Policies for Assigning ENVS TAships

Assigning TAships each semester relies on multiple criteria and is done by consensus by the Graduate Committee. In some semesters the number of TA positions is larger than or matches the number of students applying for a TA, while in other semesters far more students request a TA than the number of positions we have. The process used to decide on TA offers has four steps:

1. The Associate Graduate Director, in consultation with the rest of the Graduate Committee, makes a simple yes/no assignment for each student for each of the criteria listed below, other than instructor preferences (# 7).
2. Using these scores, we make a pool of the students to prioritize for TAships. This pool is typically somewhat larger than the total number of TAships we have. None of the criteria are paramount, beyond the first one. However, when we need to prioritize due to too few TA lines for the students asking for support, we use all these criteria to decide on the short list of students to consider.
3. This list is forwarded to the faculty who get TAs. They each provide their rankings and reasoning.
4. We then assign TAs from the pool based on match and preference of the instructors as well as other criteria described below to maximize the teaching quality in our courses and the equitable support of our graduate students.

Criteria used in assessing TA requests:

1. Guaranteed support. This criterion is whether we have an explicit, written commitment to the student and/or their advisor for a TAship. Most such guarantees are for incoming students or to honor start-up commitments for new faculty members that they are 'spending' on a particular student. Whether or not to fund these students is essentially not a choice that the Graduate Committee can make.

2. Degree Track. Whether or not the student is on the PhD track in ENVS. The program has a greater commitment to funding doctoral students than MS students, and no commitment to fund students in other programs.

3. Academic Progress. Is the student making good progress on their degree, relative to their time in the program, and as reflected in their annual report, submitted in the fall semester. Progress includes research progress, advancing through the two exams of the doctoral program, and a clear plan for finishing the degree. This last criterion is especially important for students in years 5 and beyond, when there should be clear evidence of a plan and progress towards completion of the dissertation in order to be a priority for TA funding. For students earlier in the program, advancement through the two exams should be clear or delays should be for good reasons. Students in their 6th year or beyond will also generally have lower priority for funding unless progress on the dissertation has been considerable and finishing plans are clear and immediate.

Consideration is also made for any and all extenuating circumstances that may have delayed academic progress but that are out of the student's control.

4. Past ENVS support. Priority is given to those who have received less ENVS TA/GPTI support since matriculating into the program, given their time in the program. The goal of this consideration is to ensure equitable use of the common program resources. Students vary widely in how many TA/GPTI semesters they have received from ENVS. To give a sense of this variance, data for students applying for TAs for Fall 2020 show are shown in the figure to the right (year in program is classified for the 2020-2021 academic year). Note that data are jittered to better show overlapping points.

ENVS TA/GPTI semesters

year in program in 20-21
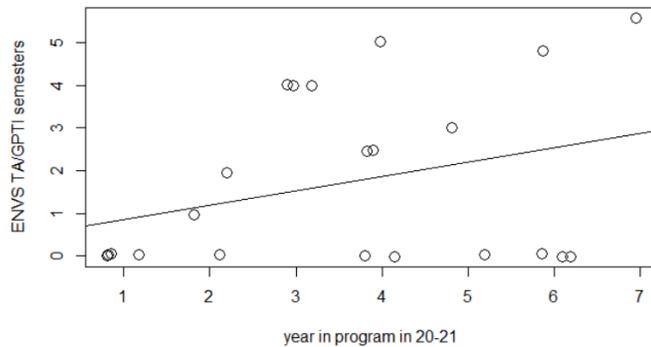
5. Past teaching performance. Students who have a record of less than adequate teaching performance will not be prioritized for TAships or GPTI positions. Indicators of concerning teaching performance can include low (in the 3's or lower) FCQ's, troubling recommendations from a supervisor, or credible reports of unprofessional behavior.

6. Other support. If a student has an alternative form of support that is guaranteed and in hand, we do not prioritize them for TA support when TAs are limited. This is assessed or confirmed by inquires made to either students and/or their advisors.

7. Preferences of faculty teaching the courses with TAs. Instructors are asked to rank the students who have expressed interest in TAing that instructor's course. Legitimate reasons for instructor preferences include: a) Familiarity with course material needed to be an effective TA, including previous course work, research experience, or having previously TAed the same or a similar course, b) training needs for students, including but not limited to recommendations or requirements for TAing made by first year guidance committees or qualifying exam committees. It is worth noting that these criteria can lead to prioritization of both highly experienced and inexperienced students for a particular TAship. Teaching is part of graduate training, and thus the most experienced TAs are not necessarily prioritized for TAships.

8. Other considerations. Multiple other considerations occasionally arise in consideration of TA assignments, although the considerations listed above are generally paramount. An example of additional considerations arose in considering fall 2020 TAships, when the grad committee considered information on impacts of Covid-19, which delayed the defenses of two students who would definitely have otherwise finished in the summer term. Considerations like these are extremely rare.