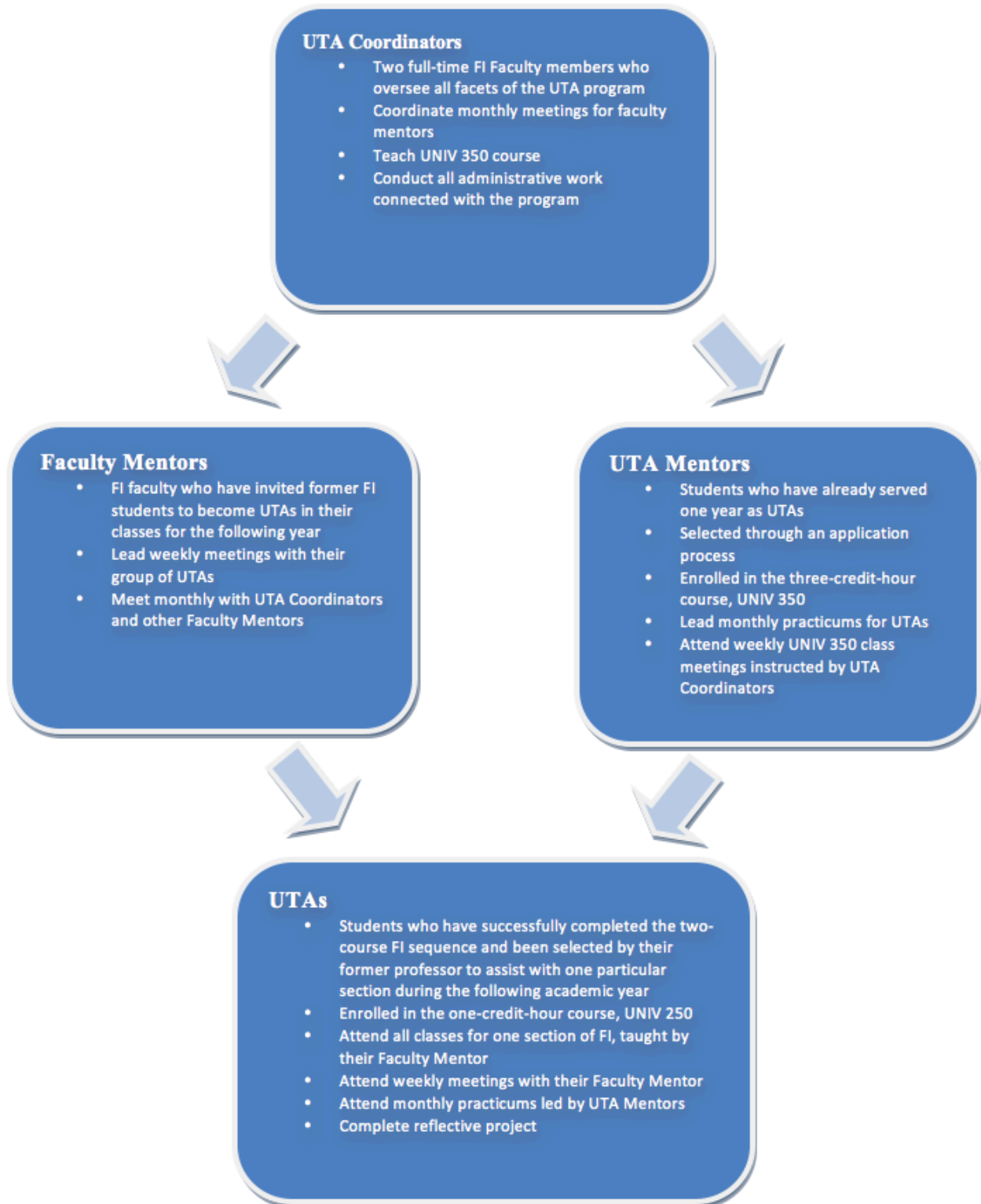
Focused Inquiry—a two-semester sequence capped at twenty-two students per section—is a learner-centered, interdisciplinary course that is taught by faculty from a variety of backgrounds and focuses on six skill areas: writing and oral communication; critical thinking; ethical reasoning and civic engagement; collaboration; information fluency; and quantitative literacy. From its very beginning in 2006, Focused Inquiry incorporated Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). However, in 2008 to 2009, the department began a pilot program for integrating UTAs into the classroom; in 2009 to 2010, the program was embraced by the Focused Inquiry faculty at large and was included in the *VCU Bulletin and Schedule of Classes* as a credit-bearing course, UNIV 250: Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Program.

Unlike GTAs, whose primary objective in the classroom is to assist the teacher, the UTAs facilitate student engagement by modeling successful intellectual practices and offering assistance to students with coursework. Participation in the program is voluntary for both students and faculty. Faculty who choose to participate in the UTA program select students from their own first-year classes to serve as UTAs the following year; most UTAs in Focused Inquiry are therefore sophomores. UTAs understand the curricular goals of Focused Inquiry and tend to be students who exhibit an innate desire to learn and share the joy of learning with their peers. During fall 2009, the first semester of the program, 51 undergraduates worked with 10 different faculty members. The program has since doubled, and one year later at the beginning of the fall semester of 2010, 101 students began working with 19 faculty (see Figure 1).

All students in the first year of the UTA program register for UNIV 250 and receive one credit for each semester that they take the course. Students commit for the full academic year, but exceptions are sometimes granted (e.g., a course needed to graduate on time is offered only at the same time as the UNIV 250 class). The course is directed by the Faculty Mentor but is assisted by UTA Mentors.

The particular goals of UNIV 250 are determined by individual Faculty Mentors, based on ongoing communication between the UTAs and Faculty Mentor during weekly, one-hour meetings. In these meetings, the UTAs provide ideas and feedback about classroom discussions and activities; they participate in assignment design; they take part in the process of planning lessons and designing the overall arc of the

Figure 1
Structure of Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Program in University College, VCU



course; and they prepare to teach short lessons and lead the class in particular activities.

All UTAs and Faculty Mentors complete individual work plans that lay out the specific goals and objectives to be discussed during their weekly meetings throughout the semester. These plans are created early in the school year and then updated at intervals throughout the year to allow for the growth and change that occur as UTAs and faculty assess new challenges and ideas in the course work. The work plan allows the UTAs to be the proprietors of their own experience, thus helping to ensure that the process of planning, as well as the work in the classroom, is learner-centered.

UTAs are students who have successfully passed the Focused Inquiry I and II sequence with a B or better and who have been invited by their FI instructor to become UTAs in their second year of college. Criteria for selection of UTAs may be, but are not limited to, positive attitude towards the material, exceptional preparedness for class, seeking of outside input and resources for assignments, exceptional planning skills, a mature attitude toward the course material, and a strong work ethic. Faculty members may include anywhere between one and three UTAs per class.

As noted in the syllabus (Henry & Gordon, 2010a), the requirements for the UNIV 250 are as follows:

- Attendance at all class sessions of the course they are assisting
- Attendance at monthly student-led practicums (run by students in UNIV 350)
- Attendance at weekly faculty mentor-facilitated staff meetings (approximately one hour per week; run by the faculty mentor under whom the UTA is serving)
- Significant contribution in the course they are assisting (at least once per unit, for a total of three times per semester). This contribution is to be decided upon by the UTA and Faculty Mentor
- Conference with the UTA Mentor at least once per unit, for a total of three times per semester
- Student-generated written product that reflects upon and demonstrates the skills they have acquired in UNIV 250

At the outset of the semester, each UTA works closely with a faculty member to model positive, productive engagement in the Focused Inquiry classroom—activities such as participating in class discussions, arriving before or after class in order to answer questions that students may have, adding their own thoughts and experiences as the teacher describes assignments, and exhibiting an attentive, positive outlook towards the course material. As the semester

progresses, UTAs begin to take on additional roles, such as working with students in outside office hours, teaching short lessons in class, or holding study sessions. During weekly planning sessions with their Faculty Mentor, UTAs are also able to participate in the planning and decision-making aspects of the course. In these meetings, UTAs suggest lessons and assignments as well as provide feedback on the effectiveness of particular activities.

Though UTAs may direct the class at times, at no point are UTAs ever to operate without faculty guidance; faculty must always be present with UTAs in the classroom. Furthermore, although they may provide feedback, the UTAs are not involved in any way in the evaluation of student work.

The reflective written product that UTAs produce during the semester may take many forms, and is either a group effort decided upon by the set of UTAs who work with their particular faculty mentor, or individual projects created by each UTA in a particular group. Products have included individual reflective essays or letters to the faculty mentor discussing the activities and growth UTAs experience over the course of the year; individual journals kept throughout the course sequence; a group discussion board or blog, with questions posed by the faculty mentor and UTAs responding weekly throughout the semester; a group web page displaying interviews and videos showcasing the work and experiences of the students and Faculty Mentor; a poster presentation at a campus-wide research symposium; and participation in presenting the UTA program at a professional conference.

The benefits and advantages to the participants—faculty members, students, and UTAs—are considerable. UTAs benefit faculty by helping them to rethink their teaching practice, and they benefit students by offering academic support and helping students to better understand what instructors are looking for. The most frequent comment that faculty make regarding the ways UTAs benefit their teaching is illustrated through one faculty member's statement: "They help me see things from a student's perspective." As most faculty have long since completed their first year of college, they value the honest and candid feedback and perspective that UTAs can offer.

When specifically asked how UTAs provide support for their teaching, faculty note that UTAs make them rethink their pedagogical practice. One faculty member commented,

I have to explain to the UTAs what I have planned and they help me truly understand what I am trying to teach. They make me break down my motivations because I have to explain why we are doing what we are doing in class, so they make

me match my practice with the goals and objectives of the course.

Another faculty member extended this observation by observing,

When you teach three sections of the same course, you adjust the class in little ways all throughout the day. UTAs help me to figure out in what order to present material and ways to present material that might generate more enthusiasm.

In addition, faculty members report that the weekly meetings with their UTAs act as a reflective and practical planning tool, resulting in more carefully conceived assignments and classroom activities. The feedback that UTAs provide in the planning sessions also allows for a much wider pool of ideas from which the faculty member can draw; indeed, a common practice among faculty is to ask UTAs to read and critique assignments that have not yet been given to students and to have the UTAs generate their own ideas about the most effective ways to reinforce skills and examine course content. This feedback allows faculty to use a student's perspective to revise assignments more effectively.

The students in courses with UTAs also value the UTAs' student perspective. One student in a section of Focused Inquiry with UTAs noted that it is "nice to have peers your own age teaching and using terms you can understand." Another echoed this sentiment: "They made me feel more comfortable in class because they are not much older than us [*sic*]." and another explained how the UTAs "are able to help from a student standpoint." These observations are indicative of the most frequent responses by students who have completed evaluations of their UTAs and were asked how the UTAs helped them or impacted their learning.

In addition to providing a student perspective on the course, the UTAs reinforce active class participation and engagement in the classroom. In the evaluations of their UTAs, students made the following comments: "They have helped me become more sociable in class, and eased the pain of asking simple questions"; "They have helped me understand the lessons more and enhanced my learning"; and "They connected personal experiences with the lessons that they taught, which helped me to understand the lesson more. The UTAs also tried to personally connect with the students throughout the semester."

Finally, students who have UTAs in their Focused Inquiry classroom perceive themselves as having an "inside track" regarding how assignments should be understood, how to get through the workload of the course, and how to get answers to questions that they might be too shy to ask the professor. When asked

about how UTAs helped students in the class, one student noted that "[h]aving students who had been through the [Focused Inquiry] experience was helpful. They provide help from a student perspective."

Finally, UTAs also provide incoming first-year students with an insider's perspective on the intellectual and cultural life of the university. As one student noted, "The UTAs gave insight as to what it will be like continuing your education in college. They were very diverse but they represented VCU well." Faculty recount that UTAs frequently advise students about courses they may take in their second and third years, offer recommendations about campus activities and social events, and even give advice on transportation and housing.

Of the three stakeholders in this endeavor – students, faculty, and UTAs – it is arguably the UTAs who receive the most benefits from the program. The UTAs gain a better understanding of their own learning process, a more informed perspective on curricular design and course objectives, and valuable leadership skills. When asked "What did you get out of the UTA Program?", our UTAs responded in the following ways:

- "I realized you don't know what you've learned until you have to teach it."
- "I feel more confident in my leadership skills."
- "I now see education from the other perspective."
- "I now know better what professors are looking for."

UNIV 350

Upon completion of two semesters of UNIV 250, students may apply for entry into UNIV 350, a two-semester course known as the Peer Leadership Program. Typically, fewer than 20 students are admitted to UNIV 350, and they commit for the full academic year.

UNIV 350 has three separate goals. The first of these is pedagogical: to learn and evaluate different styles of leadership. The second is experiential: to provide hands-on leadership experience through administration of the UNIV 250 program. The third is philosophical: to ensure that the UTA program is learner-centered and student-run. Each of these three goals will be discussed below.

Students begin by examining the relationship between teaching and leadership. Given that they have a great deal of experience in thinking about teaching after two semesters as UTAs, they can articulate the various skill sets necessary for effective teaching; what they cannot yet do is articulate the skill sets needed for a more broadly defined "leadership," and it is the goal of the course to articulate those differences as well as

those moments of overlap. During academic year 2010 to 2011, students began by reading *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Bain, 2004) as well as *Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership* (Wills, 1994). These texts encourage the students to explore the shared challenges faced by both teachers and leaders: communicating a clear message, delegating responsibilities, creating a motivational environment, making programmatic decisions, and evaluating successes and setbacks.

Moreover, the students' understanding of leadership is broadened by a series of guest speakers. Every week, a community leader is interviewed in front of the class for roughly 45 minutes; recent leaders have included several directors of local non-profits, a concert promoter, several small business owners, a local designer and activist, a mayor, and a vice-provost. The interview questions are virtually identical for each speaker; upon completion of the interview, the students have an opportunity to ask additional questions.

The students also gain hands-on experience with leadership. Each student in UNIV 350 is assigned a cohort of approximately 12 to 15 UNIV 250 students. As noted in the syllabus (Henry & Gordon, 2010b), the UNIV 350 student is in charge of a series of discrete tasks:

- S/he must meet with each member of the cohort once per month; the goal of this meeting is to check the UNIV 250 student's progress against the work-plan submitted at the beginning of the semester.
- S/he must observe the UNIV 250 student in the classroom at least once per semester.
- S/he lends guidance and advice to the UNIV 250 student regarding challenges faced in the classroom and/or with the faculty mentor.

Another task that the UNIV 350 student performs is facilitating a monthly practicum for a group of UNIV 250 students. These practicums are 50-minute sessions designed to address skills that UNIV 250 students need as UTAs. During the 2010 to 2011 academic year, practicum topics included speaking effectively in front of a class, dealing with difficult or unresponsive students, and discussing what constitutes effective and professional communication in a digital age.

The UNIV 350 students are also required to serve as student representatives on faculty committees. In spring 2011, the UNIV 350 students served on the planning committee for our FI Expo, an annual student exposition that is equal parts academic showcase and celebration; it is open to the more than 3400 students in Focused Inquiry, and so its planning, promotion, and logistical challenges give UNIV 350 students valuable exposure to how a team works towards a large-scale

goal. For the fall semester 2011, UNIV 350 students will take part in the Summer Reading Selection Committee; this committee is charged with selecting the summer reading for VCU's entire 2012 to 2013 freshman class.

As the culminating project for the two-semester sequence, the UNIV 350 students must produce a critique of the UTA program. Furthermore, the student creates a set of proposals for improving both the course and the program. The final exam period is spent reviewing these many proposals and integrating them into a single refined plan for the next semester.

Thought students in UNIV 350 no longer work in the classroom on a daily basis, they do not leave behind what they have learned as UTAs. They share the lessons they have gained as teaching assistants on faculty committees, in the classrooms during the practicums, in the design and refinement of the curriculum with the UTA program coordinator, and in one-on-one dialogue with their cohort members. In doing so, they transition from teaching assistants to student leaders.

Conclusions

At all levels, the Focused Inquiry UTA program is learner-centered and student-driven. The program is a "win-win-win" for all stakeholders: students enrolled in Focused Inquiry gain a more learner-centered experience and valuable assistance in the classroom; faculty gain meaningful feedback and student insight in rethinking classroom practice and course design; UTAs gain both course credit and valuable experience that helps them to become better students in the university, more desirable employees in the workforce, and more responsible citizens in the public sphere.

The UTA program in VCU's University College remains in a continual state of growth and revision. From its inception in 2008 to 2009 as a pilot program with a single instructor and a handful of students, it has expanded in two short years to a credit-bearing department-wide initiative with 19 faculty who volunteer as mentors and 101 students who enroll in the program. Spring, 2011, witnessed continued growth and expansion of this ambitious program. Multiple endeavors were launched to expand and evaluate this program. First, the decision was made to extend the UTA program into UNIV 200, a required course in Research Writing that is also housed in University College. A position was created for a second UTA Coordinator, and that Coordinator began integrating UNIV 200 students and faculty into the existing UTA program; in its inaugural year of 2011 to 2012, 12 of the 18 UNIV 200 faculty have elected to participate in the program.

Finally, the University College has launched an effort to assess the effectiveness of the UTA program.

UTA Coordinators are currently in the process of collecting data from courses taught by UTA Faculty Mentors. The assessment will be based on several data sources, including surveys of student engagement, class attendance rates, and DFW rates. The conclusions gathered from this current study will allow the UTA program to evolve. More importantly, perhaps, the conclusions will join the emerging body of research that explores the possibilities of working with undergraduates as teaching assistants.

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