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UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANT TRAINING PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY AT A NORTHWESTERN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and educating international students is a growing characteristic of the landscape of American higher education. Open Doors 2006 (Institute of International Education, 2006) indicated that 564,766 international students were enrolled in American higher education institutions in 2005-06 and that international students currently represent 3.9% of the total enrollment. Undoubtedly, international students benefit from studying in the United States. On the other hand, international students’ presence on American campuses, in the era of internationalization and globalization, also benefits American students, increasing their cultural sensitivity and skills in working with people from different backgrounds (Calleja, 2000; Carnevale, 1999). Recognizing the importance of international education, United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings stated, “We know international exchanges enrich a student’s overall education experience. They also help promote mutual understanding and appreciation of our different cultures” (November 13, 2006).

International students also contribute to the United States economy (Davis, 2001) and innovation (Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2005). Further, many international students choose to stay in the United States after graduation, and their contributions to American society include promoting technological development, facilitating international relations, and reinforcing America’s overall competitive advantage in the international community.

Scholars and practitioners have paid some attention to the challenges international students face while studying in American higher education institutions. Much of the existing research addresses general adjustment concerns encountered by international students (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995; Zhai, 2002). Given the increasing number of international students in teaching assistant
(TA) positions (Chalupa & Lair, 2000) and the challenges of communication difficulties named as the “foreign TA problem” (Bailey, 1984), the need for international teaching assistant (ITA) preparation programs that address these issues is growing. This case study attempted to increase the ITA training knowledge base by investigating how a training program offered by a northwest research university (Mountain University) prepared ITAs. It is hoped that this study will provide insights into the preparation of ITAs, as well as illuminate the need for a greater understanding of the experience of international students on American college and university campuses.

Definition of International Teaching Assistant (ITA)

The term ITA has appeared in a variety of documents and publications (Damron, 2003; de Berly, 1997; Gorsuch, 2003; Penner, 1997) and many American higher education institutions have developed ITA training programs with a general purpose of serving the multidimensional needs of ITAs. One issue that complicates ITA training is the lack of universal agreement regarding who should be included. For example, some institutions consider ITAs as students with non-immigrant visas who hold teaching assistantships, regardless of their first languages (Smith, Byrd, Nelson, Barrett, & Constantinides, 1992) while others believe ITAs include those who are non-native English speakers or whose first language is not English (Penner, 1997; Plakans, 1997).

In this study, in addition to the non-immigrant status criteria, the term ITA emphasizes the linguistic, educational, and cultural differences of certain international student populations. In other words, only those holding teaching assistantships and having completed their K-12 and first postsecondary education outside of North America were considered as ITAs. Therefore, students from Canada and North America, as well as those whose pre-graduate educational experiences were within the United States, were not included. Furthermore, this study does not consider non-native English speaking as the primary criteria because that definition excludes those who grew up in countries that are different educationally and culturally from the United States, but where English is a predominant language. An example of this is India, which is the source of one of the most visible international student populations on American campuses. The definition of ITAs in this study differs from the ITA criteria used at Mountain University, where ITAs include those who are (a) non-native English speakers; (b) graduate students; and (c) holding TA positions. The ITA definition used in this study highlights the importance of ITA training programs in serving ITAs’ socialization and transitional needs. This defi-
nition of ITA was developed based upon arguments (e.g., Penner, 1997; Smith et al., 1992) that ITA training programs should serve those with unique socialization and transitional challenges.

**The Roles and Functions of ITAs**

ITAs are assigned various responsibilities in American higher education institutions. Often, one group of ITAs differs from another in terms of the type of work they are engaged in. Responsibilities may include autonomous classroom teaching, leading group discussions, lab instruction, grading exams, and others (Bauer & Tanner, 1994). Some ITAs are required to share department administrative responsibilities. Cited in Penner’s work (1997), a study by Williams, Barnes, Finger, and Ruffin (1987) found that while duties of ITAs vary widely by academic departments, first-year ITAs rarely teach classes. Although ITAs are generally assigned to teach undergraduate classes, some academic departments do not have undergraduates, so the nature of these ITAs’ work may be significantly different from those who mainly interact with undergraduates. Furthermore, ITAs’ assignments largely depend upon the specific requirements of individual faculty members. For instance, some faculty might expect heavy and active involvement of ITAs in teaching while others may only expect minor assistance. Effective training programs appreciate these differences and strive to prepare ITAs for a variety of responsibilities.

Another factor adding to the complexity of ITA training is the myriad of perceptions regarding the function of ITAs on American campuses. Research has documented that ITAs are frequently criticized or challenged by American undergraduates for their language incompetence and lack of effective communication skills (Bailey, 1984; Damron, 2003). This explains why many ITA training programs are offered by English as a Second Language (ESL) or linguistics departments with the intent to improve ITAs’ English ability. However, the challenges ITAs face are not simply a matter of English proficiency. Rather, the “cultural and pedagogical differences” (Smith, et al., 1992, p. 84) between ITAs and undergraduate students are also a basis for conflict. One graduate school dean commented at an ITA orientation that ITAs should improve their ability to address criticisms from American undergraduates. This comment missed the two-sided nature of the problem (Damron, 2003). Damron also noted that a lack of willingness on the part of undergraduates to communicate with ITAs may exacerbate the problem. Mutual communication and understanding between students and ITAs provides a more comprehensive approach to the challenges both sides face.
Despite these challenges, ITAs do contribute to American higher education. In a recent study conducted in the sciences, O’Neal, Wright, Cook, Perorazio and Purkiss (2007) posited that teaching assistants influenced student retention in multiple ways, so TA training and mentoring positively impact student retention. It is important to recognize the instructional roles ITAs play and to acknowledge their contributions to the quality of instruction (Penner, 1997). Additionally, it is likely that ITAs’ pedagogical techniques vary due to the instruction they received in their home countries. As a consequence, American students with ITAs may benefit from exposure to different pedagogies and their creative ability may increase. Moreover, exposure to ITAs’ cultures also benefits American students. Given the benefits and challenges of having ITAs on American campuses, studies such as those reported here are necessary to build upon the benefits and begin minimizing the challenges.

**Theoretical Framework**

ITA trainers may intend to reach varying goals depending on the specific contexts in which the training occurs. However, one general purpose of ITA training is to socialize ITAs into the norms of institutions and departments in which they work. Organizational socialization is one theoretical framework that contributes to a greater understanding of ITAs’ experiences on American campuses. Organizational socialization is commonly thought of as the means by which organizational newcomers learn the values, norms, beliefs, and skills required to engage in organizational life (Mortimer & Simmons, 1978). Concepts of organizational socialization explain how newcomers adapt to their environments in order to become successful organizational members.

One approach to examining the organizational socialization process is a stage model (Falcione & Wilson, 1988; Feldman, 1981). These models include three phases: anticipation, encounter, and adjustment. In the case of ITAs, students come to the institution with perceptions gained through anticipatory socialization. Once students arrive on campus, they enter the encounter stage. Here they spend a significant amount of energy making sense of the differences between their anticipation of the institution and the encountered realities (Louis, 1980). The ITA training program is one tool they can use to do this. As they adapt to environmental realities, newcomers enter the adjustment phase, as a result of which many grow to feel that they truly belong to the institution as an organization. While stage models have not been proven entirely reliable through empirical testing, they are useful in that they simplify a complex process.
Another approach to organizational socialization is Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) tactic model, which views socialization as consisting of six dimensions: collective vs. individual, formal vs. informal, sequential vs. variable, fixed vs. random, serial vs. disjunctive, and investiture vs. divestiture (p. 232). An organization uses tactics in each dimension to achieve certain goals in the socialization of newcomers. This model assumes that what people learn (outcomes) is a function of how they learn it (process). Outcomes of socialization fall along a continuum, ranging from custodial to role innovation. A custodial response results in newcomers accepting the status quo. In the middle of the continuum is content innovation, where newcomers maintain a belief in the “traditional ends and norms of practice” (p. 228), but seek to improve the ways those ends and norms are achieved. Finally, newcomers may respond to socialization efforts with role innovation, in which they challenge the actual mission of the role. Van Maanen and Schien suggested that organizations should be aware of their desired outcomes, and utilize tactics that lead to those goals.

Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) model is not without critique. For example, Jones (1986) hypothesized that tactics he defined as individual (individual, informal, variable, random, disjunctive, and divestiture) would result in innovative orientations to organizational role. Conversely, tactics described by Jones as institutional (collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture) would lead to custodial role orientations. Further, Jones added a measure of self-efficacy to the mix, hypothesizing that individual self-efficacy would moderate the impact of institutionalized socialization efforts. Jones’ empirical tests of the Van Maanen and Schein model confirmed his hypotheses. Generally, he found that institutionalized tactics resulted in more custodial role orientations, while individualized efforts led to role innovation. At the same time, he found that institutionalized tactics resulted in less uncertainty or anxiety about organizational role than individual tactics. Jones also found that individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy were more inclined towards custodial role orientations when exposed to institutional tactics.

A 1996 study conducted by Ashforth and Saks confirmed several of Jones’ (1986) findings. These authors also found that institutional socialization tactics resulted in lower levels of ambiguity and uncertainty, along with higher levels of job satisfaction. They also looked at the level of individuals’ organizational identification and found that institutional socialization tactics led “newcomers to define themselves in terms of their organizational membership” (p. 170). However, these authors also found that the impact of institutional socialization tactics weakened over time, as
understandings of roles and expectations became clearer. Finally, Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) found that the content focus (i.e., organizational values, norms, and goals) of socialization theories, including Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979), was not as important as the mastery of skills, tasks, and social and group issues in the socialization process. This was particularly true in the first six to nine months in the organization.

The concept of organizational socialization is salient for higher education institutions with a mission of aiding ITAs in developing an understanding of the social, cultural, and academic norms they are expected to meet both as students and teaching assistants. However, there is some caution against the idea of attempting to integrate international students completely, which might result in their feeling disconnected from important aspects of their cultural identities, and which also could deprive the institution of the important cultural, social, and academic contributions that come from having diversity among students. Further, the process of organizational socialization for ITAs may be hindered by the fact that their values and traditions may conflict with the dominant academic culture found in American higher education institutions. Turner and Thompson’s (1993) work focused on women and graduate students of color, who experienced such values conflicts. The students in their study cited the need for a clearer understanding of the expectations of them as graduate students, which is a critical function of the ITA program. Further, developing a network of peers and faculty was seen as crucial to graduate student success. Assisting ITAs in making such connections is another focus of the training program. Considering the ITA program through an organizational socialization lens, with an eye that is open to the unique cultural backgrounds of international students helped us to examine the role of the program in smoothing ITAs’ transitions to the university environment.

Transition theory also contributes to an understanding of the experiences of ITAs. International students come to the United States from a wide variety of backgrounds and they differ in their adjustment to American higher education institutions (Perkins, Perkins, Gugilelmino, & Reiff, 1977). Transition theory “provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular point in time” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p.107).

Transition theory perceives transition as a multifaceted event, which can best be understood by considering each individual’s perception of the transition, including type, context, and impact (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The core of transition theory explores four major sets of
factors identified by Schlossberg et al., that influence an individual’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Situation refers to the context in which the transition occurs. Self includes personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Support refers to social supports, including “intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities” (Evans et al., 1998, p.107). Strategies are the coping models and skills used to deal with transition. ITAs, studying and working in a culturally different environment, face a transition that deprives them of their previous support system (Pedersen, 1991) and the challenges are obvious. ITA training programs, if conducted properly, may help ITAs familiarize themselves with the context, develop and apply appropriate coping skills and strategies, build on-campus networks, and reconstruct the “self” in the new environment. In sum, ITA training programs have the potential to smooth ITAs’ transition to the new organizational setting. Both transition and organizational socialization theory provide insights into understanding how such a program can impact participants’ transition processes.

Given this literature, the major study goals were to examine (a) how and to what extent the training program recognized ITAs’ various needs in their transition to the university; (b) how the ITA training program was designed and operated in a way that assisted ITAs’ cultural, academic, and social transition; and (c) how the ITA training program familiarized ITAs with the campus norms and thus facilitated their socialization.

METHODS

Research Context

This study was conducted at Mountain University, which is a Research I university with an enrollment of about 30,000 students. The university has an international student population of nearly 1,000 and international graduate students represent 10% of the total graduate student population. The current administration cites diversity as a major institutional goal and efforts are being made to serve underrepresented students. Additionally, the university has directed extensive emphasis and resources towards globalization. Examples of this focus include university grants available to faculty who contribute to globalization, relationships established with higher education institutions and systems worldwide, and a new course in globalization required for undergraduates to fulfill their general education requirements.

In this environment, the university’s graduate school offers a one-week ITA training program. All ITAs entering the university are required to take an automated Spoken English Test (SET) via telephone. Students
are admitted to the workshop based on their oral proficiency as determined by the SET. The one-week program is offered twice a year prior at the beginning of fall and spring semesters. The data for this study were collected during the pre-fall program in 2006, which included a total of 64 ITAs representing 16 different countries and 20 academic departments. Forty-four were males and 20 were females.

The ITA program director has ten years of experience serving international students, and ITAs in particular, at the university. In addition to the director, three program facilitators have English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching or tutoring experience. One facilitator taught EFL in Japan for over 20 years. According to the program director, all program facilitators are required to have an English background, experience with either teacher training or ESL teaching, and extensive prior work with international students and/or refugees. Both the director and facilitators participated in all sessions of the training.

Case Study Methodology

As one type of qualitative research, case study has been widely used as a research tool in a variety of fields (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). Case study is useful in that it can help researchers understand complex social phenomena. It “allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 1994, p. 3). Case study intensively describes and analyzes a single unit or bounded system over time through detailed in-depth data collection (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). For this project, a case study method allowed the systematical examination of the context in which the ITA training was developed and implemented as well as the ITAs’ perceptions about the training program. The case study focused on Mountain University’s ITA training program in the summer (pre-fall) of 2006. Consistent with case study methodology, interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to build a thick description of the experiences of ITAs.

Sampling and Participants

Because the purpose of a case study is to investigate, understand, and gain insights into the phenomenon of interest, sampling involves the purposeful selection of case(s) that are “information-rich” (Patton, 1990, p. 169) and that allow an issue to be studied in depth. The sampling strategy ensured that participants represented multiple countries of origin, a representation of gender, balance of previous experience with American campuses, and academic departments. The lead author is an ITA who participated in the training program. His familiarity with the program contributed to our
ability to build a sample that was representative of the larger ITA group.

A total of nine ITAs were recruited for interviews. We also interviewed the program director. Six ITA participants were males and three were females. Six participants were from Asia (three from China, two from India, and one from Korea), two from Africa, and one from Europe. All participants were graduate students; seven of them were pursuing doctoral degrees and two master’s degrees. Five participants were first-year graduate students in the United States and the other four ITAs had some American educational experience prior to the training. Participants were selected from six different academic departments. Departments are not identified due to the requests of several ITAs to maintain their anonymity.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for case studies relies on a variety of sources. Yin (1994) identified six frequently used data sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. To serve the purposes of this study, participant-observation, documents, and interviews were utilized. In addition to helping provide a rich contextual description of the ITA program, multiple data collection strategies aided in triangulating the data (Morrow, 2005; Stake, 1995), which contributes to the rigor of the study.

**Interviews.** In this study, semistructured individual interviews were conducted with nine participants and the director of the program. Semistructured interviews allowed researchers flexibility in asking questions, responding to participants, and communicating emerging thoughts. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews focused on exploring participants’ experiences and perceptions regarding the structure, process, strengths, and weakness of the program. The interviews were conducted in relaxing settings such as cafeterias, lounge rooms, and coffee shops. Detailed interview notes were utilized as several participants expressed unease with video and audiotaping. In addition, we conducted a two-hour interview with the ITA program director in her office to generate in-depth information regarding the program design, development, challenges, and future.

**Observations.** The lead author participated in all sessions of the ITA training. His observation notes complemented data from interviews and documents analysis. For instance, he observed and recorded interactions between undergraduates and ITAs during the pizza lunch and found that newly arrived ITAs were excited about that opportunity. He also took detailed notes during the micro-teaching sessions. He observed that first-
year ITAs in particular appeared very nervous about public speaking, and then he noted a decrease in the anxiety level as micro-teaching proceeded. These observations helped us tremendously in developing appropriate interview questions both for ITA participants and the program director to generate further information. Moreover, he engaged in many conversations with his ITA colleagues during the training process, which functioned as additional sources of information.

**Document Analysis.** The lead author had the privilege of being an ITA in the training program. He received the automated Spoken English (SET) guideline material, program agenda and various materials related to American campuses and class teaching. In addition to the materials the lead author received in the training, the program director provided documents including program sessions/timetable, program evaluations and ITA feedback, ITAs’ demographics, and staff information. These documents aided our understanding of how the ITA training program was designed as well as the means through which it reached its goals. For example, the program evaluation and ITA feedback documents both verified and questioned some of our interview findings and we were inspired to obtain further information to improve the rigor of the study.

**Data Analysis**

This study adopted the Three C’s data analysis strategy suggested by Lichtman (2006). In Three C’s analysis, the data analysis processes are described as coding – categorizing – concept (identifying themes). Lichtman broke these processes down into six sub-steps as follows.

**Step 1:** initial coding. After the collection and transcription of the individual interviews, we began initial coding. We read through each transcript and used Microsoft Word to track emerging codes. The coding process was guided by the research questions as well as the theoretical frameworks. In the process, we constantly reviewed the previous codes and added new codes to newly emergent information. This process enabled us to build a collective sense of coding and made the next step clearer.

**Step 2:** revisiting initial coding. After collecting and coding all interview and observation data, we revisited the initial codes. Based upon this examination, redundant codes were collapsed and renamed, and recurring codes were identified. This process was conducted for each individual interview and for the observations. Then, we went through the process of revisiting across all data sources.
Step 3: developing an initial list of categories. After modifying the codes, we reorganized them by categorizing them into “several lists of categories with related codes as subsets of the categories” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 169). This was accomplished by grouping sets of related codes together and determining the key linkages between them.

Step 4: modifying the initial list of categories. We combined step 4 with step 5 (revisiting categories) since they are similar in function. At this stage, we revisited and modified the initial categories based upon their importance to the purposes of the study. In other words, we either removed redundancies or combined some categories to facilitate the identification of critical elements.

Step 5: moving from categories to themes. This step involved identifying key themes that reflected the meaning of the data. In this process, we grouped our revised categories, looking for links among them and sorting them into larger themes that provided meaning to the data. Lichtman (2006) suggested that five to seven “well-developed and supported” (p. 170) themes would be sufficient for a rich analysis.

In sum, data analysis in this study “consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, [and] recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of [the] study” (Yin, 1994, p. 102). Using this analytic strategy maximized the rigor of the investigation and increased our confidence in the emergent themes.

Findings

From the various sources of data collected, it was apparent that most participants perceived the ITA training as a means for improving their knowledge base for studying and working at the university. They generally agreed that the training offered them opportunities to learn more about the campus, the dominant culture, and the community at large. At the same time, some ITAs expressed mixed feelings regarding the training. Five themes emerged from the data, each of which is described below.

FAMILIARIZING ITAS WITH THE CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

The ITA training provided ITAs, especially those new to the local area, opportunities to learn about the campus and the community at large. For those with no previous experience in the United States, the training was an eye-opener that helped smooth their transition into the institution.
One participant stated:

You know, I am from India and I came to the States several days before the workshop. Basically, I have no experience [with American campus] and ... I don’t know much about the city. I think the workshop gave me a lot of information and I can know the place better.

All newcomers agreed on this point and many expressed appreciation for the information provided through the workshop to facilitate their understanding of the living and working environment. Another participant commented, “I think the training is very helpful... I only knew something about the school from internet before I flew here.” Shortly after she added, “After the training, I knew a lot [of] support resources.” This statement was consistent with the program director’s comment that the training intends to help “students know where to get what support.”

However, ITAs with previous experience on American campuses expressed different views on this dimension. One noted, “Although, it was my first year [at Mountain University], the general information regarding American campus didn’t help me much because I have a Master’s in California and ... I knew a lot [of American campus] already.” This perception was echoed by another participant, who was in the second year of a doctoral program: “generally speaking, I knew pretty much about the environment and I don’t think that kind of information will help me. But, it may help first year ITAs.” The program director explained that some international graduate students might be GAs (graduate assistants) or RAs (research assistants) at the beginning of their time at the university and she encouraged academic departments to have students (GAs, RAs, and TAs) screened for oral proficiency using the SET at an earlier time. This would make it possible for the ITA workshop to provide necessary services earlier. This theme was important to our understanding of how the training program served ITAs in their transition and socialization into the university and community at large.

Building Networks

Most participants considered ITA training a platform through which to build networks or connections. These “networks of friends” (Evans et al., 1998) are important in that they compensate for some of ITAs’ loss of previous “support system” (Pedersen, 1991), which comes from moving away from these supports. One participant said, “I love to have friends... maybe just talking to people. The workshop helped [me] to get know somebody and to have this kind of connections. For instance, I could not know you if
I did not participate in the workshop.” The same participant expressed the desire for more activities and ITA interactions, suggesting that follow-up meetings or gatherings should be organized to reinforce networks and friendships. Some participants emphasized the importance of getting to know people with the same or similar cultural backgrounds. One participant stated: “I need to know some people from our country and… we may play together later on the weekends and to share our problems.”

International students face various challenges while studying and working on American campuses. International students, compared with their American counterparts, are not as likely to seek psychological and counseling support when encountering emotional difficulties (Johnson, 1993; Sandhu, 1994). A supportive network may buffer ITAs who are faced with challenging times. Particularly for newcomers, establishing networks may relieve homesickness and ease transitions to the new environment.

**Improving Presentation and Teaching Skills**

Both interviews and data from the ITA training program evaluations showed that ITAs particularly benefit from sessions aimed at improving their presentation and teaching skills. More than 50 of the 64 ITAs in the program indicated that the following sessions were helpful: information about teaching duties, TA roles and teaching tips & strategies, the video “Teaching American Students” and discussion, the video “Success with Presentations” and micro-teaching. In addition, during his observations, the lead author noted that ITAs were usually nervous at the beginning of micro-teaching and gradually became more comfortable with public speaking. Participants indicated that they were challenged by and satisfied with micro-teaching sessions.

Participants in the study, to a varying degree, described educational and cultural differences between their home countries and the United States. Commenting about how the skill-based training sessions helped mediate these differences, one participant stated:

> I don’t know about your country, in my country, during my college years, I never made presentations. I was so nervous talking in front of people...I have public speaking problems. The micro-teaching was very helpful. I was nervous…but it helps a lot and actually we should have more micro-teaching practice. The feedbacks from other ITAs were very nice.

Because ITAs work primarily with undergraduate students, undergraduates were brought to the training to interact with them, providing a sense of what American teaching looks like. The program director stated:
“The involvement of undergraduates in the professional preparation of… ITAs greatly benefits both groups and enhances learning and instruction in ITA classes.” This idea was echoed by Pae (2001) who noted that involving undergraduates in ITA training results in two advantages. First, it leads undergraduates to “more exposure to the general characteristics of ITAs including accents, attitudes, and cultural differences” (p. 75). Second, ITAs can speak with undergraduates in ways that help both their socialization to the institution and their teaching.

For many ITAs, these sessions were their first close interactions with American students. During the pizza lunch, conversations were lively and supportive. Moreover, most participants appreciated undergraduates’ feedback during the micro-teaching sessions and many desired even more of this type of conversation. This is illustrated by the following comment:

I just came to the United States and I do not know much about American class teaching. Interacting with undergraduate is good…but I want to go to real [class] settings to experience that. Also, you may realized, there were only a few undergraduates…and we just can not get enough what you want. I would love to have more formal interactions with them.

To further improve ITAs’ communication and teaching, the training included a pronunciation crash session. While many participants expressed their satisfaction with this session, some doubted its effectiveness. For instance, one participant noted: “It is impossible to improve your pronunciation through one session and accent is accent.” Moreover, participants with American campus experience expressed concerns that the skill-based sessions (particularly the three-afternoon micro-teaching) were too long. One participant, a second-year doctoral student, stated that “even though I was a grader last year, my knowledge about American teaching goes beyond the basic stuff taught in the ITA program.” However, he added, “I think the sessions are just…great for new ITAs.” In other words, ITAs with American campus experience expressed a desire for training more clearly relevant to their individual needs and experience. The program director noted in our interview that future programs were designed to accommodate these differences. For instance, ITAs with a master’s degree from American higher education institutions will be excused from micro-teaching and some other sessions.

Sharing Cultural Differences

ITA training can be challenging work because it serves individuals with a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, the pro-
gram director and facilitators must appreciate and accommodate for these
differences. One example discussed by the director in our interview was
her developing awareness that Indian students may be more individually
oriented while Chinese students are collectivism oriented.

Participants agreed that, overall, the workshop provided great oppor-
tunities to promote cultural sharing. Three participants talked a lot about
the “Cultural Trunk” activity, in which ITAs share artifacts or personal items
that reflect their cultures and histories with the group. This session im-
pressed participants. One noted, “I love it…we need more activities like
that.” He continued after a brief pause: “I think it will be great if we can
bring some traditional foods to share.” One ITA wrote in the evaluation
that “the cultural trunk event was awesome as it helps everyone learn
about each others culture.” Another commented, “The culture trunk was
really great. [It] gave us a lot of exposure about other cultures.” This finding
indicated that the ITA training program functioned as a stage for sharing
where ITAs may become more comfortable with cultural differences, thus
facilitating their transition process.

Mixed Feelings Regarding Program Design

The ITA workshop covered many aspects of ITAs’ lives in the United
States and on the university campus. Program evaluations showed that 51
out of 64 participants believed that the workshop was a good use of their
time. Echoing this sentiment, a first-year master’s student said:

I finished my college in my country. After that, I worked in a company for two
years. Basically, I don’t have much knowledge about the United States and
the [American] campus. I think…the workshop was just fine for me to gain
knowledge about that. I mean a lot of stuff about studying and working here.
It was just great!

Six of the nine participants we interviewed made similar positive com-
ments regarding the program design. However, some made suggestions
for improving the program design. One participant commented: “Although
the workshop was very good, it would be better…if we were notified of the
schedule in advance.” Also, the “program coordinator [director] should re-
alize that some ITAs even do not have their own computers in their rooms
and if you email them tomorrow’s agenda…or stuff at night, they have to
come back to computer lab to get it.” Overall these comments suggest that
ITA programs should consider ITAs’ personal situations.

Two participants suggested that the ITA program should be designed
to reflect the specific needs of individual academic departments since ITA
responsibilities may vary widely from department to department. As discussed earlier, ITAs may be assigned responsibilities varying from autonomous classroom teaching to test grading (Bauer & Tanner, 1994) and this is one way that departmental culture impacts ITAs’ experiences. One participant commented:

I don’t think they should simply put ITAs together without knowing their specific assignments first. To sponsor the project [program], the graduate school should survey all participants, and ITAs should be grouped in terms of the similarity of their responsibilities.

In addition, one participant suggested that it would be very helpful if ITAs were given the freedom to choose which session(s) they want to participate in. “We know what we need,” she said. The program director was sympathetic with this concern but noted, “We only have limited resources.” As an example, she discussed how difficult it was to recruit American undergraduates to volunteer in the workshop two weeks before the regular academic term begins, thus limiting the ability to target individual needs. However, being aware of the differences across departments, the director noted that one major focus of the training is to help ITAs develop the cultural and communication skills necessary to navigate their individual departments.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The ITA program studied in this project clearly has an impact on its student participants. Students found that the introduction provided to the university in the training was helpful, they noted that they gained necessary skills during the training, and they appreciated the opportunity to develop networks both among international students and across campus. These findings were consistent both in our interviews with participants and, generally, in the program evaluations. While these findings are certainly encouraging, there are deeper implications when they are related back to the literature that guided this study’s data collection and analysis. When considered through the lens of organizational socialization and transition theories, it is evident that the ITA training program plays a role in smoothing the transition of international teaching assistants in a number of ways.

First, the findings of the study supported Ashforth and Saks’ (1996) notion that institutional socialization tactics lead to lower levels of ambiguity and uncertainty in newcomers. A program such as the ITA training program, which is conducted in a group setting during a specific period of time, is considered institutional according to Jones’ (1986) typography. ITA training participants noted that they felt the program helped them
understand their roles as teaching assistants. Although, as the participants indicated, the program cannot socialize the students to their departmental norms directly, as the program director noted, the program does assist students in understanding the context of American higher education and the general expectations of the university regarding teaching assistants. In these ways, uncertainty about their roles was reduced as a result of their participation in the training.

Second, Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) argued that what was most important about organizational socialization was not the focus on organizational norms and goals but the emphasis on skill development and the opportunity to make social connections. These authors noted that adjusting to organizational life requires more than just understanding the culture. It was clear from the respondents’ comments that the skill development portion of the training was extremely valuable. ITAs commented on the value of micro-teaching and meeting with American undergraduates. They noted the need to develop teaching skills and appreciated opportunities to do so. Further, several participants commented on the value of meeting other ITAs leading to the development of peer support networks.

Finally, it was clear that ITAs used the training program as a way to make sense of the new environment in the way described by stage models of organizational socialization (Falcione & Wilson, 1988; Feldman, 1981; Louis, 1980). The program sessions, including orientation, undergraduate involvement, and videotaped presentations, allowed newcomers to understand the institutional culture and norms, thus easing their transition to institutional life (Mortimer & Simmons, 1978). These activities also helped ITAs be mindful of and prepared for potential culture and value-based challenges (Turner & Thompson, 1993). ITAs were provided the space to make sense of how the institution matched or did not fit their expectations and the ITA training improved their contextual compatibility and socialization.

Related to the issue of diversity and cultural adjustments, numerous scholars (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995; Zhai, 2002) have articulated the adjustment challenges international students face on American campuses. ITAs, as a distinctive group of international students, often face complaints from students and parents regarding communication concerns (Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Penner, 1997). Moreover, an intimidating challenge first-year ITAs must manage is balancing their academic pursuits, TA responsibilities, and personal lives. It is important to note that it was evident from our conversations with the program director, that the goal of the ITA training as a socialization tool is not to integrate international students into the dominant community’s norms but to pro-
vide them with the skills to navigate a new environment while recognizing the benefits their different approaches to teaching and learning provide to the institution and its students. In this way, the training responds to the concerns voiced by Turner and Thompson (1993) regarding values and cultural conflicts, by helping students develop supportive networks on campus. Further, the inclusion of undergraduate students in the training is one way the program attempts to educate the campus community about the benefits of having ITAs in classrooms. Interestingly, the program director noted that she would like to expand this component of the program, both to increase ITAs’ skills in working with American students and to broaden the understanding of the ITA role across campus.

Given the challenges ITAs face, the ITA training, and the sessions for improving their presentation and teaching skills in particular, increased their teaching and coping skills as well their confidence level. As a consequence, their psychological stress level is likely to be reduced. Additionally, the training enables ITAs to build networks of friends, as well as institutional and community supports (Evans et al., 1998), that are crucial components for facilitating transition. Finally, ITA training may impact ITAs’ self-identity, that is, how they perceive their multiple roles on American campuses. All of these positively contribute to individuals’ transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

However, we argue that those involved with ITA training programs on American campuses should not ignore the fact that ITAs’ performance is not a one-sided matter. For instance, in response to students’ and parents’ complaints about ITAs’ English proficiency, higher education institutions should consider the interactive aspects of this concern. It may be helpful to embrace the argument that the “classroom is a dynamic place where quality instruction is largely dependent on mutual interaction between...ITAs and undergraduates” (Pae, 2001, p. 72). Moreover, complaints about ITAs’ English proficiency may be a reflection of deep cultural, social, and pedagogical differences and biases. Both sides are equally important to resolving these issues. Strategies should be developed to promote mutual understanding and appreciation. We recommend that ITA program directors should make interactions between undergraduates and ITAs an integral aspect of the training. Given the difficulties of recruiting undergraduates in the summer, ITA program directors may need to negotiate contracts with departments and graduate schools to encourage undergraduates’ participation through credit-hour leverage. For instance, those participating in ITA training may obtain one credit hour or be recognized in other ways. This would communicate that undergraduates are not volunteers. Rather, they are program
facilitators with full commitments to the program. Additionally, empirical research studies should be conducted to investigate the most suitable interactive patterns between undergraduates and ITAs to facilitate mutual understanding as well as ITAs’ transition and socialization.

Although ITAs generally appreciate the training program, our study showed that ITAs with previous American campus experiences perceive the program differently from the newcomers because of their distinctive needs. In other words, ITAs with previous American campus experience may require different programs or approaches. To mediate these challenges, higher education institutions should provide sufficient resources for ITA training, which ITA training directors may allocate to programs addressing different groups’ needs. Institutional administrators and policymakers must acknowledge the role of ITA training in enhancing both the experiences of ITAs and undergraduates. This acknowledgement and the corresponding allocation of resources is particularly important given the growing emphasis on globalization.

Moreover, the results of this study illuminated the need for ITA training programs to address the challenges of accommodating individual department needs. One possibility for addressing this is college-based ITA training programs coordinated by institutional ITA offices. One advantage of a college-based ITA training program that involves faculty, staff, and students would be assisting ITAs in becoming familiar with their specific study and work contexts and familiarizing them with their department-specific responsibilities. In addition, college-based ITA training may help ITAs build disciplinary networks that contribute to an easier transition and socialization (Schlossberg et al., 1995). It is important not to disregard the importance of institution-wide training. Rather, the two are complementary in practice. Further studies examining the effectiveness of college-institution mixed ITA training would contribute to the evolution of more effective program structures and designs.

The last but not least important recommendation for practice is that in the era of internationalization and globalization, American colleges and universities should increase their willingness to institutionalize ITA preparation and ultimately make it an integral part of their campus cultures. Achieving this goal requires strong commitments from all parties, including researchers, ITA program directors and trainers, institutional administrators, faculty, and students, as well as the appropriate allocation of institutional resources.

Although this study is not generalizable to all institutions that operate ITA training, it has highlighted several important considerations for
institutions interested in improving the effectiveness of their ITA training programs. The results indicate that ITA training does, in fact, contribute to the socialization of ITAs and to their transition into the institution. Additionally, given the potential benefits of utilizing ITAs for both international students and domestic undergraduates, institutions sincerely interested in the possibility of globalization and internationalization may want to consider some of the findings presented here.

REFERENCES


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