

# Graduate Assistant Tip Sheet

Northern Michigan University, Department of Mathematics

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What does it mean to teach as a Grad Student?
2. What to expect from your students?
3. How to teach to Mathemaphobes?
4. How to minimize risk & create a respectable environment?
5. What goes on your departmental webpage?
6. What is FERPA?
7. How do I manage my time?
8. How do I manage the classroom?

## **Advice for first time instructors**

1. When in doubt ask Linda or Josh.
2. Get feedback about your teaching from both students & faculty.
3. Learn to cater your teaching to your personality. Some people will tell you that you must have personality X in order to be a good teacher, but that's not true.
4. Write legibly, with awareness of whitespace & don't talk to the board.
5. Teaching feels very immediate and important so it's easy to put lots of time into it. However, you can put an infinite amount of time into teaching and not all of that time will help your students learn. It's important to figure out how to manage and protect your time so that teaching doesn't take over everything.
  - a. Practice setting time limits on the amount of time you spend on teaching work so that it doesn't absorb all of your time.
  - b. Pay attention to the ways you spend your time that have the greatest impact on student success. Generally, time spent interacting with students (office hours, review sessions, lectures) is much more effective for helping students learn than time spent preparing for interacting with students (writing long & detailed homework solutions, constructing course resources from scratch, etc.)
6. Emphasize more on interaction with students. It is more effective to discuss math in an interactive environment than just deliver or lecture it.
7. It's ok to be vulnerable with your students. They will probably appreciate hearing about the struggles you've had learning math and find that encouraging.
8. Stay organized. It can be very helpful to have electronic copies of all notes, quizzes, exams and handouts. It can be helpful to post some of these materials for students.
9. Learn your student's names, they will appreciate it.
10. Write a detailed syllabus with a policy that the instructor can make modifications to the syllabus at any time during the semester.

## **General Advice**

1. Get help from a lot of people – and help others. Don't feel bad about asking any questions.
2. Don't be embarrassed about not knowing something or needing to ask for help from your fellow students or professors.
3. Don't compare yourself to others! Nobody knows what they're doing. While people might sound like they know way more than you, they are probably just as insecure as you are. It matters only that you *want* to be here.
4. Grades are not as important anymore (within reason). What is important is understanding.
5. During graduate school, you will need people to serve the following three roles: advisor, mentor and advocate. Most likely, one person will not fill all three of these roles. An advisor will help guide your research and your career, a mentor is someone you can confide in and discuss the gritty truth with, and an advocate is someone who will speak up on your behalf when you are not in the room.
6. Work-life balance is important! Find something outside of school that you like to do, so your identity, self-worth and happiness have a buffer against the ups & downs of graduate school.
  - a. For some, this means working every day of the week, but not too much on one day.
  - b. For others, this means having at least one full day off.
  - c. This balance might mean several weeks of dedicated and focused work, followed by a few weeks of moderation.
  - d. Figure out what works by trying new things until something works.
  - e. Try to get 8 hours of sleep every night.
7. Take advantage of your time at NMU – connect with the faculty, the community, the lake & the winter.