

PROGRAM PROFILE 1.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN
ADVENTURESHIP: DIVERSITY,
CONTEXT, AND CASUISTRY
IN GRADUATE STUDENT
PROFESSIONALIZATION

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At Saint Louis University (SLU), like so many other institutions, the first-year composition requirement generates a considerable number of courses each semester, most of which are taught by graduate students from the Department of English (which houses both the writing program and the rhetoric and composition concentration). Because the course also generates a considerable revenue for the university, the department is able to offer assistantships¹ to all full-time graduate students (master's and Ph.D., regardless of concentration), who are expected to spend 20 hours per week as students and 20 hours as university employees. Although these assistantships are made possible by the expectation of teaching, they are not called teaching assistantships but *graduate* assistantships (GAships). While this distinction may seem relatively small, it reflects an essential difference in the opportunities offered to SLU's English graduate assistants (GAs). Unlike many other rhetcomp programs, these GAships are not reserved exclusively for teaching. Instead, their design allows the department and its students to customize each GA's path with the experiences and professionalization suited to their research and career aspirations.

1 While not directly relevant to my profile of SLU's assistantship program, it's worth noting that these assistantships come with a modest stipend (comparable to the relatively low cost of living in the Saint Louis area) and health insurance. Most positions are 9-month contracts (mid-August to mid-May), though certain positions are 11 or 12 months instead (July to May or July to June, respectively). It is also worth noting that the assistantships offered in the Department of English are different than those offered in other departments and colleges across the university, so *SLU* assistantships as a whole are not necessarily the same as *English* assistantships. For the purposes of this discussion, though, I'm referring exclusively to the assistantships offered in the Department of English (as of 2020).

The primary way that SLU's GAships allow for such versatility is the restriction of GAs' teaching loads. As with TAships, teaching within the writing program or Department of English is the primary and most common responsibility of SLU English GAs.² At SLU, three-credit courses are considered 10-hour responsibilities, but it is a truth universally acknowledged that teaching is more than a 10-hour-per-course commitment when it comes to preparation and grading. SLU's Department of English recognizes this as a potential problem for GAs and, therefore, limits GA teaching loads to only one course per semester. If GAs were to teach two courses ("20" hours), the actual hours worked would quickly eat into the time students need for their studies and to progress in their degrees. This restriction is an intentional move to help GAs—who are first and foremost *students*—balance their lives between their student responsibilities (study, research, etc.) and their work responsibilities, which (theoretically) allows them to maintain a more realistic 40-hour week.

Because these GAships are a 20-hour-per-week employment commitment, the teaching limitation creates the need for another 10 hours of non-teaching duties. The Department of English therefore has a range of other positions that allows GAs to mix and match the types of experiences to suit not just the department's but also their own needs, whether personal, academic, or professional. These roles are spread across a range of professionalization or research opportunities:

- Consulting in the university writing center
- Staffing and maintaining the writing program's multimodal resource room and website
- Assisting faculty members with research or special projects
- Assisting program coordinators, directors, or chairs with administrative duties

The diversity of these roles is where SLU's English GAships truly customize each GA's responsibilities and thereby promote each GA's opportunity to create a cohesive and worthwhile program experience.

In most cases, GAs are expected to take on one teaching and one non-teaching role within the assigned year.³ In certain circumstances, though, GAs can

2 GAs begin teaching immediately upon entering the program if they joined with sufficient training or experience in teaching; if not, in their first semester, they take a composition pedagogy seminar and begin teaching in their second semester.

3 Within the teaching expectation, GAs can still personalize their experiences. The most common course offered within the writing program is ENGL 1900, the university-wide required composition course. Once GAs develop greater teaching experience, those interested may also opt to teach other composition and/or literature courses: a pre-ENG 1900 course for students with lower placement scores, a professional writing course, or introductory-level literature survey courses. With these options, GAs are able to diversify their teaching portfolios beyond the required

double-up on the same type of role. For example, GAs may request 2 non-teaching positions or 20 hours of the same position.⁴ Such requests are common for those who need greater flexibility in their schedules due to various personal situations (health needs, childcare, etc.) or who want to improve professionalization and have a more robust CV line in a certain area (e.g., administration, multimodal and/or digital humanities). Alternatively, some GAs ask to teach two courses. This request is typically only granted to Ph.D. GAs who have passed their comprehensive exams, as they are better prepared to handle the additional work. The additional teaching hours can be invaluable experience, though, and can make the difference in hireability for GAs with minimal prior teaching history or who plan on seeking placement at universities or colleges with heavier teaching expectations. Overall, the mix-and-match design of these 10-hour teaching and non-teaching positions allows GAs to create opportunities that align with their personal, professional, and academic lives.

While student requests are important to GAship assignment, departmental context is the first determining factor in who gets which assistantships. To some extent, faculty members and directors can request GAs they want to work with, but most assistantships are assigned to fill intra- and extra-departmental needs. Certain key positions are required for the department to function and/or to fulfill partnerships with other departments or units across the university, such as the writing center (housed under student development), women and gender studies, and library special collections. Therefore, each year, the department requires a certain number of GAs to hold those key administrative positions, a certain number to teach the required composition course, and a certain number to consult in the writing center—those numbers fluctuate to some extent but are fairly fixed. Therefore, GAs who may desire a non-teaching or non-consulting position may still be called upon to teach or consult to ensure those areas are not left vacant or understaffed.⁵

Outside of departmental matters, the assignment of GAships comes down almost entirely to casuistry, and the department (especially the Director of Graduate Studies, who makes the ultimate decision on assignments) puts considerable effort into understanding and working with and for students' needs to

composition course.

4 Some of the administrative non-teaching roles are more intensive and/or specialized and are therefore deemed 20-hour responsibilities outright, such as assisting the writing program coordinator.

5 Unlike the 10-hour positions, the 20-hour roles are specialized and therefore generally only granted to GAs whose research or professional interests align with the role (rhetoric and composition student for the writing program assistant; an early modernist for certain library collections, etc.). Only in the most extenuating or unusual circumstances are 20-hour positions held by GAs outside their respective areas.

the best of their abilities. No two GAs are the same. Even those within the same concentration will have their own research and professional interests and aspirations, which means their position preferences necessitate completely different GAship experiences. To facilitate the assignment process, the Director of Graduate Studies sends GAs a survey each year to rank their preferred positions. For instance, in the situation mentioned above, where a GA may not want to consult, the director could ask another GA whose survey showed greater interest in consulting if they'd prefer to consult 20 hours (forgoing a teaching position for that year or perhaps just a semester). Such flexibility would still allocate the necessary number of hours to the writing center but would allow both GAs their preferred positions.

However, these assignments rely on much more than preference. The yearly survey also includes a field for comments that students can use to inform the director of any special circumstances the GA might want them to know when deciding who's assigned to which roles. Additionally, the director encourages GAs to schedule one-on-one meetings both with their advisors and with the director himself to speak about their concerns and needs for the coming year (and/or to make their case in the event of special situations or unusual requests). The director is therefore able to consider a wide range of factors when determining placement: each student's year in the program (in terms of whether a position needs experience or whether the requester has seniority), whether the student will be taking comprehensive exams that year, number of credit hours being taken, prior job performance, etc. These considerations—and the work done by the director to collect and make sense of the disparate needs of such a large group of people⁶—are what make or break each GA's experience for that year and whether their professional responsibilities will align or conflict with their academic and personal lives.

Ultimately, though, the quality of each GAship comes down to two factors: self-awareness and disclosure. As is so often the case now given the nature of humanities in general as well as the state of employment in academia, many GAs enter the program having only a general sense of their research interests or their professional aspirations. Many students spend the first few years (and sometimes even the last few years) of their program figuring out what they want to do, both in their studies and professionally. Additionally, students also have

6 For the past several years, this position has been held by Rachel Greenwald Smith. I simply cannot stress enough how much of an amazing job she does every year as an advocate for graduate students' professionalization in conjunction with their academic and personal health and wellbeing, all done while juggling nigh innumerable contextual factors. I have no doubt that her compassion and dedication to her work as director are key reasons that SLU English GAships function as effectively as they do.

to make a decision between the best position for professionalization or for their academic, personal, or other types of wellbeing, as such factors don't necessarily always align. Ultimately, all of the various scenarios and circumstances mentioned above are subject to GAs understanding what their current and future goals are (or might be), realizing which positions best suit those goals, and *requesting* those positions when the yearly survey makes the rounds. The director can only work with what GAs tell them, so the most important factor is the student's self-awareness, foresight, and willingness to be forthright about the intersectionality of their needs and identities.

To a certain extent, GAs who don't demonstrate that foresight (or master's students, who have only two years in the program and therefore can't take advantage of the diversity of GAship positions in the same ways that Ph.D. GAs can) are more liable to be given the most-needed and least customized positions of teaching required composition and consulting in the writing center. Those GAs are therefore more likely to feel as though they are nothing more than "affordable labor" to the department, filling the department's commitments but not their own. On the whole, though, SLU's Department of English is quite intentionally mindful of GA identities and wide-scale needs, and the structure of their GAship program helps to minimize the disconnection that many GAs might experience elsewhere.

POSTSCRIPT

At the start of this profile, I mentioned that these GAships were offered to all full-time graduate students in the Department of English, regardless of concentration (rhetoric and composition, early modernism, romanticism, etc.). Given that this collection spotlights "rhetoric and composition TAships," however, I feel it's important to close by acknowledging how SLU's English GAships affect rhetoric and composition students specifically.

Obviously, the teaching opportunities are directly relevant and also essential to future professional work. However, the entire corpus of roles available within the GAship is invaluable for professionalization in rhetcomp, which is perhaps a little unusual for a relatively small rhetcomp division. As of 2020, there are approximately four faculty members who have degrees or specialties in rhetoric or composition and a comparable number of Ph.D. students pursuing the rhetoric and composition concentration.⁷ Yet writing consulting, working in the multi-modal/digital humanities lab, and serving in administrative positions (especially

7 English MA students are required to study across a range of concentrations (four out of an available five areas) and do not technically claim a single concentration.

assistant to the writing program coordinator and the assistant coordinator of the writing center) are all markedly rhetcomp-driven. In fact, if any students may feel a disconnect between their GAship experience and their professional development, it's likely felt by those concentrating in literature (who make up 4/5ths of the department), who at times express resentment toward positions like teaching required composition or consulting. For rhetcomp students, *every* position can be directly relevant to their careers and academic specialties.

The relevance and diversity of these opportunities allows rhetcomp students to cultivate precisely the type of professional experience they will eventually want to pursue on the job market. In fact, our most recent rhetoric and composition graduate (who served many years as the assistant coordinator of the writing center) was hired by the university as coordinator of the writing center, a full-time staff position. Regardless of professional aspirations—whether that's teaching, research, administrative, or alt-ac—the variety of graduate assistantship opportunities offered within the Department of English allows their rhetcomp students to leave the program with robust experiences unique to their academic and professional identities.