I am pleased to say that my experience as a teaching assistant (TA) in UGA’s English Department has been extremely positive. In the English Department, graduate student teacher training begins with a semester of peer apprenticeship. New graduate students interested in becoming TA’s are required to spend at least one semester attending an experienced instructor’s first-year writing class—first as an observer and then as an active participant in both leading classes and grading student assignments. As far as I know, this semester of peer apprenticeship is fairly unique among TA training throughout the university.

After completing the apprenticeship, the next step in the TA training process is an intensive teacher training session held during the week prior to the start of classes in the fall. Such up-to-the-minute training is very useful to TA’s making the transition from summer vacation mode, and it bolsters their confidence for that first day of teaching on their own (as most of them will be Teachers of Record, rather than assisting professors in large lecture sections).

During their first semester of teaching, TA’s are required to enroll in a pedagogy course. This class not only increases student knowledge about the theories and practices of teaching writing and literature, but it serves as an excellent “support group” for new teachers and a safe place for sharing innovative teaching ideas or airing problems with students, grading, lesson topics, textbooks, etc. Once during this initial teaching semester, each member of the class is observed and evaluated by the Director of First-year Writing or one of her assistants. So, as you might imagine, a TA’s first semester of teaching is a very positive experience.

After that first semester, however, much of the support and the energy generated in the introductory semester seem to dissipate. Once TA’s have completed the required pedagogy course, no comparable forum exists for sharing ideas and airing problems related to teaching. The energy and excitement in the students’ graduate coursework are almost exclusively focused on research and scholarship. Furthermore, a TA’s teaching is never again formally evaluated. For the remainder of their graduate careers, TA’s are only evaluated by faculty on their scholarly work, and this, I would argue, has the effect of making it seem like teaching is merely what “pays the bills” and that producing quality seminar papers, presenting scholarly research at academic conferences, and attempting to get published in peer-reviewed journals are the areas where students should concentrate their “serious” efforts. While it is gratifying to be pushed to excel in our scholarly achievements in order to give ourselves the chance to pursue employment at the nation’s large research universities, many of us know that we
are entering a job market that has a surplus of qualified applicants, and we would appreciate being given more opportunities to learn about and observe quality undergraduate teaching and to hear about institutions that would value our teaching skills just as much, if not more than our publishing potential.

The other aspect of that first semester of teaching that needs to be bolstered is the sense of being in a community of teachers. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to host and attend numerous scholarly lectures and readings by literary figures and creative authors that are followed by energetic and fruitful question and answer sessions, but we rarely gather together to listen to visiting scholars or faculty members talk about their teaching.

Despite these minor perceived deficiencies in our program, teaching is a fundamental and highly worthwhile aspect of most graduate students’ experiences in the English Department. So, although the general attitude of faculty in the department often appears to be one of “concentrate on your research and scholarship, because that’s what will get you a ‘good’ job,” teaching is certainly given ample attention and is well-supported by the Department Head, the First-year Writing Director, and the undergraduate and graduate coordinators, all of whom ensure that excellent teaching is recognized and rewarded.