

Teaching with GSIs in Large-Enrollment Courses: A Case Study (GSI Teaching and Resource Center, 2004; adapted with permission)

For the past ten years Professor Jones has taught a large-enrollment course with approximately 300 students. This semester Professor Jones is teaching the course with five GSIs, three of whom are graduate students enrolled in other departments.

Professor Jones meets with GSIs once a week for an hour to go over course logistics such as enrollment in sections, assignments, grading, and test preparation. To assist GSIs and to ensure equity across sections, Professor Jones also uses the time to distribute and go over a lesson plan that the GSIs are expected to use in their teaching of sections.

Chris is an experienced GSI who has taught the course before but with a different professor. In the weekly meetings Chris appears somewhat bored and impatient. Pat, on the other hand, is teaching for the first time at Berkeley. She attended the fall orientation conference sponsored by the GSI Teaching and Resource Center and is eager to use the ideas that were presented at the conference to keep students engaged and motivated in section. She's having difficulty, however, integrating the techniques she learned at the conference with Professor Jones's lesson plans, and she doesn't have enough time in section to do both.

Kerry is a first-year student in Professor Jones's course. In the lecture Kerry sometimes finds it difficult to follow along and stay awake. Kerry likes section because of the small class size, but she often goes to section without having done the reading. Nonetheless, she assumes her GSI will cover the readings and summarize lectures when necessary to help students succeed on the exams.

In spite of studying very hard, Kerry has not done well on the first exam. Though she had planned on majoring in this field, the C- grade is making Kerry have some doubts about that and even about her ability to succeed at Berkeley. She finds it increasingly difficult to concentrate on her studies. In section, students are extremely upset about the test, and they take their frustration out on Chris, the GSI for the section. The students have ascertained that the test was graded on the curve, and the grades were bumped down because too many students scored high on the test. Chris tells the students in his section that he shares their opinion and thinks that grading on the curve is unfair.

After the midterm, Pat decides to do a mid-term evaluation and asks students for feedback on what types of activities they should be doing in section to improve their learning. Pat is frustrated to find that students just want to have a summary of the lecture in section. Some students also mentioned that their friends' GSIs did more to specifically prepare them for the exam, and they think it is unfair that she did not do the same. They don't want to do activities such as group work or case studies any more as they think those things won't help them on the test. Pat is not sure how to proceed since she knows that lecturing and other modes of teaching that put students in passive roles are not as effective as more active, small-group learning techniques.

Professor Jones is relatively pleased with how the course is going, though he always feels a sense of isolation in lecturing for an hour and a half without any interaction with the audience. Students seem to be attending lecture regularly, but Professor Jones is concerned that in lecture many students do not seem engaged as he looks out at them from the podium. He is also concerned that his office hours go largely unused by students. But the first exam went well as evidenced by the grade distribution, and Professor Jones feels confident that the rest of the semester will go smoothly.

1. What are the dilemmas and obstacles facing each of the individuals in this case study?
2. What are the causes of these dilemmas?
3. What solutions would you propose so that these dilemmas can be overcome?

What issues or problems are raised by the case study? It might be helpful to approach this by looking at what is going on with each of the characters in the case study.

Professor Jones

GSI Chris

GSI Pat

Undergraduate Kerry

Other issues?