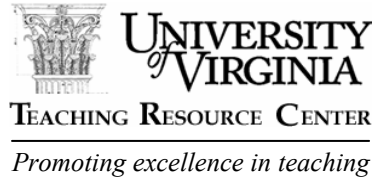


ASSIGNING STUDENTS TO SECTIONS IN LARGE-ENROLLMENT COURSES



The English Department has developed a set of procedures for assigning—as fairly and reasonably as possible—students in large lecture classes to their discussion sections. The motives behind these procedures are 1) to prevent confusion by keeping section assignments under the control of relatively few people, 2) to ensure that students are assigned to sections they can attend, and 3) to ensure that teaching assistants (TAs) are given roughly equal numbers of students. What follows is a step-by-step description of these procedures.

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Once the corps of teaching assistants is established, the course professor invites one TA to be the “Head TA.” This TA, who receives an additional stipend, will then be responsible for the section assignments and other administrative tasks. (However, some professors prefer to manage these duties themselves.)

As soon as the Course Offering Directory goes online, the professor has the registrar block all online enrollment into the sections (though *not* into the lecture). Online section enrollment will be re-opened early in the second week of classes, once students know what sections they have been assigned to. At that time, and only then, students enroll in their sections.

On the first day of the course (in the first lecture), each student gets a “Section Preference Form,” which lists the times and locations for all of the sections. Students rank each section in order of preference, and indicate which sections they simply cannot attend. These forms often include a space for any remarks or notes students deem necessary. Students must put their names on these forms, and turn them in at the end of the first class. On this first day of the course, students are also told where and when they can learn of their section assignments (see below).

Equally important, students need to be told on this first day that sections will not meet until the second week of classes.

In the days immediately following this first meeting, the Head TA or professor assigns students to sections with two factors in mind:

- Students’ section preferences: In general, even for a course with very large enrollment, students can be assigned to a section from one of their top three or four choices.
- Having equal numbers of students for each TA and/or section: For the sake of fairness to the TAs, it is important to make sure that some TAs do not have many more students (and the grading or time commitments they entail) than others. It can be helpful for the professor to stipulate a margin of tolerance: say, no greater enrollment differential among sections than 3 or 4 students.

This is how one professor made the section assignments: All of the students who chose section 1 as their top choice were put in one stack; all those who chose section 2 as their top choice were put in another; and so on. Sections preferred by many students were reduced by moving some of these students to their second, third, or fourth choices until all of the sections were roughly equal.

Once the section lists are established, the Head TA or each individual TA types up each section roster. These rosters are then posted online (on Toolkit, for example) and in hard copy (taped to the walls in front of the professor's office). The section assignments are posted as quickly as possible – at least a day before the first sections meet.

Once students learn their section assignments, they must enroll in the section to which they have been assigned. Students are told that they can attend only the section to which they have been assigned.

However, inevitably, there are some enrollment problems: unexpected scheduling conflicts emerge. Students who have questions or problems about their section assignments are told to contact the Head TA or the person in charge of assigning sections. The Head TA checks in with the TAs who stand to gain or lose the student in question. If any changes are made, the Head TA confirms this with the two TAs who are involved.

Some students will dislike the section assignments they have received, and will prefer another. For example, many students dislike Friday sections. However, the English Department has found it most effective to be firm and to make it clear to students that mere preference will not justify a section change. Switching between sections taught by a *single* TA may not be a problem, though even here strong pedagogical reasons exist for keeping sections sizes at parity. Unless there is a real necessity (such as an intractable scheduling conflict with another course), it is best to insist that students remain in the sections to which they have been assigned.