

HTA Missive

Meta-TAs

Fall 2008

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0 About this document

This document is intended to get new and returning HTAs on track with various administrative, technical, and logistical practices in the department.

It is a permanent working draft, and is always under revision. It’s intended as an educational resource for head TAs, and to this end, your feedback is needed! Please let us know what kind of things should be added, changed, or removed.

We realize that a lot of the stuff in here won’t apply to every course and haven’t put in much language like “if your course has programs” or “if your course has multiple HTAs.” Reducing this kind of bias might be a good thing, so if some sections seem particularly course-model-specific, please point them out.

Lastly, this is a public document. Everything said in here is theoretically available to every UTA, professor, and CS student. Fundamentally speaking, it’s beneficial to have it be so—if people are uncomfortable that students know about some policy or another, chances are that it’s the policy that needs to change.

0.1 Executive summary

10 reasons to read this document.

- How much are you getting paid?
- Timeline: what needs to get done by when?

- The university has rules about hiring. Do you know them?
- Don't reinvent the wheel with your course—you can benefit from the experience of the HTAs that came before you
- Know your budget for feeding yourself and your staff, and how to spend it
- Get yourself and your staff access to rooms and supplies
- Keep course materials on the web and in your directories secure
- The course directory is a mess... what to do.
- Cope with collaboration: you need to know about moss and university policies
- What can the meta-TAs do for you?

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0.3 URLs

If you're accessing the URLs in this document from outside the department, you need to use the public web server rather than the internal web server. You should just replace `http://web-int/` with `http://www.cs.brown.edu/`.

0.4 Attachments

- the ugrad missive
`http://web-int/courses/ta/pubs/ugrad_missive.ps`
- the draft HTA job description
`http://web-int/ugrad/jobs/hta/`
- the HTA missive (this)
`http://web-int/courses/ta/pubs/hta_missive.pdf`

1 Congratulations!

Congratulations on being hired as a head TA! Whether you've done this several times before or this is your first time, we hope you're excited about the opportunity to work closely with your professor to administer, support, and improve your course and that you're looking forward to the new challenges you'll manage to seek out (and stumble upon) next semester.

As a head TA, you're given access to a lot of knowledge about the course, historically and for the current semester, and you're entrusted with a pretty significant "big-picture" responsibility. Given that your staff (and student body, for that matter) are composed of your peers, you may find yourself in some rather awkward situations that, as an HTA as opposed to a UTA, you'll have to deal with.

Don't be overwhelmed by it. Try not to feel like you have to control everything. Keep communication open between the professor and the students and between the professor and the rest of your staff. Delegate big chunks of the details to UTAs. Try to give them something they can "own" and then discuss with you. Try really hard to identify more "things that need to be done" (this is what makes great HTAs), but remember to address the big picture while you're dealing with all the little things. Grab a chunk you can deal with, and point out your other observations to the professor and leave them behind for future staffs.

Remember that the students' learning and the student experience in the course is the big goal but that it's also important for your professor and TAs to learn and have fun and for *you* to learn and have fun.

1.1 Professionalism

A couple thoughts on professionalism: as a head TA, you're an icon for the course, second only to the professor. You're expected to, *at all times*, display a positive, professional attitude towards your course, your professor, and the program and department as a whole, setting an example for your UTAs. You should think about how your attitudes and conversations appear to students; "image" is fairly important in this job.

When it comes to conduct in the lab and various public but "personal" things (e.g. your tone in mails and newsgroup posts, your background image, your signature, your .plan), err on the side of professionalism, even if it's a bit "more boring" or "less funny." The extreme form of this principle would be not doing something that publicly makes fun of your students, staff, professor, or course, but goes all the way down to not being seen with food in the lab and trying not to be intimidating or unapproachable to students.

2 HTA job description

The department needs to put some thought into a general HTA job description and a general UTA job description. At least the UTA job description, and perhaps both, will hopefully end up including language that requires courses to explicitly establish and publicize course-specific job descriptions. Both will also discuss the expected role of the professor in the course.

In the meantime, consider the somewhat workable current HTA job description.

<http://web-int/ugrad/jobs/hta/>

2.1 Variance in head TA roles

In some courses (especially upper-level courses), it is common for head TAs to have a less managerial and more technically oriented role. These TAs might be more accurately described as "development TAs" who are paid at the head TA rate but, in the interest of not complicating the TA position hierarchy, are referred to as head TAs.

The administrative contacts for the course (as far as the meta-TAs are concerned) will be all of the head TAs unless the course designates otherwise. Courses with more than one head TA may choose a subset of the head TAs for the meta-TAs to communicate with.

2.2 Division of responsibilities

Courses that have multiple head TAs may want to divide up the responsibilities, with individual head TAs handling chunks of stuff more or less on their own. While they clearly don't have to be set in stone, rough guidelines can make it possible for HTAs to function independently and often make it easier for UTAs to get things done.

For example one HTA could deal primarily with homeworks and lectures, while the other deals primarily with labs and projects. One could work on “internal” stuff (i.e. organizing the staff), while the other could work on “external” stuff (i.e. managing communication with the students). Perhaps the administrative aspects are decided on jointly but one person is responsible for tracking and following through on each request. Perhaps someone is responsible for handling all TA meeting-related tasks, like reserving rooms and getting food and reminding the staff. Perhaps someone is responsible for all the technical aspects of the course, or perhaps one person handles the scripting and another handles accounts and things. There may be some things, like permissions on the course directory, web content, and the newsgroup, that can't be split up.

Think about what makes sense for your course and the people skills and organizational skills at work on your staff, and make some explicit decisions. Whatever model you come up with, be sure to share it with the professor and the rest of the staff.

Consider the role of the professor. Each professor has a different sense of what they want to be taking care of and what they want you to be taking care of. After you are hired, this should be one of the first topics of discussion between you. Some important things to establish:

- UTA recruiting and interviewing—who will prepare what?
- extensions—who should students contact, by what method, what are the criteria, and who should keep track of them?
- re-grade requests—same issues.
- editing/updating last year's lecture slides, if relevant
- planning and drafting of syllabus
- email to head TAs—who will answer them? how will you split that up?

Some things that are always the domain of the professor, but that you will need to know about:

- classroom location
- textbook

- collaboration policy violations—you notify the professor of the material and students involved, and then you won't hear much more

As a head TA, don't put yourself in a position where you feel like you are the only one responsible for course stuff that has to happen. This is not part of the job description. Your professor is always there as the figure of authority for students, and your UTAs are there to get things done. Communication is the key.

3 Immediate tasks

- Get department card access (Kathy Kirman, kpk, CIT 572), building card access from Janet (jeager, CIT 471), and an elevator key from Janet (jeager).
- If you haven't worked on campus (recently), get your documents together and go see Ayanna (alt, CIT 5th Floor) to fill out an I-9.
- If you don't read your CS e-mail every day, set up e-mail forwarding (run `mailconfig`).
- Set up `csxxxheadtas` mail alias to use for hiring
`/var/mail/alias_dir/csxxxheadtas`
- Get added to `csxxxta` and `csxxxhta` groups (email problem)
- Clean out your web directory and consider putting up a "coming soon" page.

4 UTA hiring process

As something of an aside, there are a few course organizational things that you'll need to figure out a bit sooner than you might expect, since they'll come up for TA recruiting and hiring:

- plans about what kind of course development you're expecting for the coming semester
- a TA camp start date (which probably means goals for TA camp and a rough schedule)

4.1 Recruiting

TAing doesn't pay a lot, can seem to require intimidating amounts of knowledge, and is a lot of work. This means that many students won't decide to be a TA without some encouragement. If you want to have enough applicants and some choice amongst your applicants, you will probably have to recruit. How you do this is up to you and your professor, but some obvious suggestions are: e-mail people who TAed the class last year, contact current TAs for other courses as appropriate, and contact students who did well in the course last year or whom you remember as being sharp and interested in TAing.

The better job you do recruiting before applications close (or even before they open), the better off you'll be. Individual e-mails composed directly to people (with a "hey first-name" in them) are surprisingly effective and might work better than BCCed mass e-mails. Phone calls can also work well, not to mention approaching people in person.

Pre-interview recruiting is probably the best time to improve staff diversity as well. Think about gender, race, and other forms of diversity when doing your recruiting. Also think about age—your course needs a pool of potential HTAs, which means UTAs who are sophomores and juniors. This is also something worth thinking about during registration for 100-level courses. Publicizing your course around the department will alert more first-years and sophomores to its existence and how much fun it is—UTA recruitment is really hard if only seniors take the course.

If you think your course might be short on staff, work with the meta-TAs and "work the network" of HTAs to come up with a list you might recruit from. And again, realize that this gets much tougher (and potentially more awkward) after applications close.

Use your new HTA mail alias for this stuff (you're probably best off setting a Reply-To address). It adds a tone of seriousness and professionalism to the requests. And try to maintain confidentiality—if you're recruiting someone, it shouldn't be public knowledge unless they make it that way.

4.2 Info session

The UTA info session is typically held partway through each semester to discuss TA opportunities for the following semester.

You should plan to attend, as should your professor. At the info session, each professor and head TA will have a chance to speak briefly about the glories of working for their course and mention anything new/exciting that will be going on with the course in the coming semester. Food is provided by the meta-TAs at this event, so many undergraduates tend to show up.

Needless to say, this is a good place to recruit, both TAs and students.

A couple suggestions here: don't spend too much time apologizing for the way your course was or wasn't run last year (if an apology seems necessary, keep it to a half-sentence or less). Don't scare people off with course development ideas but don't trivialize the amount you're changing either. Applicants are likely to be concerned about the workload associated on a massively-redeveloped course but don't want a "stale" course either. Try to be honest and realistic. You and your professor will be called up together, so you may even want to practice what you're going to say. Make sure your professor is planning to attend, and track them down and bring them to the atrium on the actual day of the event.

4.3 Interviewing

The meta-TAs administer the actual application process and then deliver a pile of applications to you. They can also tell you how many applications you have received so far while the applications are still open. Assuming your recruiting has gone well, now you'll have a bunch of applicants to choose from. Remember that you should keep the fact that they have applied to TA your course confidential as you schedule interviews with them (use BCC to mail them all, etc).

As far as interviewing goes, past head TAs have pointed out that a 5-10 minute interview may actually be the worst way to chose between possible staff members. If you have time, 20-30 minutes might be a better amount of time.

When contacting your applicants to schedule interviews, *be sure not to publicize the list of applicants*. You should either send e-mails directly to each applicant (this is really easy with `mutt -i somefile somerecipient`) or use BCC. Be sure to use the e-mail address specified on the application as not everyone reads their CS account regularly. The same thing goes with the actual interview scheduling. There are many options for going about this:

- Use the CIS SignUp Center, available at
`www.brown.edu/Facilities/CIS/Faculty/tools/signup`
Make sure to set it up for anonymous sign-ups.
- Have the applicants contact you with preferred time slots.
- Publish remaining slots on a webpage.
- Create a world-writable file, but have the applicants sign up using code names so as not to publicize the list of people interviewing. Note that this method is risky in that it trusts that no one will alter other people's sign-ups. It's also somewhat risky because there's some chance of applicants clobbering each other's signups by editing at the same time, and using `lockedit` to prevent this can actually reveal identities because of who will own the lockfile.

It is so important that it is worth reiterating: Respect people’s privacy, and leave it to them to publicize their application if they choose.

It’s good policy to interview all of your applicants. An interview helps to set the tone for the working relationship, is a good way to explicitly communicate the job responsibilities, and is a good reminder that they’ve actually applied for a job. If you interview one person, interview *all* of them.

The “interview everyone” policy also applies to returning TAs. Even if you’re sure that you want to hire them, it’s a good formal procedure and gives you context to evaluate the other applicants. And if you end up deciding that you don’t want to hire them, it makes it less “random” or “surprising” to them. Remember that returning TAs are not automatically hired back.

Things you might want to do in the interview:

- Describe the job (e.g. attending class, attending a weekly TA meeting, writing homework problems, grading, holding office hours, occasional help sessions).
- Tell them when they have to be back at the beginning of the semester for TA camp.
- Describe any out-of-the-ordinary changes that are planned for the following semester.
- Characterize the approximate workload (e.g. about 10 hours a week, not including class time).
- Find out why they’re interested in TAing and how related experiences and past coursework have led them to this.
- Let them ask questions about the position, and make sure they’re OK with the job and the time commitment.
- If applicable to your course, inquire about technical skills (e.g. such-and-such programming language, \LaTeX , HTML or web design, etc).
- Get them to talk about the course material in some way.
- For intro-level courses (and this might be helpful for upper-level courses too), get them in some kind of interactive teaching situation (“Pretend you’re on hours, I’ll be the student, etc. Don’t worry about sounding like you’re patronizing me; talk the way you would to an average student on hours.”)
- Give them a chance to talk about what improvements and changes they might want to make to the course.
- Tell them that hiring decisions are made in a meeting on such-and-such date and that you’ll be in touch either way. This is something good for the professor to say, since she or he is the one responsible for hiring.

While you may be able to make some hiring decisions during an interview, it's a bit inappropriate and somewhat awkward to tell people that they will be hired during the meeting, even if you're sure you'll end up having them on your staff. It also puts the applicants you haven't said this to in a rather odd situation. What's more, the student may have applied to TA multiple courses, which is why hiring decisions cannot be made before the hiring meeting.

If you're interviewing more than just a few people, make sure that you are taking detailed notes about each one—it's silly for you to say later, "I can't remember this person, that must mean I don't want to hire them." If it seems necessary, consider some kind of collectively-determined 1-10 score. Schedule yourselves time in between interviews to recap with your professor—spacing out the interviews really helps in terms of energy and recollection.

If you're having trouble coming up with material-related questions to ask during your interviews, consider this "fun" idea, particularly useful in courses like 22 and 51, and perhaps even in 16, 17, 157, and 167. When setting up your interviews, ask your applicants to come in with their "favorite question" about the material (or at least a question they like). Have them explain the problem, then have them teach you the solution (help session-style).

Even if you're running the show, your professor should be present for the interviews if at all possible, and you should never interview alone.

Note that there are some questions that you're *not allowed to ask* a job applicant. Read what the university has to say on the subject (and get some advice about questions to ask) at:

<http://www.financialaid.brown.edu/Content.aspx?CbkJd=29#ask>

Please note that it is also considered inappropriate to ask what other courses someone has applied to - this is considered a confidential part of the application process.

4.4 Selection

After you're done interviewing, organize your lists of applicants and the HTA and professor comments on each one. Take time to think about diversity again: Brown is an equal opportunity/affirmative-action employer. Not only that, the computer science field on the whole has severe ethnic and gender diversity issues, and a diverse staff helps maintain a diverse student body.

Identify which TAs you definitely would take, which ones you definitely would not take, and the ones that are borderline. You might lose some of your desired applicants to other courses, so keep that in mind.

Note that faculty are responsible for the actual selection of UTAs. They, of course, do this based heavily on input from the HTAs.

4.5 Hiring meeting

The hiring meeting is held after UTA applications close and courses have had a chance to interview candidates and discuss their preferences.

Often, someone will apply to TA more than one course. In their application, we ask them to rank the courses they are applying for by preference, but these preferences often change as particular head TAs talk to applicants. The Meta-TAs hold the hiring meeting to resolve conflicts when multiple courses want to hire any particular TA. All head TAs should attend this meeting, but if one head TA can't make it, there should be at least one representative for your course. The Meta-TAs will speak to any UTA that multiple courses are interested in hiring and in this meeting will resolve these conflicts and make sure that each course has enough UTAs.

Note that the course rankings are taken very seriously, but that applicants accepted to two courses may be assigned to a course they did not prefer if necessary for staffing a course.

4.6 Applicant notification

After the hiring meeting, you should let all your applicants know if they have been accepted or not. Don't make them wait until the summer to hear. Be sure to contact *all* applicants for your course: those selected, those not, those on a waitlist, and those that you wanted but got taken by other courses. Each of these categories should probably get a different letter. If you're unsure which of the applicants you're not hiring were hired by another course, ask the meta-TAs.

Once again, don't forget about confidentiality. Mail each applicant individually (including the people hired—they may, for some reason, change their plans and force you to hire someone off your waitlist) or BCC. Out of respect for the rejected applicants, do not tell anyone who else is on the staff until the lists have been posted publicly.

After the public posting happens, you're welcome to send a "congratulations, hello, and welcome" to your whole staff. It would probably be a really nice gesture if your professor did the same. This is probably also a good time to finish setting up the `csxxxtas` alias.

5 Staff organization & planning

5.1 Hand-off meeting

If possible, get together with the previous semesters' HTAs and the professor. It's one of the best ways to get on-track with the myriad course-specific details

and goals related to development, administrative matters, and staff organization. The past staff probably has a list of things they wish they could do over or make improvements to, as well as an understanding of potential pitfalls.

5.2 Pre-semester gathering

Get your UTAs together at least once before the end of the previous semester. It's good for you to meet each other before TA camp, and it's a good time to talk about your collective goals for the course and start building consensus on them.

This is a great time to pick up university card-access forms from the Meta-TAs and have people fill them out at the first meeting. This way, when you schedule a meeting upstairs the following semester, they can all get themselves there.

Have the professor attend this gathering, or at least schedule a second event with the professor before the end of the semester. If you need something low-maintenance, have your TAs and the professor meet at noon and take a field trip to Geoff's and back, reserve the library (or sit outside) to eat, and have people leave when they have to.

5.3 TA camp

Your course may or may not have TA camp, depending on the size and experience of you staff and how much development needs to be done for a particular semester. Please make sure your staff knows to be back in time for the mandatory UTA Orientation even if there is no camp.

If you are having TA camp, choose dates before you begin interviewing. That way you can alert every applicant during the interview that part of the commitment to TA your course is to be back on campus for those dates. *Inability to attend TA camp is not grounds for turning down an applicant.* Some people come from far away (and perhaps have already purchased plane tickets at great expense) and requiring that all staff attend TA camp introduces bias into the hiring process. That being said, you may require very good reason for not attending TA camp.

When scheduling your TA camp, there are a few things to accommodate: TAs may also be Meiklejohns or OWC'ers, in which case they will have other commitments in the week before the fall semester starts. Other events that happen around TA camp time in the fall are the CS department picnic, the activities fair, and the all-important UTA orientation meeting hosted by the meta-TAs. In the spring, things are a little easier, though there's usually less time to get things done. In both the fall and the spring, keep in mind the fact that there's a university holiday (Labor Day and MLK, Jr. day) the Monday immediately preceding the start of classes, and that lots of people and services will disappear

over the weekend.

A stipend roughly consistent with the rest of TA pay (\$25 per day) is paid to UTAs and HTAs for attendance at TA camp. HTAs are responsible for keeping track of how much each UTA works, accurate to the half day. Note that this covers time HTAs spend preparing for TA camp and getting administrative details together but does not cover extensive course development (which is never funded directly through the TA program). It does include the UTA orientation.

See below for how to arrange dorm access and food for your TAs during TA camp.

5.4 Staff organization

There are a lot of different ways to organize all the work that needs to get done for a course. The two most important things to remember: (1) don't try to do close to all of it by yourself, and (2) it's good to involve your UTAs in a substantial way—all it takes is organization and clear communication.

Need some help coming up with ways to evenly divide up responsibilities amongst your UTAs? Here are some classics that many courses use:

- web TA, scripts TA, copy TA, grades TA, newsgroup TA
- Put each UTA or pair of UTAs in charge of a project, from start to finish. This can include editing handouts, running helpsessions, and answering newsgroup posts.
- Extra TA hours—always appreciated by students!
- Assign two or three TAs to each category of assignment (i.e. labs, sections, homeworks, projects).
- Have rotating jobs, and assign different TAs to work on them each week.
- For classes with homeworks, split up solution writing and review on a per-problem or per-week basis.

TA Hours Sometime during TA camp or the first week of class, you should set up a schedule of TA hours for all your TAs. Don't put all the hours at the same time every day, as students will have athletic practices/rehearsals/etc. at certain times every day. Offer a variety of times: try to have hours at least one day a week before 6 pm, and make sure to include some HTA hours in there so that students can see a head TA easily when they need to.

6 Reference

6.1 Administrative reference

This section explains a bunch of administrative policies and practices that apply to most courses. You should probably read through this section a couple times before the semester starts and refer to it when fielding practical and administrative requests from UTAs.

6.1.1 Class

Textbook and Classroom These things are the professor's job to arrange. However, make sure you know what your professor has arranged and that it makes sense to you.

The library will put course texts and course packs on reserve if the library already has a copy or if a copy is supplied by the course. Talk to your professor about purchasing a copy for this purpose (if you need help with funding, talk to the meta-TAs).

For course-related books other than textbooks and course packs, the library will purchase copies for reserve—contact the Sci-Li reserve desk for how to do this.

For technical books of interest to students in your course, tstaff will usually buy copies for the sunlab. Get in touch with the meta-TAs and the head consultant, who will collect the proposals and seek funding.

University course web page listing Each semester, requests must be submitted to link course web pages from the university course web page listings. Go to the list of course web pages at courses.brown.edu, and if your course is not listed, fill out the online form linked from the top of the page.

Doing this is pretty important, as it also gives you a link on BOCA.

Syllabus Depending on the professor you are working with, your course will put together some kind of syllabus with project/homework deadlines in it to hand out to students. Deciding who creates this document and sets these deadlines is between you and the professor. Start thinking about this as soon as possible (in the semester before your class). You'll need to give your deadlines to the meta-TAs at the start-of-semester HTA-MTA meeting, so get 'em ready.

If you have programs due on Fridays and Saturdays, make sure they're due by 10 pm at the latest. It puts undue pressure on the consultant (and student, for that matter) when assignments are due after the lab closes. You should also double-check holiday schedules across a variety of faiths when considering due dates and late policies.

6.1.2 Food, shelter, and money

Early arrival room & board For dorm opening dates, check

www.brown.edu/Administration/ResLife/dates.html

This fall semester, the earliest TAs can move into their dorms is **TBD**, but probably somewhere around August 27.

Once you have chosen your TA camp dates, please check if this date is before the dorms open. If it is, you should mail the meta-TAs with a list of the names of the TAs that will be coming back early and need dorm access. Please note that there is a \$25 fee to the TA program to get dorms opened early. This is a flat rate, but it is sometimes waived for openings a few days before the general opening dates.

It also may be possible to get your TAs on meal plan during TA camp. This would be at their own expense. If anyone on your staff is interested in this option, please contact the meta-TAs well ahead of time (as soon after hiring as possible).

Being paid The pay scale: \$885 + (\$100 for each semester of TA experience) + (\$200 if you are going to be an HTA)

In order to get paid, you need to fill out an I-9 form. If you have ever worked for Brown before, you have already been cleared and need do nothing. If you have not, then visit Trina Avery (kha) and show her the required identification. A passport or a combination of Brown ID and social security card work nicely. You can also refer to the full list on page 3 of the I-9:

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Human_Resources/forms/i-9.pdf

As a head TA, you should also remind each of your UTAs that they must do this. The meta-TA will work with Jennifer to provide a list of which staff members need to be I-9ed.

The meta-TAs will send mail to each TA that needs to be I-9ed. However, many TAs won't check their mail before the semester starts or won't reply to the mail, so you should be sure to remind them all anyway.

The meta-TAs will also send mail about paycheck dates so that everyone knows when their money is coming.

Food budget & getting money Each course has a food budget for its TA staff. The standard amount is \$3 per student enrolled in the course, so if CS31 has 80 people it has a \$240 food budget for pizza for grading meetings and

suchlike. You access this money through Lori Agresti (laa). Whenever you want to order pizza, buy sodas, or go out to dinner, you should go see Lori first. If the amount is under \$20, then she will probably choose to give you cash. Then you go spend it and take the receipt and any change back to her. If the amount is large, like ordering 5 pizzas, then she will take care of ordering the pizza for you and charging it—she'll just give you cash for the tip.

6.1.3 Facilities

Please make sure your UTAs know about all the space policies outlined below. It's important that everyone stick by them.

Rooms and Machines

- TA rooms (birdcage, Moonlab, 219)

The birdcage, the Moonlab, and 219 are the rooms where hours are held. To control crowding, each course is assigned to a room at the start-of-semester HTA-MTA meeting and should hold all of their hours there. TAs will receive priority in the room assigned to their course.

The Moonlab and 219 are reserved for the TA program in the evenings on weeknights and most of the day on weekends. This schedule is set with the registrar at the beginning of the semester, so the exact hours will be announced then. Any hours scheduled when the moonlab and 219 are not available will have to be in the birdcage, of course.

Security and hygiene must be maintained in the TA rooms. If you are the last person to leave the birdcage at any time, or the Moonlab at midnight, please turn the lights off, erase the whiteboard, and close the door.

Don't leave the door to the birdcage open when nobody is in it, and tell your UTAs not to also. Don't leave non-TAs in the birdcage alone. Multiple flat-panel monitors were stolen recently, and it would not have happened had the door been shut when the last person left.

- TA office (344)

The TA office is a room for TAs to do course-related work. No students are permitted in this room—it is not for holding hours or interactive grading. Unless there is a shortage of machines, TAs are welcome to do non-TA work in this room as well.

- 506

CIT 506 is reserved by the TA program starting at 6 pm. It has one node, rendezvous, in it. Many courses have found this a good place to grade. In order not to coincide with other TA staffs or other groups that use the room, please reserve it if you want to use it (see reservation procedures below).

- Copy room and printing

Since TAs have access to the fourth and fifth floors, they have access to the printing and copying facilities there. There is the fourth floor copy room with bw4, xerox (Linux) and ricoh (XP) on a KVM switch (ideal for printing things, checking e-mail, fingering people, etc.), student supplies such as pens and paper, and the enormous copier. Head TAs should learn the code for making copies on the copy machine in the room. There is also a printer on the fifth floor named bw5 and a smaller copier in the adjacent room.

See also the section on making copies at the Metcalf Copy Center.

Reserving rooms The Meta-TAs are working on preparing a script that you can run to reserve rooms that will send mail to the appropriate person, as the person in charge of each room is ever-changing. Until it is prepared, however, here is the info you need. When reserving rooms, remember to do so at least 3 days in advance, preferably more, to make sure you can get a space.

Also, make sure to check for conflicts with your reservation on the departmental web site. Each room has a page on the departmental web page, which links to a calendar of current reservations.

All reservations go through the Meta-TA Admin, mta@cs.brown.edu.

- Sunlab

You can reserve just a few rows or the whole lab. However, please reserve it only when you need a node for every student in a lab or a help session.

- MSLab

You should only reserve the MSLab for help sessions and labs. Like the sunlab, please reserve it only when you need nodes, and please avoid grading in there.

- Motorola (CIT 165)

This is the lecture hall on the first floor of the CIT (behind the food cart) that is used as a study room when it is not a classroom.

- CIT 219

This is the big classroom on the 2nd floor of the CIT that is not the Moonlab.

- TA Office (CIT 344)

This room is reservable only by CS courses, and only on a limited basis, when courses need a combination of privacy and access to nodes for grading meetings that is unavailable elsewhere.

- Lubrano
4th floor. Has nice A/V equipment. It's a good space for talks, or for meetings where only one discussion is happening at a time. Consequently, it's not a great space for TA meetings.
- CIT 506
The 5th floor conference room is reserved for the TA program after 6 pm every day of the week. You still need to reserve it for your specific course to avoid collisions.
- CIT 345
This is a conference room on the 3rd floor, across the hall from the TA office. It's a good place for staff meetings or grading. There is one computer, and AV hookups.
- Other classrooms in CIT
- Classrooms in other university buildings
Before 6 pm: Lora.Rossi@brown.edu
After 6 pm: Mary_C.Sullivan@brown.edu

Storage Every course gets both secure and non-secure storage. The secure storage is in the form of lockers in the hall on the second floor near the handin bins and the birdcage. Each course gets one combination locker from the Meta-TA admin. Non-secure storage is available in the gray file cabinet in the birdcage room. If you want space in this cabinet for your course, ask the Meta-TA admin.

Handin bins and hand-back drawers Each course gets at least half of a handin bin and a hand-back drawer. Who gets what is determined by the Meta-TAs, who will collect data from you on how often and when you plan to use your handin bin. Keys to the handin bins can be obtained from Janet (jeager) in CIT 471. You can have as many keys as you want, so at least every HTA and one UTA (typically a "grades" TA) from each course should have them.

Card access University card access (CIT building and stairwell) is managed by Janet Eager (jeager, CIT 471) and department card access (TA room, TA office) is managed by Kathy Kirman (kpk, CIT 572). You'll need to take your staff to her office, as they each have to give her their Brown card and get it swiped. (Note that the departmental locks are offline systems: *if you lose your card*, you will have to get it re-swiped with Janet, and your old card will actually keep working until you go and see her.)

6.1.4 Resources and Photocopying

Copying Your copy options are the 4th floor copying machine and Metcalf. The first requires an access code (if you don't know it, ask the meta-TAs) and the second requires an account number (ask the meta-TAs).

Copies of handouts should be made at the Brown Copy Center on Thayer Street (under Metcalf). The Copy Center's charge slips have a place to write the CS account number. When copies are picked up, it is vital that the Copy Center receipt be given to Lori Agresti (laa) or put in her mail box on the fourth floor.

As an alternative to making copies, keep in mind that Adobe Acrobat documents may be viewed on-line. They can also be printed to postscript, or exported to HTML. This may be a sufficient substitute for some handouts (e.g. lecture slides) and will reduce copying expenses and save paper.

Students are charged for course handouts as follows:

- first 100 pages/student: free
- each additional 100 pages/student: \$5/student.

Faculty handle collecting these charges, seeing that all students pay, etc.; they may, of course, delegate this to an HTA or UTA. Any money collected for a course must be either cash or checks made payable to Brown University. Once the money is collected, a deposit slip should be requested from Lori. She will need to know what the money is for, and will give you the deposit slip, along with an account number. That account number should be written on the back of every check. Take the money and checks to the Brown Office Building, and give it to the person at the Cash Management window on the second floor (across from the Payroll Window). They will give you a receipt, which you should bring back to Lori.

Supplies All TAs have access to some necessary office supplies. They are kept in an unlocked cabinet (labeled "student supplies") in the copy room on the 4th floor, up and to the right of the color printer. These supplies include pens and pencils, notepads, and whiteboard markers. Help yourself, and tell your staff to help themselves, as needed.

Sunlab books Traditionally, tstaff and the dug pay for sunlab books as necessary. If there are *technical* books that would be useful for your students or TAs to have around in the lab, get in touch with the meta-TAs about it, and they'll bring it up with the head consultant and user services coordinator.

6.2 Technical details

6.2.1 Mail forwarding

From now until the end of next semester, it's important that the meta-TAs, professors, your UTAs, and eventually your students are able to contact you by email.

If you're not going to be checking your CS email over break, you should set up email forwarding. You can now do mail forwarding using a `.forward` file in your home directory. There's a script called `mailconfig` which will set this up for you. More details are available on the department's email web page (<http://cs.brown.edu/facilities/system/email/forwarding.html>).

Make sure your UTAs do the same thing. Using mail forwarding is much easier than trying to maintain your own extra set of email addresses, and it makes it possible for the meta-TAs to contact your TAs about administrative things directly.

6.2.2 Groups, identities, and mail aliases

These three things are often confused, especially by first-time HTAs. Groups are for file permissions, mail aliases are for mail addressed to things `@cs.brown.edu`, and identities are for a few "local" things including disk quotas, handin permissions, and startup hooks.

In general, the meta-TAs will set up all of these once hiring decisions have been announced, asking for more information from the HTAs or professors when necessary. If any of these things are incorrect, you can always request changes by mailing `problem` or `mta`.

Groups Groups are used for setting file permissions. They're the things that are listed when you type `ls -l`. You can find out what groups someone is in by typing `groups theirlogin`. To see who's in a group, run `/pro/consult/bin/grplist group`.

In order to get at most of the stuff in a course directory, you'll have to be in course's TA group (i.e. `csxxxta`). All HTAs, UTAs, the professor, and probably some previous HTAs/professors/etc. should be in your course's TA group. Everything in a course directory should be group-writable by some group or another. To this end, all courses should request a head TA group (i.e. `csxxxhta`) for the HTAs and the professor.

UTAs (and sometimes professors) often leave files and directories with the wrong permissions lying around. HTAs can use the utility `chmod!` to fix faulty permissions in the course directory (usage much like `chmod`). There's an analogous command for groups (`chgrp!`).

It's possible that you'll want some extra groups for various projects or subtasks (the web page, grades, etc.). You can request these by mailing `problem`. This is most likely to be necessary when you have a project that includes students other than TAs.

However, think twice before restricting general TA access to things. While "least privilege" is a good model in certain situations, there's some psychological disadvantage to blocking people's access to certain things. The act is read not strictly as "you don't need to see this," but also as "we don't trust you with this." Treating your UTAs as adults and acknowledging the ways that UTAing can be complicated or awkward is a good thing; worrying about restricting specific access to most of your staff is probably not worth it. If you really have to restrict something, consider restricting it to the professor and HTAs only.

Identities Identities are a Brown CS thing. The fascist shell (`fsh2`) uses them (loosely speaking) for granting disk space. The `handin` program (`handin`) uses them to determine who can hand in programs for the class. The `identities` hook loads course hooks based on identities during shell initialization. A few other tools (notably the TA waitlist) rely on identities for determining enrollment in a class, and programs like `lw -I` make it easy to find people based on their identities.

To find out what identities someone has, run `ypmatch theirlogin identity`. To see everyone who has an identity, run `ypcat -k identity | grep someidentity`.

All UTAs should have a `csxxxta` identity, which grants them an appropriate amount of extra disk space. The HTA's can adjust this amount by contacting Dorinda Moulton (djm). Additionally, the `csxxxta` identity lets users hand in programs for the course they're TAing. This is particularly nice when you're testing `handin` scripts and such, as it often saves you the trouble of having to `su` to a test account.

You'll notice that, as a head TA, you'll get the `hta` identity (for life) which gives you an additional 5000k. Score again.

Mail aliases Mail aliases control where mail addressed to `something@cs.brown.edu` gets sent. As mentioned in the previous section, you can use `mailconfig` to control what happens to mail sent to `yourlogin`. Tstaff can also create other mail aliases for various purposes (web tas, grade tas); you're pretty much guaranteed to have encountered them while taking your classes. To check who's in a mail alias, run `praliases somealias`.

The HTAs and the professor should be in the `csxxxheadtas` alias, and all UTAs, HTAs, and the professor should be in the `csxxxtas` alias. Some courses also prefer an additional `csxxx@cs.brown.edu` alias, because it looks nicer and is easier to remember than the one with "tas."

Including the professor is a good thing for the sake of professionalism, and to some extent protects you as an employee. Talk to your professor about it and see what she or he prefers. It helps your professor be more in touch with the amount of administrative work you're doing and also keeps them a little more in touch with your UTAs.

6.2.3 Test accounts

All courses are entitled to a test account. Test accounts are essentially sample student accounts that TAs have passwords to.

Mail **problem** to request a test account for your course. You'll get an account like csxxx000 and an initial password, which you should change on both linux and windows. Record the account name and password somewhere in your course directory (a file called test-account in admin/ is probably sensible). Make sure any UTAs working on software or scripting know about it.

The reason people need test accounts is so that they can make sure things work on accounts that don't have TA permissions. They're also useful for some other things, like testing things that send a lot of mail.

Some things you should *always* try using a test account:

- the system-wide startups, as modified for the new semester (new accounts created for students in your course will end up with these startups)
- your student identity hooks
- any software being supported especially for your course
- Xemacs editing modes for your course's file formats
- WinXP paths and settings
- your handin scripts and any other scripts you have students run

6.2.4 Course directories

Chances are you already have access to your course directory. Chances are you've poked around in it. And chances are, it's kind of a mess.

Cleaning things up At least one of the head TAs should take a long pass through the course directory, cleaning up as much stuff as possible, moving stuff that shouldn't be readable (like last year's grades), deleting old things that are no longer needed (remember, there's always backups), and writing a README to the staff of where things can be found and where they should put things they're working on.

As mentioned before, you can use `chmod!` and `chgrp!` to fix broken permissions in your course directory.

Keep in mind that nightly backups are made for files stored on maytag, so it is rarely necessary to actually keep most of your old course directories on maytag. Consider moving all old material that you may actually want (which probably doesn't include handins, for example) to tier 3 of tierfs, which is not backed up. Dorinda (djm) can restore any of the old material from backups in about 2 days, should that be necessary (if tierfs crashes, for example).

Policies Don't keep stuff in the course directory that has nothing to do with the course. Keep administrative software in the course directory, including things that the students will run. In most cases, don't keep educational software there (i.e. applications and libraries the students will use to do their assignments).

A personal mailbox of TA-related mail can be kept in the course directory if necessary, but nothing else should be. If you or someone else on your staff really needs a place for something random, they should use `pro_request`, `/pro/tasupport`, or the `/contrib` tools.

Setting permissions Everything in the course directory should be group read-write for either the `csxxxta` group or the `csxxxhta` group (or possibly some specialized group).

Remember that all of your directories (and only your directories) need to be `chmod-ed` `setgid (g+s)`. To do this on everything you own in a given directory and its children, try

```
find <DIRECTORY> -type d -exec chmod g+s {} \;
```

If you wish to use one, you can ask the current MTA-tech about automated permission-checking scripts.

Organization It's best to stick to really standard, intuitive conventions with your course directory. It's best if the files with permissions other than `-rw-rw----`, for example, the world-readable stuff and the HTA-only stuff, are collected and isolated as much as possible. It makes (manual and automated) permissions checking much easier.

These suggestions are far from complete, but everything students run should go in `bin/`, source code should be in `src/`, everything TAs run should go in `tabin/`, all administrative files should go in `admin/` (grades, lists of students, TA info, hiring info, history, course policy documents, and an general/administrative TODO for next year), current HTA-only stuff should go in `admin/hta/`. Your identity hooks go in `startups/` and handins go in `handin/`. `www` should be a

symlink to your web directory. From there it gets a little bit trickier and perhaps a bit more course-dependent.

In most cases, it's best to keep old information on projects with the current information on the projects (archived in subdirectories like 2002, 2001, etc.). Old web directories are probably best kept in `old/www_2002/`.

Any lists or documents relating to TA hiring should go in `admin/hta/hiring` and should be readable only by the HTA group. Old grades, which probably go in `admin/old_grades`, should also be readable only by HTAs.

Your top-level directory should be `o=rx` (world readable and executable but not writable) so that your students can access handin scripts and source code.

Lastly, write a README that explains the purpose of all the directories, and gives people enough guidance that they can figure out where to find things and where things should go.

TODO files Make a bunch of TODO files of “things that should be fixed next year,” and every time you see some little thing that “can’t be fixed at this point” for whatever reason, put it into one of those files. This is one of the only ways to have these little details actually get fixed, and will be an excellent resource to next year’s HTAs and UTAs.

Have as many of these files as seems appropriate. One for each project, homework, or lab probably makes sense. One for each lecture might make sense, or perhaps one for each chunk of lectures (or for all the lectures).

Complaints and suggestions from students on the newsgroup are perfect things to summarize and drop into one of these files. You should also strongly encourage your UTAs to add things to these files. It’s a great way to get wide-based long-term input from TAs in a non-confrontational way. Encourage people to sign their entries.

... and Windows If none of your TAs ever use the course directory on Windows, you thankfully don’t have to worry about any of this. If not, this stuff is really important and you should ask questions if any of this doesn’t make sense.

To access your course directory on Windows, first run `df /course/csxxx` on Linux to find out which filesystem it lives on, then go to

```
\\maytag\course0\csxxx or \\maytag\course1\csxxx
```

This should work in the mslab and on vmware.

maytag, the file server, has this theoretically neat feature where volumes can be set up to have “mixed mode” file permissions. This means that you can choose between Unix-style permissions and Windows ACLs (access control lists) on a file-by-file basis.

When you set an ACL on windows, any existing permissions on the file are clobbered by the new permissions. When you use `chmod` on a file, all windows ACLs are clobbered. In theory, this would be a good thing. But there's some complications. . .

There is also another filer, `amana`.

When you're viewing permissions on the platform they were set on, you're seeing native permissions, and things look reasonable. But when you look at them on the other platform, you see `maytag`'s "estimate" or "most reasonable representation" for those permissions. So `ls -l` gives you something bizarre that makes the file look like it's executable and maybe world-writable. This is compounded by the fact that, while `maytag` has some magical glue inside that maps your Linux account (your NIS UID) to your Windows account (your Active Directory SID), it doesn't have the equivalent mapping for Linux groups, so they never show up in Windows ACLs, and you can never set a Windows ACL to allow or deny file access based on groups.

The (perhaps?) good news is that, regardless of which platform the permissions were actually set on, and how they might be represented on the other platform, as long as they're not actually *changed* on the other platform, they'll behave correctly (i.e. the most recently-applied permissions take effect correctly on both platforms).

Another complication is that the two platforms have different ideas about how permissions get set on new files. In Windows, ACLs are always copied/inherited from the parent directory. In Unix, file permission modes are set based on your `umask`, and the group is set based on either your primary group (usually `ugrad`), or (when the `sgid` bit is set on the directory) the group of the parent.

The official `mta-tech` recommendation: don't use Windows permissions.

"But I'm on an XP machine and I want to set my permissions," you say? Fortunately, you can view and set Unix permissions through the windows shell using the `SecureShell` tab on the properties sheet. Specify an owner and a group, and set all the bits you'd set using `chmod` (including `sgid`). You can even do this recursively. And you can use Unix groups. And you can `ls -l` on Linux and have the actual permissions show up. Ah. `SecureShell` is not currently installed on `vmware`.

Perhaps someday mixed-mode permissions will even go away. . .

So stick to `chmod` and `SecureShare`, and forget about Windows ACLs, at least for stuff in your course directories.

6.2.5 Snapshots

Remember that we're on a filesystem that features hourly snapshots (actually, they're every 4 hours), meaning that you can almost always do your own re-

stores. Inside your top-level course directory, you'll find a `.snapshot` directory, and inside there, you'll find directories like `hourly.0` (most recent), `hourly.1`, `hourly.2`, ..., `hourly.5`, `nightly.0`, ..., and `weekly.0`.... Though snapshots are read-only (as far as file contents and permissions go), you can usually copy stuff out of there and into the regular course directory.

If you get errors like “blah and blah are the same file”, it's because the destination file exists and hasn't changed since the snapshot was taken. You can always try restoring to a different path to avoid these messages.

More information is available at

<http://web-int/system/services/snapshots/>

A big warning about snapshots: snapshots are read-only and no one (not even root) can modify them. This means that if source code or solutions are given the wrong permissions, even if just for a couple hours, they'll be available for up to three weeks. So be really, really careful about setting permissions on things, especially sensitive things.

Note that copying out of the snapshot is the preferred way of doing restores, so unless file ownership is important, please use that rather than submitting a restore request.

6.2.6 Web

Your web directory is `/pro/web/web/courses/csxxx`, and should probably have a `/course/csxxx/www` symlink.

Your home page should be called `home.html`, and, assuming this file exists and is readable, your course web page is at

<http://web-int/courses/csxxx/>

In order for content to update on the public web server (`www`), you need to run the command `webupdate`, which uses `rsync` to recursively push out the current directory to the web server. Again, only world-readable files are published to the outside server.

Think about which parts of your web page (e.g. solutions, online book, etc.) might need to be accessible only on the inside web. You can control which files get pushed to the outside web through `.private` files, and can control web server permissions using `.htaccess` files. Any files that are not world-readable are automatically not copied to the outside web. Keep in mind, though, that everyone with an account can browse through `/pro/web/web`, so setting your web permissions to be more restrictive than your file permissions may not have quite the desired effect. For more:

```
http://web-int/system/software/web/update.html#privacy
http://web-int/system/services/web/passwords.html
```

You can run your own CGI programs by putting them in `/pro/web/cgi-bin`. They are accessible only inside the department on web-int, and run as user `www-data` and group `www-data`. There are a few general-purpose CGI programs available on both servers:

```
http://web-int/system/software/web/cgi/
```

Policies Keep your web directory as trim as possible. Course web directories should probably be in the 20-60 MB range, and definitely below 200 MB. There's a bunch of stuff that traverses the filesystem, indexing the web, and the less stuff it has to run on, the better. There's also generally a tighter space crunch on the web filesystem than on the course filesystems, and `webupdate` runs faster when there's less stuff to dig through.

Old web content, if it needs to be kept around, should be kept in the course directory rather than the web directory (and accessed using file URLs if necessary).

6.2.7 Startups

The new startups (as of Fall 2002) include functionality for sourcing course hooks based on identities. Docs are pending for these, but basically, you should just create a startups directory inside your course directory, make it HTA-writable and world-readable, drop files in there called `csxxxstudent` and `csxxxta`, and they'll get loaded automatically when your students and TAs log in. Assuming they have the appropriate identities, of course.

There is a very limited command set for hooks that ensures that they'll work with everyone's shells, and you should think about what kind of stuff is really appropriate for one of these hooks (i.e. they should include environment customization, but probably not permissions-setting) and run your hook by the `mta-tech` before people are given the identities. There are a few potential tricky points, especially with setting `CLASSPATH`.

You shouldn't be modifying students' dotfiles, directly or indirectly. Your course's account setup script should probably do things like creating a directory for their coursework and setting appropriate permissions but not much more than that.

Note that it is no longer permitted to have students' course directories readable by the TAs (or anyone other than themselves). If you want to access their material, use `sux`.

The one exception is Xemacs. If you need to load course-specific stuff, add a

line to `~/xemacs/hooks.el` that loads your hook. There's an example line in there that you can use. Don't add random elisp to this file (or to `custom.el`) directly.

6.2.8 Mailing Lists

Mailing lists have now replaced newsgroups for course announcements. If you'd like one, and do not already have a `csxxx@list.cs.brown.edu` list, please contact the MTAs. You will be responsible for administering the lists. Ask the MTAs or **problem** if you have issues.

6.2.9 Printing

Per department printing policies, undergraduate work is to be printed to the CIS printer or `bw1` in the Sunlab, not department printers.

However, course TAs can use department printers when producing course-related materials. There is a printer in the fish bowl called `bw2`. On the third floor there are `bw3` and `c3` located in the hall by the small elevator which are black-and-white and color, respectively. In the copy room, you can use `bw4` (black and white), `c4` for color, and `psct` for color transparencies. In the 5th floor, behind the elevators, you can use `bw5` for black and white and `c5` for black and white transparencies. There are Linux machines and Windows machines in the 3rd and 4th floor copy rooms (and 506) that TAs can use for printing or quick edits. They also have 24-hour access to these spaces.

If the printer isn't working or print queues are stuck, TAs should **not** attempt to fix it themselves; they should instead mail **problem**. After hours, mail **problem** or find a SPOC (use `zspoc`).

Sensitive materials should probably be printed to `bw3` and picked up immediately rather than printed to `cis`, as jobs have been known to have been misplaced there.

There is a printer in the sunlab `bw1`. Security is a large concern with this printer, as it is accessible to all undergrads. Each course should formulate policies describing what is and isn't allowed to be printed to the sunlab printer, and make those policies known to the students. The consultants have the ability to take sunlab printing privileges away from students who violate the policies or abuse the printer.

6.2.10 Software plan

Representatives from each course are asked to meet with the `mta-tech` to discuss/formulate their plans for administrative and educational software for the semester. The purpose of this is to advise on the best way to implement various

things, how to make software solutions maintainable from a student, TA, and staff perspective, and to help determine which software the TA program ought to support going forward.

These can be arranged with the mta-tech. Depending on the needs of your course, they can happen as early as the middle of the preceding semester and as late as a couple days before the start of classes.

6.2.11 Student accounts

For all courses requiring (or strongly encouraging) machine usage, student accounts and student identities are provided.

During the first couple days of class, you should pass around a list for people to write down their logins (for existing accounts) or their Brown short ids (for new accounts). For students without a Brown short id, their full name will suffice. (In this case, for your own purposes, you will probably want to obtain their e-mail address.) If your course has a contract that students fill out, this would be a good place to collect this information. Make sure you include a checkbox for “do not have a CS account” and collect short ids or names and e-mails.

For students who have had accounts in the past but do not currently, you should submit a new account request and have the student submit a restore request once their account has been created.

Once you have a list of new accounts that need to be created (as complete as possible), mail it to problem. Keep it simple - use a text file with Brown short ids, one per line. Use separate files for accounts which need to be created and those which simply need additional identities.

TA's should pick up the passwords for new accounts from Dorinda (djm) and hand them out during class or lab. It's good to know soon whose accounts are not working, so consider doing this during an interactive session in the Sunlab with TA's standing by to help. After the initial distribution, keep the passwords in your course locker.

If your course is going to be distributing accounts at a lab session (this primarily applies to intro courses), you can arrange to have a SPOC present to fix account problems. Email the meta-TAs.

Disk usage granted for each student identity is determined by the mta-tech and the user services coordinator based on information provided by head TAs. If you feel your students or TA's need more space, simply ask, but be reasonable. If most students feel cramped for space, then get more space. If one or two have trouble, consider just helping them cut down on their usage.

All undergraduate accounts should have the "ugrad" identity, which provides space for browser settings, dotfiles, etc.

Note that *identities are required for handing in programs*, so it's important to plan ahead of the first assignment.

Also, please notify Dorinda about students who drop the class in the first few weeks so that accounts can be deleted.

6.2.12 Backups and restore requests

Restores of course directories, and in researching collaboration violations, home directories, are available on request, but can take up to two days. A head TA should run `restore_request`.

Note that snapshots are the preferred way for handling restores; see the discussion on snapshots in the section on course directories.

6.2.13 Tstaff support

Expert tech support The mta-tech is available for a reasonable amount of tech support on startups, scripting, software maintenance, web maintenance, permissions and course directory organization, user applications, and of course, the supported software. This is available to HTAs, plus any UTAs who are working on the more technical aspects of the course.

Note that, while you are not really required to use any of the supported software, the mta-tech might not be willing to provide much support for an alternative solution if there's a supported solution you're not taking advantage of.

This is a fairly new service, so it's a little unclear as to what level of support it will be feasible to provide. Clearly, it's beneficial to have most of the time of the mta-tech spent on more long-term projects, but it makes sense to include some balance of immediate support as well.

Administrative requests Course-related administrative requests (including groups, identities, mail aliases, accounts, permissions, room requests, news-groups) should be mailed to `problem@cs.brown.edu` and will be handled by the user services coordinator or a SPOC.

Note that all such requests should come from a HTA (or a professor). If UTAs need permissions fixed, they should ask a HTA to make the request.

Other requests Courses may submit general technical requests to `problem@cs.brown.edu`, and they will be responded to by someone on tstaff. If things are timely and relevant to your class (or to the ugrad computing experience in general), you should probably talk to the mta-tech about them to see if they can be expedited a bit.

6.2.14 /pro/tasupport

/pro/tasupport is a repository for scripts, documents, and other software developed by individual courses but that might, today or some other day, be useful to other courses. There are some useful things in there now but not a ton. None of it is officially supported, though tech support is available per usual. It hasn't been around for very long (it came about circa January 2002).

Permissions in there are fairly open, which makes it possible for people to reorganize things and tweak other people's solutions.

Just about everything in that directory is in group `tasupport`. Students working on useful scripts for courses can be added to this group.

If you're interested in this stuff, poke around, drop in the stuff from your course, and work with others (including the mta-tech) to do the same.

6.2.15 Supported software & environments

There are a few projects that are either developed or supported by the mta-tech (proactively or on demand), or are recommended solutions that the mta-tech is knowledgeable about and willing to support.

- the CS classes for \LaTeX , and texmake, a build environment for \LaTeX
- a java obfuscator
- moss, a tool for checking code similarities
- sorting mail with procmail
- text-based mail and news (mutt and slrn)
- the default startups and the identity hooks
- the handin program and a simple handin script
- a simple grade-management tool
- consultant minicourses

Note that a lot of these either originated as other people's projects or are still maintained by other people.

Requests for these sorts of projects are queued up by the mta-tech, who is responsible for working with head TAs to set priorities and implementation goals for the projects deemed "worth doing," working to find funding for implementation assistance when appropriate.

7 Miscellany

7.1 Collaboration

Situations of suspected collaboration are among the most stressful and frustrating situations for TAs, professors, and the students suspected of policy violation.

The TAs are responsible for identifying cases of potential violation and should be relatively proactive in doing so, particularly when grading homeworks.

This is the last involvement the UTAs should have.

HTAs may be asked to assist the professor “off-line” in documenting the grounds for a code violation charge but should under no circumstances be present if students are confronted on a charge. They may also be asked to testify in a dean’s hearing.

Collaboration observed in the lab or in other public spaces should be brought to the attention of a head TA, who should, if possible, confront the individual at the time of the occurrence, then bring the incident to the attention of any other head TAs and the professor. For this issue, head-TAs should take the time to come up with a really specific line of action for what they want their UTAs to do when they observe this kind of thing. Specify exactly what you want them to do or say—there shouldn’t be any improvising going on here.

Confidentiality is at an extreme in these situations; everything is on an absolute need-to-know basis. UTAs working on identifying collaboration cases should report their findings to head TAs, must not discuss the cases with the rest of the staff, and should pretend that they don’t know anything. The same goes for head TAs, who shouldn’t be made aware of the actual outcome of a discussion unless it pertains to the course (i.e. they need to know if the student received a directed NC on an assignment or on the course, but all other outcomes should be phrased as “the issue has been resolved”). This is University policy, designed for the students’ protection.

The department chair is the only other person who may be involved in these cases. Professors are urged to contact the chair if they need guidance about how to proceed with a specific case.

Brown’s Academic Code:

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/academic_code/code.html

7.2 Academically struggling students.

The first thing to worry about is identifying students who are having trouble. There are many ways to do this, depending on how your course works. Low grades on homeworks or projects are useful, but sometimes indicate just bad

time management skills rather than trouble with the material. Labs or other situations where TAs get to watch students working with the material directly are more useful. Note students who consistently don't finish labs on time. Talking to students, whether during labs, on hours, in interactive grading, etc. is very useful also. Note who tends to have the most misconceptions about the material, and who tends to come to hours the most with very general questions and misunderstandings (as opposed to just clarifications).

It's important that all TAs help identifying students having trouble, because it's very hard for any one person to know every student in the class and their level of understanding.

After the first month or so of classes, it's probably possible to have a good idea of which students are consistently having trouble and which are in danger of failing if something doesn't change. Don't wait until the middle of the semester to do something with this information, try to act on it as soon as possible so that students have the greatest number of options available to them.

Meet with your professor (if you don't do that already) and talk about these students. Each TA is likely to know about only some subset of the students, so make sure everyone gets to talk. Mention examples of things that they asked on hours (that you wouldn't expect anyone to ask). Talk about their performance in lab. Often, some TA will know the student from a context other than the course or know someone who does and might know about why the student is having trouble. Even if not, try to get a sense of why they're having trouble (lack of time, bad time management, emotional issues, lack of effort, etc.) and make sure other TAs know about all of this so that they know what to expect from these students on hours and in labs.

Make sure the professor is aware of students who are having trouble, and have him or her try talking to them as soon as possible. The easiest way to do this is to have the professor send them an email asking them to come to office hours or set up an appointment.

Try to give some special attention to these students (within reason). Keep them interested in the class by acting enthusiastic and interested on hours and complimenting their work in labs. When trying to help them on hours, be sure not to assume they understand previously covered concepts, and be prepared to explain material from weeks ago, if they never really learned it then.

Students that struggle in a course often consider dropping it for one reason or another. There's not much you can do about this besides being understanding when students ask for extensions, but there will be students who struggle and don't ask. When a project is due, keep an eye out for students that don't hand anything in at all. Try to contact each of them individually if you can after any late-handin deadline is passed. This way you find out about any handin problems or personal emergencies, and it will be helpful and appreciated. It's a great way to help people avoid dropping out of the course.

7.3 Institutional memory

Future iterations of the course can benefit greatly from constructive advice left behind by former UTAs and HTAs. The professor can do a lot in this role as well. Without recording your history, you really will end up repeating it.

Creating useful institutional memory can be a really challenging thing. Be creative about ways you leave your thoughts behind and work to create a framework where UTAs can do the same.

As part of of HTA organization the next time around, digest the old material. During TA camp, have TAs go through old lists of things to do on documents, marking off things as they get fixed. When stuff can't get fixed, leave it in for the following year.

The newsgroup is a good tool for this as well, but don't expect it to cover everything. In most cases, it will have very few of the TAs' thoughts on what's broken, and you definitely need their thoughts, particularly when it comes to staff organization.

Besides the ideas of maintaining TODO files, sifting through newsgroups, having HTA exit interviews, and getting the old and new HTAs together with the professor, you may want to consider some other forms of institutional memory:

- Week-by-week time-lines of things, and what sorts of things need to happen during the various parts of the semester
- Lists of action items and “all the random stuff” that needs to be done per assignment, per lecture, per help session (using whichever categories make sense for your course)

7.4 Tech support for students

One of issues addressed in the undergraduate missive is establishing the division between “TA questions” and “consultant questions.” This can really be a challenge for new students (and can even be a challenge for new TAs and new consultants).

In the interest of trying to help this, don't offer technical assistance to students on the course newsgroup. In your missive (and wherever else your newsgroup policy is documented), request that students bring technical questions not specifically related to course software (i.e. remote login issues) to a sunlab consultant. This is not to say that course TAs shouldn't be helping students with these issues, but that the students shouldn't expect help on these issues from their TAs.

Another step towards this would be courses not maintaining their own “how to use the sunlab” or “how to remote login” documents. This would require a

well-developed centralized alternative, one that is not really currently provided in `/rooms/sunlab/consult/guide/` or (gasp) `/system/`, but is probably doable in the future.

The consultant mini-courses are usually not very well attended, due mostly to the fact that students don't necessarily hear about them, and that they don't realize that the knowledge they pick up would be useful to them. There's a frequently-heard comment along the lines of, "I wish I had gone to the mini-courses. Once I knew they'd be useful, I sort of didn't need them anymore."

7.5 Start-of-semester visits to classes

At the beginning of the semester, the meta-TAs will likely schedule with you to come visit your class, introduce themselves, and distribute paper copies of the ugrad missive. This may not happen in your course if it is (a) a spring course connected to a fall course, or (b) your course number starts with 200 or suchlike.

7.6 HTA recruiting

Toward the end of your class, you should get your UTAs considering their interest in head TAing the following year. If course development seems worth doing, the summer before is really the time to do it (even for spring courses!). Getting the current UTAs thinking ahead to the following year may also encourage them to put some extra thought into long-term goals and to write down ideas as they go.

7.7 End-of-semester tasks

Before you shake off the burden of responsibility for your course, please remember to take care of wrapping up your course at the end of the semester.

- Clean out your course storage in the handin room file cabinet and the lockers. It should be empty except for anything really important that will be wanted next year.
- Make sure you and your TAs return your handin room bin keys to Janet (jeager).
- Empty out your handback drawer—don't leave old student work or lecture slides in there. If you are a friend to the earth you will recycle.
- If any students have incompletes, put a list together and circulate it with the professor and head TAs, and keep reasonably close tabs on them. You should also send the names to the meta-TAs so that accounts and identities can be kept around for the students.

- Plan for an HTA organizational meeting with the professor and the next year’s HTAs. If this is not possible, arrange for an in-person or written “exit interview” to pass on some official course-specific advice to the next HTAs.
- Clean out your course directory. Remove unnecessary material, like hand-ins, etc.

8 Resources

You have some newsgroup resources available to you when you have questions that need to be answered, are looking for some piece of information, or want to start a discussion/get feedback about something. `brown.cs.ta` is available for stuff concerning the TA program, and the meta-TAs promise to read. `brown.cs.consult` is there for technical questions about things like remote login, and `brown.cs.ugrad` is there for general CS ugrad stuff (concentration req’s, etc). You can also direct UTAs and students to these newsgroups when they have questions that are extraneous to your course.

Some mail aliases you should know about/use:

- `mta` goes to the Meta-TAs (admin and tech)
- `problem` mail if you bust a node in the TA room, etc.
- `house` mail if you notice maintenance issues with the facilities (broken shade, overflowing trash, etc)

8.1 Meetings

Here is a summary of the meeting-related responsibilities of a head TA. Most of these meetings are mentioned in greater detail at some other point in this document.

- HTA orientation meeting
This meeting is held after you are hired, i.e. in the semester before your course. At this meeting, you meet the meta-TAs, receive this document, and discuss any particular issues going on with the TA program or your course for the coming semester.
- UTA info session
- Start-of-semester HTA meeting (typically, evening on the Friday before classes begin)
Please plan to be back on campus by this date.

To this meeting, you should bring:

- a copy of your syllabus with all your course’s project deadlines
- a schedule of times your course needs to use the MSLab for labs, if relevant
- how many times a semester/what days of the week you wish to use a handin bin

Also at this meeting it will be decided which courses will use which room for TA hours.

- UTA orientation meeting (typically, morning of the Monday before classes begin)

This meeting occurs before classes start around the time that TA camps are ending. You and your staff should be sure to come. Administrative rules and space policies that your UTAs are responsible for, everything from sexual harassment to picking up the TA office, are covered.

There will also be technical sessions that will help your TAs with stuff they need to know to TA, like how to `su`, `gzip` and `gunzip` stuff, permissions, etc. This will probably be offered during the UTA orientation meeting. If you have any specific requests with regard to special sessions or content to be covered, contact the meta-TA tech.

8.2 The meta-TAs

The Meta-TAs are responsible for representing your concerns to the faculty and staff, and the best thing for you to do is to communicate your concerns to them, trust that they’ll do the best they can, consider their response critically, and respond with your thoughts. If you’re uncomfortable talking to them about an issue, or their response to or handling of a situation just doesn’t cut it, you can try working closer to the source. However, you are really encouraged to effect change via the Meta-TAs to whatever extent you can.

They’re also supposed to sort of “queue up” requests for `astaff` and `tstaff` and to put systems in place for communicating with them. If you feel like you have to contact them directly and it’s not because the Meta-TAs referred you to them, the Meta-TAs are probably not doing their job. So do what you have to do to make your course work, but realize that working with the Meta-TAs to have try to have them address and document the issues is a better long-term solution.

8.3 *Les grandes personnes*

Not sure who to talk to about something? The Meta-TAs work closely with many of these people, and can often point you in the right direction.

Your professor You might have great interactions with your professor and agree about a lot of things. Dealing with your professor might be a chore or a never-ending uphill battle. In either case, be creative about your professor as a resource. Get the professor and the UTAs in the same room every now and then. If the professor isn't inclined to suggest social things, suggest one. If your professor never posts to the newsgroup, have her or him make an administrative posting sometime. Publish your professor's office hours—it's amazing how much practice professors have dealing with student complaints.

Your professor's assistant Find out who your professor's assistant is and take advantage of the things they can help you with. They sometimes (or often?) know about your professor's schedule and can sometimes arrange meetings, secure delivery of confidential materials, and can track down your professor when she or he is otherwise impossible for you to contact.

Director of undergraduate study Tom Doeppner (twd), the director of undergraduate study, is responsible for undergraduate concentrations, the UTA program, and working with the faculty on ugrad issues. As part of this role, he serves as a ugrad-faculty liaison, and is always available to respond to student, UTA, and HTA questions and concerns (and is clearly always responding to faculty and Meta-TA concerns). Tom meets weekly with the Meta-TAs, and the MTA-Admin reports to him.

Department chair Roberto Tamassia (rt), the department chair, is responsible for Tom, for the rest of the faculty, and ultimately, for the image and quality of the department as a whole. If you or a UTA or a student has varied, weighty things to say, he may be the best one to talk to.

Executive assistant to the chair Janet Eager (jeager) is a great resource for dealing with various administrative issues. As far as the TA program goes, she handles petty cash, "hospitality" purchases, and communicating with other departments like residential life, purchasing, and facilities.

Department executive officer Jane McIlmail (jem) handles, among many other things, payroll for the department and is the one who first-time campus workers need to see in order to be put on payroll. She's also the one to coordinate with in the case of any special arrangements for being paid to work on courses during previous semesters or summers. She handles room and textbook requests for undergraduate courses, and also has enrollment figures, both current and historical, for all courses.

Reception Genie and her assistant handle reserving rooms that are within the department and the ordering of office supplies, though you must have Janet's permission first to order. They can also help you fix the copying machine if you have broken it and are desperate.

Director of facilities Jeff Coady (jwc) is responsible for computing facilities and equipment in the department, including the equipment in the ugrad labs and TA spaces.

User services coordinator Dorinda Moulton (djm) is responsible for the undergraduate labs (the sunlab, the mslab, and the TA areas), for creating and managing accounts, and for supervising the SPOCs, MTA-tech, and the consultants. She also handles reservations for the ugrad labs and is a good tstaff point of contact for HTAs.

Hardware technician Max Salvas (mls) is responsible for maintaining the computing hardware in the department. He also handles most of the department-maintained AV equipment and is a good person to talk to about AV issues in the Sunlab, 506, or Lubrano.

9 Closing

This document undergoes continuous improvement. If you think of suggestions that should be talked about here, write them up and send us mail! The intent is that the content in this document is some balance of common sense, department policy, and HTA wisdom. Your thoughts and participation are important, and help to make this a useful document for future HTAs.

Good luck with recruiting, hiring, and the rest of your semester. Here's to a great semester!

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