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Fall 2022

UTA Reflection

This semester, I was a UTA for Real Analysis (Math 425A) with Professor Conroy. As this is my second semester being a TA, I was able to better prepare myself for the workload, and I hit the ground running this time around. In the spring, my work was (very nearly) entirely composed of grading, but I was better able to communicate with my mentor this time and figure out a better set of tasks for me. I feel that I had a much more productive and rewarding experience, both for myself and for the students.

There were three major changes to my UTA experience this fall. First, I graded significantly less homework compared to last semester. Then, I had graded one to two full homework assignments per week, but this time I graded only a few homework assignments and some homework regrades, which took significantly less time. As I'm sure everyone can agree, it is a great success when one is able to get out of grading. Regardless, I was able to devote more of my time to my office hours. The second major change was that people, in fact, attended office hours this semester. Whereas last semester I sat in an empty room for an hour a week, this time I got to actually help people who wanted to learn. Given the fewer hours I spent grading, I was able to hold office hours at least two hours each week (though oftentimes more than two). The third major change was the shift from online to in-person calculus tutoring, which greatly improved turnout rate. In spring I had a grand total of five people show up at all, but now I averaged about ten students per week coming in. Since my hours' scheduling didn't change drastically between semesters, I believe that the increased accessibility to tutoring led to the drastic rise in turnout.

Given the orders of magnitude difference in calculus tutoring attendance and the division-by-zero error one would get if trying to compute the growth factor in my office hours

turnout, I felt much more productive as a TA this time around. Part of this was the random occurrence that calculus tutoring began being offered in-person, but much of it was voluntary on my part. I specifically requested this course, Math 425A, for its perception of difficulty and for my own skill in the material. I guessed (correctly as it turned out) that this was a course in which it was more likely students would seek out office hours in. In my office hours, I helped the same one to three people each week, so not only did I build a connection with them, but I was able to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses to determine where they most needed help. I feel that my work this semester was not just “helping out the professor,” but I genuinely feel like without my assistance that these students would have floundered much more, not just indirectly (such as giving feedback on homework) but directly by giving one-on-one help with them.

In my previous reflection, I mentioned my feelings of impotence as I knew that I could be doing so much more to help, but thankfully that problem has been fixed this semester. I realized that much of it comes down to my own choices, so I’m satisfied I was able to figure out a more accommodating set of responsibilities this time around. I think the biggest takeaway from the UTA program will be the greater sense of confidence and assertiveness these past two semesters provided. Sure, it wasn’t ideal that I spent so much time grading and being idle last semester, but I was able to identify that this wasn’t something I wanted, and I decided to make an active change in it to better myself. I roughly estimate that I spent ~30x more time helping one-on-one with students this semester, which I found extremely enjoyable and which students likely found helpful. Not only that, but spending all that time tutoring helped my communication skills too, no doubt. Regardless, I had a great time this semester and I’m excited to be a UTA next semester.