

# What Does a Teaching Associate Professor Do?



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For about a decade now, the Department of Statistics at North Carolina State University has been hiring faculty in career path, non-tenure-track teaching positions. These positions were first called clinical assistant professor positions, but have since been renamed teaching assistant professors. These positions are unusual in that they are not tenure-track, but they do have a career track, unlike instructor, lecturer, or adjunct positions found at many universities in the United States. Thus, a teaching assistant professor has the opportunity to be promoted to a teaching associate professor and a teaching professor. For simplicity, I'll refer to a person in any of these positions as a TAP and to tenure-track or tenured faculty as TT faculty.

## What Do TAPs Do?

Currently, the department has four TAPs, all of whom began at the assistant level and were promoted to the associate level. All currently have five-year contracts and PhDs in statistics or mathematics. Their responsibilities include a nominal teaching load of four courses per semester, though most TAPs begin with a "3+" contract. That is, the teaching load is three courses per semester, plus some scholarly activity. That may include research, but doesn't have to.

The four TAPs (including me) have evolved into very different roles within the department. The ways we contribute to the department, university, and profession include teaching graduate and undergraduate courses for statistics majors and as service courses; developing curricular and teaching materials to share with colleagues and/or publish; writing research papers; serving in administrative roles such as assistant department head, co-director of graduate programs, and director of undergraduate programs; recruiting, advising, and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students, including directing dissertation research; writing grant proposals; providing professional service by reviewing journal submissions; being an associate editor or grading AP Statistics exams; serving on committees... Sounds a lot like what a TT faculty member might do, right?

So what does a TAP not do? In my department, there's very little we can't do. We have the opportunity to achieve our full potential. The biggest difference between a TAP and TT position is we allocate our time differently to the realms of teaching, research, and service. TAPs are not expected to publish in top statistical journals, advise a regular stream of graduate students, or get research grants, though we can do those things.

We are expected to do a lot of outstanding teaching, and the flexibility of these positions has allowed us opportunities junior



Teacher Associate Professor (TAP) and Director of Undergraduate Programs Roger Woodard (center) mentors North Carolina State graduate students.

faculty at a Research I university can rarely afford to consider. For example, we spend time on large course redesigns; organize conferences; develop teaching materials that are worth sharing and publishing; take on administrative roles; and go after grants for REUs, conferences, undergraduate and graduate support, enhancing diversity, and teaching activities.

I want to note that a TAP is not the same as a TT person doing research in statistics education. We have recently hired someone in this type of TT position to begin in January 2009. She will have the same research, teaching, and service expectations as any other TT faculty, with her research focused on statistics education. A few other statistics departments have, or at least have advertised, similar positions. While some TAPs are active in the national statistics education community, there is not a requirement of education research for reappointment or promotion.

### **Why Would Someone Want to Be a TAP?**

A TAP is typically someone who is passionate about teaching and mentoring students and who wants to be in a research-intensive environment. A TAP position may look similar to a TT position at an institution that places more emphasis on teaching and undergraduates. However, there are advantages to being in a Research I school and NC State, in particular.

There are resources that may not be available at smaller institutions, such as for travel and professional development. In addition to supporting NC State's well-established undergraduate program, we have opportunities to mentor graduate students in teaching, research, or in their graduate careers in one of the oldest, largest, and best graduate programs in the United States. In a large department, we have a variety of undergraduate and graduate classes to teach and are surrounded by colleagues with various expertise. Opportunities also exist to provide statistical consulting for students and postdoctoral fellows in other departments. We can have



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a big effect on the profession and in training critical thinkers. A variety of seminars (Bayesian, bioinformatics, biostatistics, environmental statistics, statistical genetics, regular departmental seminars, and seminars by a number of interview candidates) and special topics courses in the department and at the nearby Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute provide opportunities for continuous professional development.

### **Why Does the Department Want TAPs?**

The existence of TAPs at NC State does not mean TT faculty members are not excellent teachers. In fact, many have received university and national teaching awards. TAPs can make valuable contributions to the long-term goals of the department and the



Teaching Associate Professor Kim Weems at the presentation of an honorary doctorate from North Carolina State to David Blackwell



Teaching Associate Professor Kim Weems (left), David Blackwell, and Department Head Sastry Pantula



Teaching Associate Professor **Roger Woodard** joined the department in 2003 and currently serves as director of undergraduate programs.



Teaching Associate Professor **Kim Weems** joined the department in 2001.



Teaching Associate Professor **Jeff Thompson** joined the department in 2003.

mission of the university. The creation of TAPs incorporates faculty members with different interests and skill sets and helps keep teaching loads for research-active faculty at a level where they can continue to be successful in their research productivity.

Unlike short-term adjuncts or instructors, TAPs have a vested interest in the future of the department. So, while it is more of a commitment than hiring an instructor, the benefit to the department tends to be much greater. TAPs have the time for (and even expectation of) improving teaching and curriculum across the whole department. NC State TAPs have also taken on administrative and service roles that lessen the non-research workload of TT faculty, make use of the professional strengths of those in TAP positions, and contribute to the long-term growth of the department. TAPs also play an important role in training graduate students, especially for academic positions.

### And About That Pesky Tenure ...

I don't miss it. Is my position less secure than my colleagues? My contract has to be renewed every five years. With reappointment, promotion, and post-tenure review every three to five years, I'm not sure TT faculty members have it any easier. The university, which regards us as "special ranks" faculty, has explicitly stated that the review process is the same for TAPs as for TT faculty, though contributions in different realms must obviously be weighted differently. Industry isn't handing out five-year contracts either. Job security is not a bigger concern for me than for anyone else.

Some professional organizations have been outspoken against increase in non-TT positions in academia. I agree that non-TT positions should not increase at the expense of TT positions. They should be used to complement TT faculty members and support the mission of the university. Universities must be ethical and respectful in how non-TT faculty members are treated. A TAP is not a person the department gets to abuse and then dump when funding gets tight. Neither are TAPs short-term, hired-as-needed teachers for low-level courses. In my department, the TAPs are very much respected by colleagues and the administration. We are not second-class citizens, and we participate in nearly all activities. For better or worse, we are expected to contribute as much as TT faculty, and we do in the realms of our passion and expertise. I love my job! (Okay, it is pay raise time, and I want my department head to count this as one of my publications.) ■