

2014 Teaching Conditions for Graduate Students at Harvard Survey

In the spring of 2014, the Graduate Student Council conducted a survey of current graduate students at Harvard to investigate teaching conditions. This survey followed up on the GSC's winter 2012-13 survey on student satisfaction. The 2013 survey demonstrated that graduate students' satisfaction varied widely, and indicated certain areas (such as advisor-advisee relations) that significantly determined levels of perceived well-being. With the 2014 survey, the GSC hoped not to measure satisfaction, but to characterize the typical teaching workload and to pinpoint problem areas. Accordingly, the discussion that follows concentrates on the most troubling results.

These results paint a picture of a teaching staff that is overworked and under-guided. Across the board, a significant number of TFs reported unclear expectations, or a reality that does not match what is officially expected of them. An overwhelming majority reported working more than they are required to—for most of them, at the cost of making progress on their degree. Half of TFs reported receiving minimal or no teacher training, and most reported that the maximum section or lab size they felt they could lead effectively was lower than the official target sizes set by the Office for Undergraduate Education.

Harvard has made clear its commitment to advancing the quality of undergraduate education through cutting-edge pedagogical innovations. It is imperative that the university back these efforts up with an equally strong commitment to the basic components of a college degree.

Profile of Respondents

The survey received 1224 responses in total, or 30% of GSAS students. While nonrandom sampling means that the results do not always reflect percentages confidently, in many cases the absolute numbers are significant in themselves.

Responses were spread across the divisions, with 24% of respondents from humanities departments, 46% from natural science departments, and 30% from social science departments. This means the social sciences and humanities programs were overrepresented relative to natural science students, who make up a majority of GSAS students. Given that natural science students typically teach for fewer semesters than other students over the course of their degree, the responses of more experienced teachers are probably overrepresented relative to those who have taught fewer semesters.

Master's students, who make up about 4% of the GSAS student body, were slightly underrepresented. 26 respondents, or 2%, were enrolled in Master's degree programs, with the remainder enrolled in PhD programs. While the overall response rate was 30%, only 16% of Master's students answered the survey. Since the majority of Master's student respondents either reported 0 teaching semesters at Harvard, or left that question blank, the survey results in the aggregate reflect the experience of PhD students.

The gender breakdown reflects the proportions in the GSAS student body, which is 44% female. 45% of survey respondents identified themselves as female, and 50% as male (the remainder choosing not to identify themselves). With one major exception (noted below), responses to the survey did not vary widely by gender.

The majority of respondents (54%) had only taught one or two semesters, while 15% had taught three or four, 10% had taught five or six, and 4.4% had taught more than four semesters. It is not clear how well this reflects the experience level of Harvard's TFs as a whole, but responses did not vary widely by experience level.

Expectations and Course Head Practices:

Respondents were asked about two types of expectations for TF work: the *kind* of work they were expected to do (as opposed to tasks the course head is responsible for); and the *hours* they were expected to work. Our results suggest that task expectations are clearer than time expectations. 56% agreed that their responsibilities were clearly explained to them, while 26% disagreed. By contrast, 37% agreed that the time commitment of TF work had been clearly explained, and 37% disagreed. Regardless, in both cases at least a quarter of TFs feel that the expectations of them have not been made clear. In the open-ended responses, TFs consistently expressed that expectations and workload vary by course head, and that for this reason, it is important for TFs to receive clear guidelines for each course that they teach.

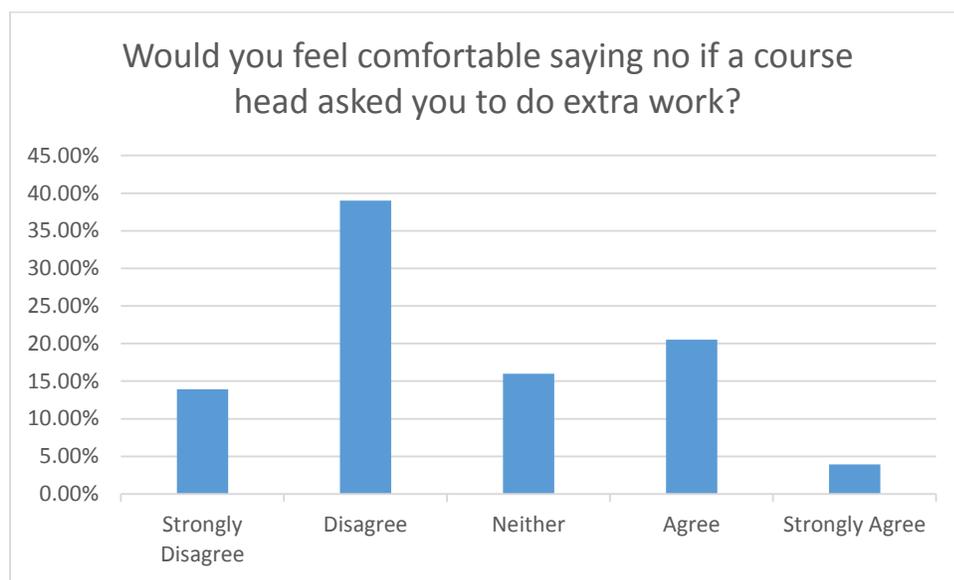
One clear area of concern was in the ability to say no: around half of respondents expressed discomfort with telling their advisor or course head that they would not do work beyond their expected teaching responsibilities. This number varied significantly by gender: 64% of women said they would feel uncomfortable saying no if their advisor asked them to do extra work, compared to 49% of men. At the same time, about 16% said that their advisor had actually asked them to do teaching work exceeding expectations, and there was no gender disparity in this number. Nonetheless, we may infer that a greater proportion of women asked to do extra work actually end up doing it.

Training:

About half of respondents said that they had minimal or no training for teaching, and about half said they received some or significant training. In the open-ended question on teacher training, 54% of responses had the word "Bok" in them, suggesting that the Bok Center is a major component of teacher training for TFs. Many responses listed only the Bok Center Teaching Conference. At the other end, TFs who reported "significant training" most commonly listed pedagogy courses in their departments, followed by Bok Center courses. The responses suggest variation in the quality of departmental teaching courses: while almost every person reporting significant training had attended one, so had a number of those reporting minimal training. One TF wrote, "The course [in my department] is more of a support group for sharing experiences, not particularly pedagogical or structured." Another wrote that their course "offers a good amount of practice (nano-teaching with videotaping etc.) with a range of experienced lecturers who can

provide feedback and information about the Harvard undergraduate curriculum.” More typical, however, were the many responses that listed only “Bok Center teaching conference,” or “Bok Center lectures,” or some variation.

Only 43% of respondents said that course heads set clear academic misconduct policies. Since Harvard’s university-wide policy gives course heads extremely wide latitude in determining what constitutes academic misconduct, this number is cause for alarm. Many respondents described scenarios in which the policy was clear, but the course head encouraged them not to pursue action when they received work that violated it.



Experience of Teaching:

It is clear from these results that the official workload expectations do not match up with reality. Officially, full-time equivalence is calculated on the basis of a 35-hour workweek, meaning that graduate students should be working 7 hours per week per discussion section or lab group. By contrast, the median survey response, both overall and at each level of teaching experience, was 10-12 hours weekly per fifth. The survey also uncovered a wide range of variation. 21% of respondents said they worked, on average, 8 or fewer hours per week per section; while 16% reported working 16 hours or more—more than double the official expected amount.

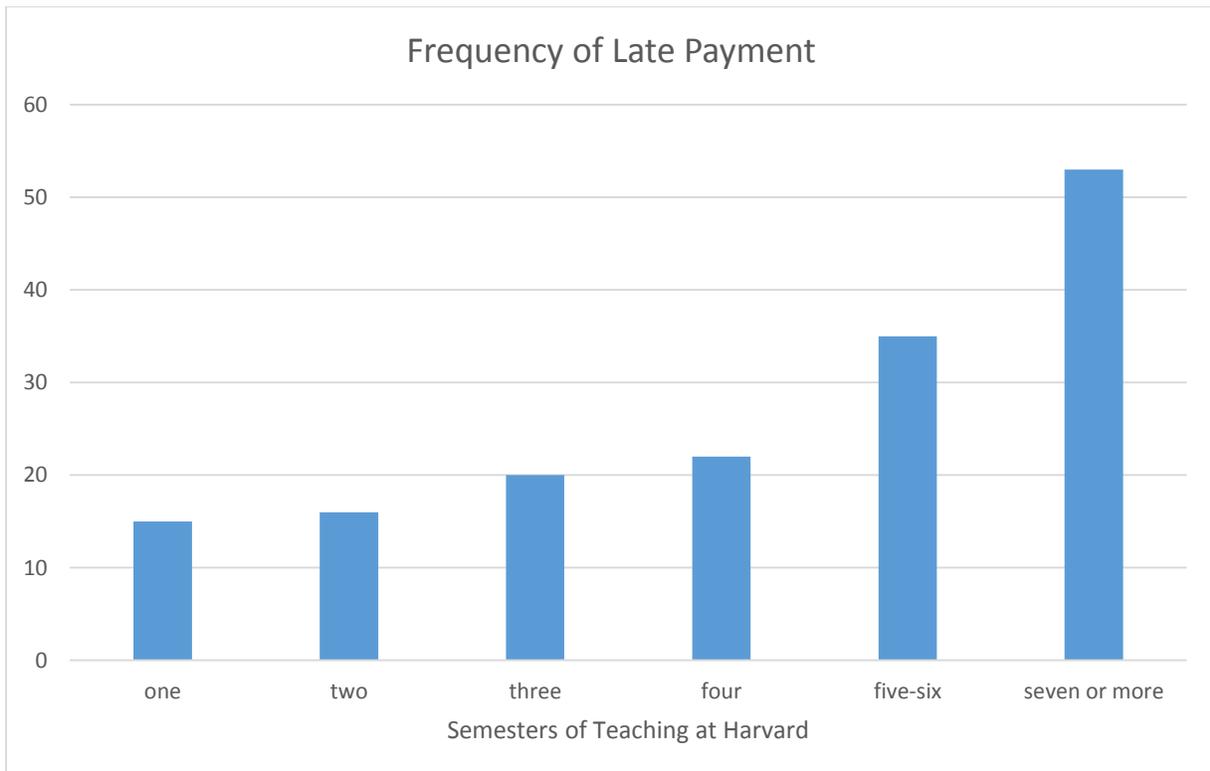
Teaching frequently gets in the way of research.

49% of respondents felt they would be able to make better progress to degree if section or lab sizes were smaller, and 41% said that teaching had been a major obstacle to degree completion. By contrast, only 27% said they had been able to make significant progress on their degree while teaching. Many respondents felt that, as one put it, “my teaching semesters are effectively time off from writing my dissertation.” Some felt that teaching deserved this time investment, either

because teaching was important to them personally, or because it is an important part of a PhD. One respondent wrote, “I never expected to make any progress on my dissertation while teaching. It’s a serious commitment.” Others, however, reported a sense of exhaustion, and complained about having research expectations placed on top of teaching expectations. “By the end of the day,” one TF explained, “I’m usually too exhausted to do any real research. My schedule right now is to teach and prepare to teach...during the regular 9-5 workday, and [do] research on evenings and weekends” Respondents who did not feel teaching impeded their research tended to discount the variable cost of more students, feeling that most of their course preparation involved developing materials, attending lectures, and leading sections, rather than giving personalized feedback.

Late Payment

20% of respondents (200 people) said they had experienced more than a two week delay in payment. Qualitative responses suggest that the primary cause of late payment is being hired after the start of the semester, and breaking down responses confirms that late payment increases in probability from the fourth to the fifth semester more than from the second to the third. While the problem is more prevalent for students in non-guaranteed teaching years, students with guaranteed teaching still experience a significant rate of late payment. In absolute terms, 88 students in their first year of teaching reported experiencing more than a two-week payment delay in 2013-14.



Section Sizes:

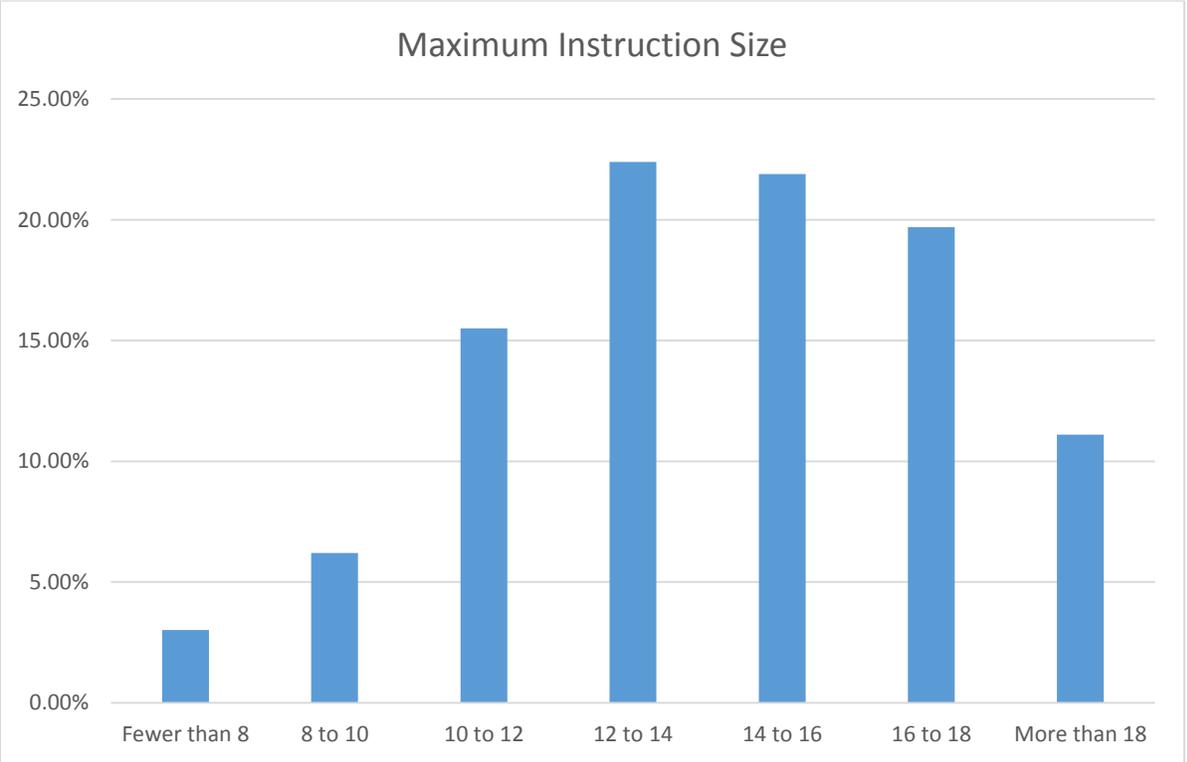
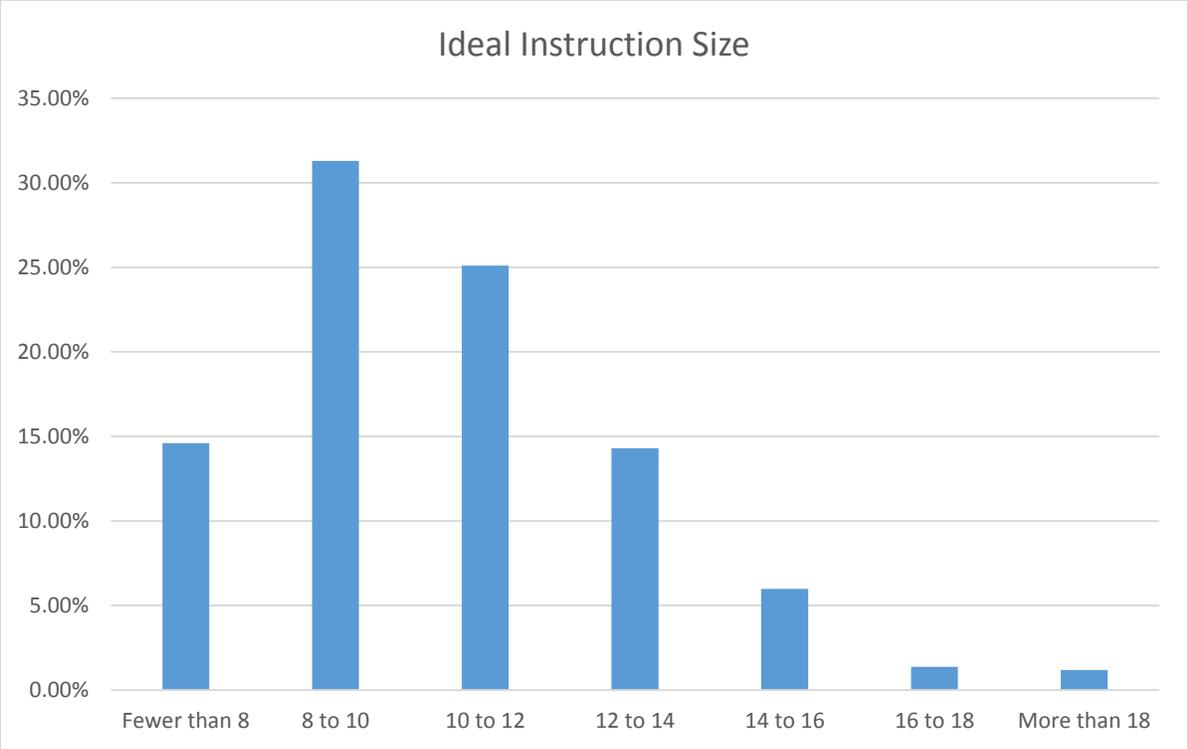
Since the Harvard Teaching Campaign is currently asking for discussion and lab sections to be capped at 12, and since the GSC has officially endorsed the Campaign, section sizes are an area of special interest in this survey. The results on time commitment, discussed above, suggest that a reduction in section sizes is needed for workload reasons. Smaller sections will ensure that students are being paid fairly for hours worked, and allow students to make better progress to degree. It is also possible that a reduced workload would increase the quality of the teaching that many GSAS students do: as the number of papers graded and emails answered drops, students will have relatively more time to prepare for discussion.

Another source of information on the pedagogical value of smaller sections is the opinions of GSAS students themselves. Survey results suggest that GSAS students would prefer much smaller section sizes, and that they find current sizes unreasonable. The survey did not ask respondents to give an opinion about current section sizes in general. Rather, respondents were asked to evaluate the impact of section size on their ability to lead discussion and to give written feedback. They were asked four questions: the *ideal* section size for giving instruction, the *ideal* section size for giving feedback, the *maximum* section size for giving instruction, and the *maximum* section size for giving feedback.

In general, respondents clustered around 10-14 students as their preferred section size. The median response was 10-12, splitting closely between 8-10 and 10-12. Only 9% of students felt that the ideal size of a section for instructional purposes was 14 or greater. The median response for maximum section size was 14-16. The responses were roughly the same for grading workload: responses split at about 10 students as the ideal number for written feedback, and 14 as the maximum.

In the open-ended section, respondents most typically favored smaller sections on the grounds that discussions larger than a certain size are not coherent, or do not allow everyone enough speaking time. Another concern was that TFs could not give feedback to more than a certain number of students given their other commitments. Some people suggested that different kinds of courses (discussion, lab, problem set review) had different ideal or maximum sizes.

Respondents who reported a maximum section size of more than 18 students tended either to express concern that too-small sections would hamper the flow of discussion, or to suggest that section sizes at other colleges and universities reach much higher than 18 (i.e., that Harvard TFs are privileged). Frequently, in these responses, TFs decoupled classroom management from feedback, arguing that TFs could manage large discussions effectively but that excessive grading workload remained a problem.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Reduce Section Sizes

As a matter of fairness, either graduate student TFs should be paid in fractions of a 50-hour workweek, or section sizes should be reduced to 10-15 students. Given the pedagogical value of smaller sections, especially for inexperienced teachers, we recommend reducing sizes.

Clarify Work Expectations

Every department should actively review TF workload and course head practices to see whether TFs are overburdened, and whether particular course heads give their TFs work beyond official expectations. Many students do not feel comfortable speaking up about their workload, so it is Harvard's responsibility to find those who are working too much. In addition, as Harvard addresses the climate for women on its campus, it should consider pressure to do extra work alongside other forms of gender discrimination.

Improve Coordination

Harvard should pay its graduate students in guaranteed teaching years automatically, without waiting for appointments. It should be Harvard's responsibility to identify students receiving external fellowships in lieu of teaching appointments.

Harvard should build a centralized platform for finding and advertising teaching appointments, to reduce the number of appointments made after the beginning of the semester.

Improve Teacher Training

GSAS, in cooperation with the Bok Center, should review the pedagogy training programs in its departments to identify model programs and encourage other departments to follow their lead.