Mentoring plays a crucial role in the academic, professional, and personal development of graduate students, both in the context of scholarly research and teaching. In this chapter, we discuss the role of mentoring in supporting the teaching-related training of graduate students. Particular attention is given to the unique benefits and challenges that accompany peer mentoring, which involves graduate students working together to improve each other’s teaching skills. In the sections that follow, we describe several examples of peer mentoring and discuss research on peer mentoring’s effects on teacher training. We then identify potential challenges and barriers that can affect the success of peer-mentoring programs. Finally, we highlight some practical considerations related to implementing peer mentoring programs to complement existing teaching assistant (TA) training activities.

Before we begin, it is helpful to briefly describe the authors’ backgrounds in teaching and mentoring. Several of us (Amlung, Dengler, Simpson, and Stone) taught undergraduate classes
as graduate TAs, and attempted to increase the amount of teacher training offered in our
department. Each of us also served in the role of peer mentor for incoming TAs in psychology.
All authors carried out research on the University of Georgia (UGA) Department of Psychology
peer-mentoring pilot study, discussed below. Finally, as the Coordinator for the Scholarship of
Teaching and Learning at UGA, Dr. Domizi has coordinated TA development programs,
including serving as a faculty mentor for UGA’s Preparing Future Faculty program.

Who Are Teaching Assistants and What Do They Do?

Teaching assistantships are common funding sources for graduate students in a variety of
disciplines. They allow graduate students to pursue their degrees with free or reduced tuition, and
typically with a stipend. In return, departments can meet their need for affordable teachers and
achieve the flexibility necessary to accommodate fluctuating course enrollment in the face of
restricted budgets. Specific duties of TAs vary by course, discipline, and institution. The typical
TA position involves serving in a supporting role than can include assisting the instructor of
record with grading, holding office hours or extra help sessions, course management, occasional
guest lectures, and leading discussion or breakout sessions. STEM disciplines often employ
laboratory assistants, who are assigned instructional duties in a laboratory section (including
computer labs). Teaching and laboratory assistants may support a single course each semester, or
multiple courses. Finally, graduate students may also be assigned to serve as instructors of record
for an entire course, typically having autonomy for teaching and assigning grades. In English, for
example, many graduate students serve as instructors of record from very early in their graduate
careers, especially if the institution maintains an introductory composition requirement. Such
departments tend to have well-established pedagogy courses that graduate students take before or
during their first semester teaching. In other disciplines, such as many of the natural and physical sciences, it is unusual for a student to be classified as instructor of record. Many departments prefer to ease their students into teaching, first as teaching or laboratory assistants, and then selecting exemplary students to serve as instructors of record. Regardless of the type of appointment, TAs must balance the duties of their teaching positions with other responsibilities, including research, coursework, and other program requirements. It is therefore important to consider how we can better prepare TAs for their teaching responsibilities, to maximize their success both in the classroom and in their future careers, and to increase their confidence and skills in dealing with challenges as they arise.

The Need for Additional TA Training

Though teaching by TAs is common, many feel unprepared for their teaching responsibilities and report a lack of structured teacher training (see, e.g., Barnes and Randall 2011; Golde and Dore 2001). A survey of over 32,000 graduate students found that teaching-related training/preparation/supervision was rated substantially lower than other aspects of graduate training (Fagen and Suedkamp Wells 2004). It is often assumed that because TAs were good undergraduate students themselves, they will also be good teachers (Staton and Darling 1989). Fagen et al. (2004) note that, “TAs are thrown into teaching environments in a sink or swim manner” (84). Dishearteningly enough, this sink-or-swim analogy is appropriate. Many TAs may not feel ready to tackle even the basic responsibilities of their positions, and as teaching responsibilities increase (e.g., serving as instructor of record for an entire course), this lack of preparation may be amplified. It is unfair for TAs to find themselves in this position and it is also unfair to the students they are teaching. One TA described teaching as analogous to
jumping out of an airplane: “there’s only so many things you can do on the ground” (Dudley 2009, 10). Though we agree that encouraging TAs to begin teaching early in their graduate training allows them to compile a record of teaching experience and also to show evidence of improvement prior to entering the job market, we do not believe that going in blindly is the best strategy.

So what can be done to address this seemingly pervasive lack of preparation? Some amount of teacher training is of utmost importance prior to any substantial teaching responsibilities. Indeed, many graduate institutions offer pre-semester orientation programs, which are intended to give TAs the basic skills necessary to begin their teaching responsibilities. Topics typically covered during these orientation sessions include information about institutional policies related to teaching, guidelines/suggestions for interacting with students in class and during office hours, recommendations for grading student work, and an orientation to on-campus teaching resources (e.g., testing or disability resource centers). However, the length, content, and effectiveness of these orientation programs vary widely across institutions. In addition to pre-semester orientations, many departments have a formal program or seminar in which TAs are encouraged to enroll during their first semester of teaching. Such programs may take place over one or more days (Hardré and Burris 2010), a few weeks (Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006), or over the course of one or more semesters (Rushin et al. 1997; Smith 2001). Finally, additional training may also be available in the form stand-alone workshops on specific teaching topics. These departmental or institution-wide training opportunities are certainly helpful for TAs, but one-on-one and small-group interactions are also important. TAs appear to be aware of this: when asked how their training could be improved, TAs consistently suggest offering increased opportunities for teaching-related mentorship (e.g., Bomotti 1994; Jones 1993).
Supervising faculty members are one source for mentoring. Graduate students at teaching-focused institutions—whose schools are likely to have faculty who are willing and able to dedicate time to teaching-related activities—likely have largely positive mentoring experiences with faculty. However, the vast majority of graduate TA positions are in research-focused departments in which faculty mentors may give little teaching-related feedback to TAs (Prieto, Scheel, and Meyers 2001). This may be due to the fact that faculty at research-focused institutions are accustomed to a system that values scholarship (e.g., publications, grants) more than teaching (Boyer 1990). The relative value placed on scholarship and teaching at these institutions is evident across numerous domains, including institutions’ mission statements (e.g., Morphew and Hartley 2006), the lack of adequate incentives for supporting teaching (e.g., Shannon, Twale, and Moore 1998), and differences in faculty pay (e.g., Binder et al. 2012). Indeed, faculty at institutions that value research more than teaching may be ineffective teaching mentors for graduate TAs (Boyer 1990). This may be due in part to the perception of faculty that—based on their own experiences—they would be doing their students a disservice by encouraging them to devote time to teaching-related activities (e.g., Robinson and Hope 2013). However, this perspective overlooks two important facts. First, graduate students’ research skills also benefit from teaching experiences (Feldon et al. 2011), and second, graduate students are likely to end up at institutions with different priorities from the ones graduate faculty know and expect (Austin 2002). Nonetheless, most graduate students will likely receive at least some teaching training from faculty mentors.
One successful program that emphasizes small-group interactions is the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program.\(^1\) This program is designed to provide graduate students with opportunities to observe and experience faculty activities that are both teaching- and research-focused. Importantly, graduate students participating in PFF programs are paired with faculty mentors who provide feedback on their teaching and other insights about the nature of an academic career. Several reports have documented the many benefits of PFF programs (DeNeef 2002; Phelps 2010); however, participation in PFF activities at some institutions may be limited to only a small cohort of TAs. As such, we believe that complementing faculty/supervisor and small-group–based training with collaborative learning experiences involving larger groups of TAs is an important and largely unexplored approach. This type of preparation is what we refer to as peer mentoring.

Peer Mentoring: Definitions and Examples

Mentoring has been defined as a “pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goals of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies” (Murray 1991, 4). Mentors care about the success of their protégés, and provide career advisement, leadership, and support. The connection formed between mentors and protégés, including a sense of protection and security for the protégé, is also an important component of the experience (Gibson 2003). There are many different types of mentoring. A mentor may be vastly more experienced than a mentee, and therefore the mentee may gain more from the relationship than the mentor. For instance, some graduate programs

---

\(^1\) Additional information on the Preparing Future Faculty program is available online at http://www.preparing-faculty.org.
provide structured faculty-student mentorship for graduate TAs (Meyers and Prieto 2000). Peer mentoring, on the other hand, refers to interactions between individuals with a similar level of training that extends beyond simple peer support and includes focused guidance, resource sharing, and problem solving. In general, programs that focus on facilitating peer mentoring among graduate students are rare. In the following paragraphs, we discuss examples of structured and informal peer-mentoring programs described in the literature.

Several kinds of formal, structured peer-mentoring programs have been implemented across a range of academic disciplines. For instance, Files and colleagues (2008) developed a facilitated peer-mentoring program for medical instructors that was designed to boost academic productivity. Heinrich and Oberleitner (2012) describe a multi-year peer-mentoring program with the goal of enhancing scholarly productivity in a nursing school setting. Peer mentoring has been successfully used to combat academic and professional stress among nursing students (Li et al. 2011). In the domain of business and organizational research, peer mentoring has been shown to increase collaboration and sharing of organizational knowledge (Bryant and Terborg 2008). Similarly, Parker, Hall, and Kram (2008) reported that peer coaching positively contributed to professional development in MBA students. Elsewhere, peer mentoring has been incorporated into graduate programs in education (e.g., Dorn, Palpalewis, and Brown 1995), gerontology (e.g., Webb et al. 2009), accounting (e.g., Jackling and McDowall 2008), and as a university-wide initiative (e.g., Holley and Caldwell 2012). Together, these examples illustrate the positive effects of structured peer-mentoring programs on productivity, collaboration, and academic success.

Structured peer-mentoring programs whose aim is specifically to enhance graduate TA teaching development, however, are less common. Peer-mentoring activities in college writing
programs have been documented by two research groups (Martin and Paine 2002; Barr Ebest 2002). In a case study by Barr Ebest (2002), novice TAs were paired with senior TA peer mentors. The teams met regularly throughout the year to discuss progress, and mentors conducted classroom observations of TAs, analyzed syllabi and assignments, and reviewed graded papers. Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006) provide another example of a highly structured, year-long peer-mentoring program for TAs in a foreign language graduate program. Three to four advanced TAs dedicated 30 hours per term to peer-mentoring activities, including consultations, observations, and organizing workshops. Importantly, they found that protégés often sought assistance for non-teaching-related aspects of graduate student life, such as balancing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Even in the absence of structured peer-mentoring programs, TAs often engage in informal, unstructured mentoring activities with fellow graduate students (see, e.g., Austin 2002; Meyers and Prieto 2000). TAs turn to each other for guidance, support, and knowledge, and often forge their own informal mentoring relationships (Wulff et al. 2004). What does this type of informal peer mentoring look like? Drawing examples from our own training, we all have had the unfortunate experience of getting negative feedback on course evaluations at the end of a course. One Psychology TA, struggling with negative feedback on course evaluations, was advised by a peer mentor to try midterm course evaluations. The TA took this advice, made improvements to the course mid-semester to address students’ concerns, and received higher teaching evaluations as a result. Another TA was having difficulty conveying a particular psychology concept to students, who found it frustrating and difficult to understand. Rather than trying to tackle this problem alone, the TA sought advice from a group of fellow graduate students, who helped to brainstorm solutions. The TA successfully carried out one of the
suggested activities and the students shared an “Aha!” moment. These examples illustrate how informal peer mentoring can help TAs address common teaching challenges.

Research on Peer Mentoring: Motives and Outcomes

Scholarly research on the role and effectiveness of peer mentoring in TA development is limited. Below, we briefly review the available literature on peer mentoring, with a focus on motives for seeking peer mentoring and the benefits and outcomes for both the TAs and their mentors. Throughout this section, we also discuss findings from a pilot study in which graduate TAs in a psychology department at a large research university ($N = 108$) completed an anonymous survey that assessed frequencies of various teaching-related mentoring activities, motivations for engaging or not engaging in mentoring, and teaching-related benefits gained from these experiences. Generally speaking, we found that TAs engaged in peer mentoring improved their teaching skills, and did so to a greater degree than those relying exclusively on faculty mentoring.

TAs seek out mentoring experiences for a variety of reasons. Peer-mentoring relationships are viewed as safe places, in which TAs feel they can be honest and open (Bonilla, Pickron, and Tatum 1994). We speculate that the advantage of peer mentoring in this regard may be due, in part, to faculty members being in a position of power relative to their students, whereas peer-to-peer mentoring does not involve such an imbalance. Peers are also often more accessible than faculty, partly because the TAs’ offices are typically segregated from faculty offices, limiting opportunities for chance encounters and informal discussion (Wulff et al. 2004).

---

2 Preliminary results of this study were previously presented at the 2012 meeting of the American Psychological Association (see Amlung et al. 2012).
In our pilot study, TAs were asked to identify the most common reasons they sought teaching-related peer mentoring. The most frequently cited were that their peers seemed to understand/relate to their situation (97% of respondents), and that peers seemed willing to help (91%). Other common reasons included seeking peer mentoring in order to save time (84%) and to receive social or moral support (81%). The most common reasons that TAs sought help from faculty (not including their major professor) were for feedback on their teaching (44%), for advice on teaching careers (34%), and to build professional networks (31%). We also examined common reasons for avoiding faculty-based mentoring for teaching. Perceived conflicts between teaching and research roles prevented many TAs from approaching their major professors (41% of TAs cited this as a primary reason). TAs also had the perception that they would be a burden (34%) and did not think faculty would be willing to help (31%).

There are numerous benefits to peer mentoring, which thus far have only been documented anecdotally (e.g., Holley and Caldwell 2012). One benefit is that peer mentoring allows TAs to gain new techniques. For example, one of us recalls a conversation with a peer mentor concerning a student who was not actively contributing to classroom discussions. Being relatively inexperienced, the TA felt that he had exhausted every technique he knew to encourage the student to participate. The more experienced TA shared additional strategies from her own experience—including using low-stakes writing and classroom response systems—that proved successful in the classroom. Interdisciplinary peer-mentoring groups that span academic departments also expose TAs to different perspectives they may not have previously considered. For example, another one of us recalls talking with a peer in an English department about how to help students who were struggling with writing papers. This experience led to an exchange of sample rubrics and other materials related to evaluating student writing.
Peer mentoring may also serve as a valuable source of professional development for future instructors. Recent graduates, when asked about the most pivotal events in their preparation for teaching careers, cited peer mentoring as playing a crucial part in positively contributing to their professional development as teachers (Smith 2001). Peer mentoring may also increase TAs’ preparedness and competitiveness on the job market, improving their collaborative and cooperative skills as well as their teaching. Importantly, peer mentoring is also beneficial to mentors, providing them with an opportunity to critically reflect on their own teaching (Barr Ebest 2002). Mentors are then better prepared to serve in mentoring roles in the future, regardless of whether they pursue teaching-focused careers or not (Noonan, Ballinger, and Black 2007). In fact, research suggests that individuals who were mentored are likely to mentor others at a later time (Hunt and Michael 1983).

In our study, TAs rated their peer-mentoring experiences as significantly more beneficial than mentoring received from faculty, though each type of mentoring provided unique benefits. The most common benefits that our TAs reported receiving from peer mentoring were examples of teaching materials (e.g., lecture slides, in-class activities, assignments), advice about effective teaching practices, and social support and encouragement.

Challenges to Peer Mentoring

Despite clear potential benefits to both mentors and protégés, peer mentoring programs face a variety of potential barriers and challenges (for a recent discussion of this issue, see Holley and Caldwell 2012). Some challenges are practical in nature, while others stem from institutional or departmental cultures regarding teacher training. From a logistical standpoint, one of the most common challenges to any form of mentoring is time. Both faculty and graduate
student TAs are incredibly busy and find themselves with ever-increasing responsibilities and deadlines. In addition to providing research mentoring to their graduate students, faculty members often have added administrative, service, and other professional obligations. As a result, some faculty may be reluctant to devote time and energy to mentoring graduate TAs. Student-led peer-mentoring initiatives, like the one described below, may circumvent some of these faculty time constraints. From the standpoint of the protégés, first-year students are similarly overwhelmed with coursework, beginning their research programs, and learning to perform their TA duties. With these competing responsibilities, incoming TAs may feel that they lack sufficient time to improve their teaching. However, novice TAs should be informed that forming peer-mentoring relationships with senior students may actually save time and reduce stress.

Many graduate programs are also operating with diminishing resources, including smaller budgets, heavier teaching loads, and greater competition for physical space. Implementing a formal, department-wide TA training program, therefore, may not be feasible. While some forms of peer mentoring require departmental contributions (e.g., a faculty or staff member to serve as a facilitator, funds to invite guest speakers), informal peer mentoring can be low-cost, if not free. For example, a student-led peer-mentoring group may only require access to a classroom for regular meetings. While refreshments are a nice addition to meetings (and may have the added benefit of increasing attendance among hungry graduate students), our experience is that participants are typically willing to pitch in food and drinks in a potluck format.

For TAs at research-focused institutions, one common challenge to seeking teaching training is the perceived conflict between their roles as researchers and teachers. Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006) note that it is common for TAs at research-focused institutions to
receive conflicting messages regarding the relative value of teaching and scholarship. Faculty supervisors and thesis advisors at these types of institutions may appear to value teaching, but then actively discourage spending time building these skills (Barr Ebest 2002). As already mentioned, this may be due to institutional priorities that privilege scholarship over teaching, or to the failure of faculty to consider the types of institutions in which their graduate students are most likely to teach in the future. Thus, some TAs find themselves caught between explicit messages supporting teaching and implicit messages and actions implying that it is less important than scholarship (Wulff et al. 2004). Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006) further suggest that peer mentors may help reduce this tension, since they provide a valuable model for effectively balancing these roles. More experienced TAs are “able to find time and energy to dedicate to both activities” (Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006, 243). Our pilot data supports this: nearly all respondents indicated that other graduate students better understood and related to their situations, including the challenges of balancing multiple obligations. We believe that supporting peer-mentoring programs may contribute to larger cultural changes in the value and visibility of teaching.

Practical Considerations for Increasing Peer Mentoring

In this section, we discuss several practical considerations related to increasing peer mentoring, both through formal (i.e., structured pairings) and informal (i.e., fluid pairings, unstructured) programs, to improve TA training. These “best practices” are drawn from examples of peer-mentoring programs that have been described in the literature (e.g., Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006; Martin and Paine 2002; Barr Ebest 2002) as well as our own experience with creating a peer-mentoring organization for TAs in psychology. Although largely
anecdotal, we think they are a useful starting point for implementing a new peer-mentoring program.

A Case Study: The Psychology Educator Development Association

Like many large research universities, the University of Georgia (UGA) relies on graduate students to fulfill its instructional mission. Each semester, TAs in the UGA Department of Psychology assist professors with courses or serve as instructors for their own courses. The department offers several teaching-centered professional development opportunities, including a seminar for incoming TAs and an advanced teaching practicum course. However, graduate students in the department (including several authors of this chapter) desired additional training beyond what was then offered. This led to the founding of an informal student-led organization named the Psychology Educator Development Association (PEDA). The organization maintains a diverse calendar of monthly meetings, guest speakers, course planning roundtables, and periodic social activities. PEDA also organizes group travel to regional teaching-related conferences. As participants, we noticed that one of the primary advantages of PEDA was the increased collaboration and communication among the graduate student peers that occurred via informal discussions outside of regularly scheduled events. Incoming graduate students, in particular, used PEDA to connect with advanced TAs in the department with shared interests in teaching. Importantly, the pairing of mentors and mentees in PEDA was a fluid process, allowing TAs to seek support and advice from multiple mentors.

Creating a peer-based teaching organization, such as PEDA, was complicated by the lack of practical recommendations in the TA development literature. One notable exception is the

3 For additional information about PEDA, see .
Appendix in Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006, 248-49), which provides a list of guidelines for implementing their structured peer-mentoring program. Silva and colleagues first describe the requirements for serving as a peer mentor, including positive teaching evaluations, at least one year of teaching experience, strong organizational skills, and evidence of the ability to create and adapt a variety of teaching materials. The authors then describe the different roles that a peer mentor might assume, including helping new instructors transition from orientation workshops to the real classroom, assisting TAs with crafting lesson plans and other teaching materials, conducting periodic teaching observations, and providing mentees with detailed feedback to help improve teaching.

Format and Structure

As the examples described elsewhere in this chapter demonstrate, peer mentoring can take many forms. Some graduate programs may take an informal approach, as we did with PEDA, fostering communication and collaboration among TAs in the department without placing any restrictions on the nature of these interactions. Other departments may favor a more structured TA mentoring program, such as that proposed by Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006), in which a small number of advanced TAs are selected to serve as mentors for novice TAs in the department. The choice of structure and format depends on several factors, including the amount of time and resources available to support mentoring and the level of initiative and motivation among potential participants.

We believe that both options can be worthwhile, with each offering unique benefits and challenges. In our experience with PEDA, the informal format was useful in that we were able to shift our focus to teaching topics that were most timely for our members. For instance, if some of
our TAs were struggling with facilitating classroom discussion, we devoted our next meeting to that topic. Informal mentoring may also require less time and resources than structured alternatives (e.g., mentors and mentees do not have to commit to a fixed number of hours per week to meet). However, informal programs necessarily demand greater initiative and planning by participants to make the program successful. Mentees also need to be more motivated to seek out and schedule training with peer mentors. If a department does not have a critical mass of graduate students who are interested in leading the initiative, then an informal format may not be ideal. Structured programs, on the other hand, have the advantage of holding participants accountable for devoting meaningful time and effort to mentoring activities. Structured mentoring programs may also produce greater benefits for some TAs—particularly first-year TAs, who would otherwise be unlikely to seek as much support from their mentors, but who require help in prioritizing teaching amongst their other responsibilities. Nonetheless, in both types of programs, it is beneficial for TAs to teach individual lessons and get constructive, personalized feedback from experienced teachers. Ideally, there should be a period of transition in which novice TAs gradually take on more responsibilities throughout their graduate training, receiving guidance and mentorship along the way.

**Identifying Mentors**

The selection of experienced TAs to serve as mentors for novice TAs is an important first step, and can be carried out either by the novice TAs themselves or through a more formalized matching process (e.g., surveying both mentors and mentees and matching them based on mutual goals). The pairing of mentors and protégés can be fluid, as in our case with PEDA, or more static, such as in a structured mentoring program (e.g., Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006;
Barr Ebest 2002). At a minimum, it is critical that both mentors and protégés share a commitment to improving teaching and professional development. Among the qualities Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez (2006) associate with strong peer mentors are good teaching evaluations, strong communication and organizational skills, experience observing teaching, evidence of implementing a variety of activities in the classroom, and sufficient time to devote to mentoring. It may also be useful for mentors and protégés to have similar topical interests in teaching. For example, mentees may wish to select mentors who have previously taught a course they are currently preparing to teach. In addition, some mentors may be particularly good at certain aspects of teaching, such as successfully leading students to work in teams, carrying out engaging class demonstrations, creating effective learning assessments, or using technology. In this way, mentor-mentee pairs may be based on the skills mentees hope to develop and the skills mentors have already mastered. Finally, some protégés may be more comfortable seeking out mentors who are similar to themselves in some characteristic, such as gender, ethnicity, or being a non-native English speaker (Holley and Caldwell 2012).

**Timing and Duration**

Another important consideration when implementing a peer-mentoring program is the appropriate timing and duration of the experience. Catching new TAs early in their careers is important, as this is a phase in which they are establishing their identities as teachers and beginning to solidify aspects of their teaching style (Wise 2011). Moreover, providing opportunities for mentoring early includes peer mentors as an integral part of the department’s support structure for teaching (Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006). The first few semesters of graduate school are also when students are learning time management strategies that will
allow them to effectively balance multiple teaching and research obligations. Encouraging new TAs to participate in teaching-related training may also help counter negative views toward teaching (i.e., viewing teaching as less important than scholarship) before these attitudes are fully engrained. In our view, exposing novice TAs to examples of high-quality teaching early in their careers provides a model for TAs to follow throughout their training. Nonetheless, the opportunity for mentoring in later training stages (i.e., when TAs take on more significant instructional responsibilities for laboratory/discussion sections or as instructor of record) is also important for generating new teaching strategies and further refining teaching skills to assess and improve student learning.

Prior implementations of peer mentoring have varied widely in the duration of the experience, with many structured programs taking place across multiple semesters (e.g., Barr Ebest 2002; Martin and Paine 2002; Silva, Macián, and Mejía-Gómez 2006). Importantly, although less durable peer-mentoring relationships may have a meaningful impact on TAs, empirical research suggests that sustained training is necessary to ensure improvements in teaching practices (e.g., Rushin et al. 1997; Richardson and Placier 2001). Ideally, mentors would be flexible in the amount of time they are available to each mentee, allowing for individual differences in training needs. Both parties should discuss the unique goals for the mentoring experience and plan for a sufficient amount of time to achieve goals. At minimum, such mentoring should occur for one semester—or for the duration of a single course—since different challenges will arise at different points across the semester (e.g., designing syllabi prior to the start of the semester, creating midterm assessments and projects, utilizing course evaluations at the end of the term to further refine the course for the future).
Support from departmental and institutional sources increases the likelihood of a peer-mentoring program having long-term success. For departments that rely heavily on TAs to meet instructional needs, coordinators of peer-mentoring programs should emphasize the benefits of improving TAs’ teaching skills (e.g., improved quality of undergraduate instruction). In our work with PEDA, we approached the department administration and secured financial support for a group of TAs and instructors to attend regional teaching conferences. Our department also provided funds for group registration for online workshops related to teaching. Program facilitators may also want to ask the department for physical space for mentors and mentees to meet. Silva, Macían, and Mejía-Gómez (2006) discovered that the peer mentors in their program needed office space to meet with the new TAs. Departments may also be willing to set aside space for a teaching lab or resource room to further support the mentoring program. TAs might use this space to compile teaching materials and other helpful resources.

Another potential resource, if available, is a campus teaching and learning center. Our experience is that teaching center staff genuinely want to help graduate students improve their teaching, but may not know about all of the activities in every department on campus. In our case, we found that the Center for Teaching and Learning at UGA was eager to recommend topics for our meetings and to connect us with distinguished teaching faculty across campus who were willing to speak during our group meetings. Finally, teaching centers may also be a useful source for financial support for campus TA development initiatives.

Summary
Teaching is a lot of work, but can also be very rewarding, especially when it is a shared experience. In our view, peer mentoring provides an important supplement to existing faculty-based training for graduate TAs. Both our pilot study and our experiences with PEDA suggest that the majority of TAs share this view. For example, the majority of TAs in our study indicated that they would likely take advantage of structured peer-mentoring programs if such programs existed. Programs that support peer mentoring may not only foster growth among TAs, but may also improve undergraduate instruction, given the large number of courses taught by graduate TAs. Such programs will also better prepare graduate students to transition into faculty positions and other mentor roles once they complete their degrees.

Works Cited


Feldon, David F., James Peugh, Briana E Timmerman, Michelle A Maher, Melissa Hurst, Denise Strickland, Joanna A Gilmore, and Cindy Stiegelmeyer. 2011. “Graduate Students’


