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Practicing Mentorship: Graduate Supervision of Undergraduate Research

Olivia K. Lima, Amanda C. Hege, J. Patrick Seder, & Dennis R. Proffitt

Abstract

Many research universities rely on graduate students to supervise undergraduate research assistants (RAs) who collect data and handle research logistics. This experience can be mutually beneficial, as RAs receive hands-on learning, and graduate students practice mentorship in preparation for assuming a faculty role. However, assistantships must be intentionally designed to meet educational (not just practical) goals. What training and support do graduate students receive to take on this mentorship role? In two surveys, RAs reported on their satisfaction, educational benefit, and desired changes; while graduate students reported on their goals, challenges, and the support they receive.

Background

The benefits of undergraduate involvement in research have long been touted, and are now beginning to be documented through rigorous research (see Kardash, 2000, and Seymour, Hunter, Laursen & Deantoni, 2004, for a review). However, less is known about the specific elements of RA programs which make them educationally valuable. The inclusion of meaningful tasks and the importance of a good mentoring relationship has been suggested (Swager, 1997).

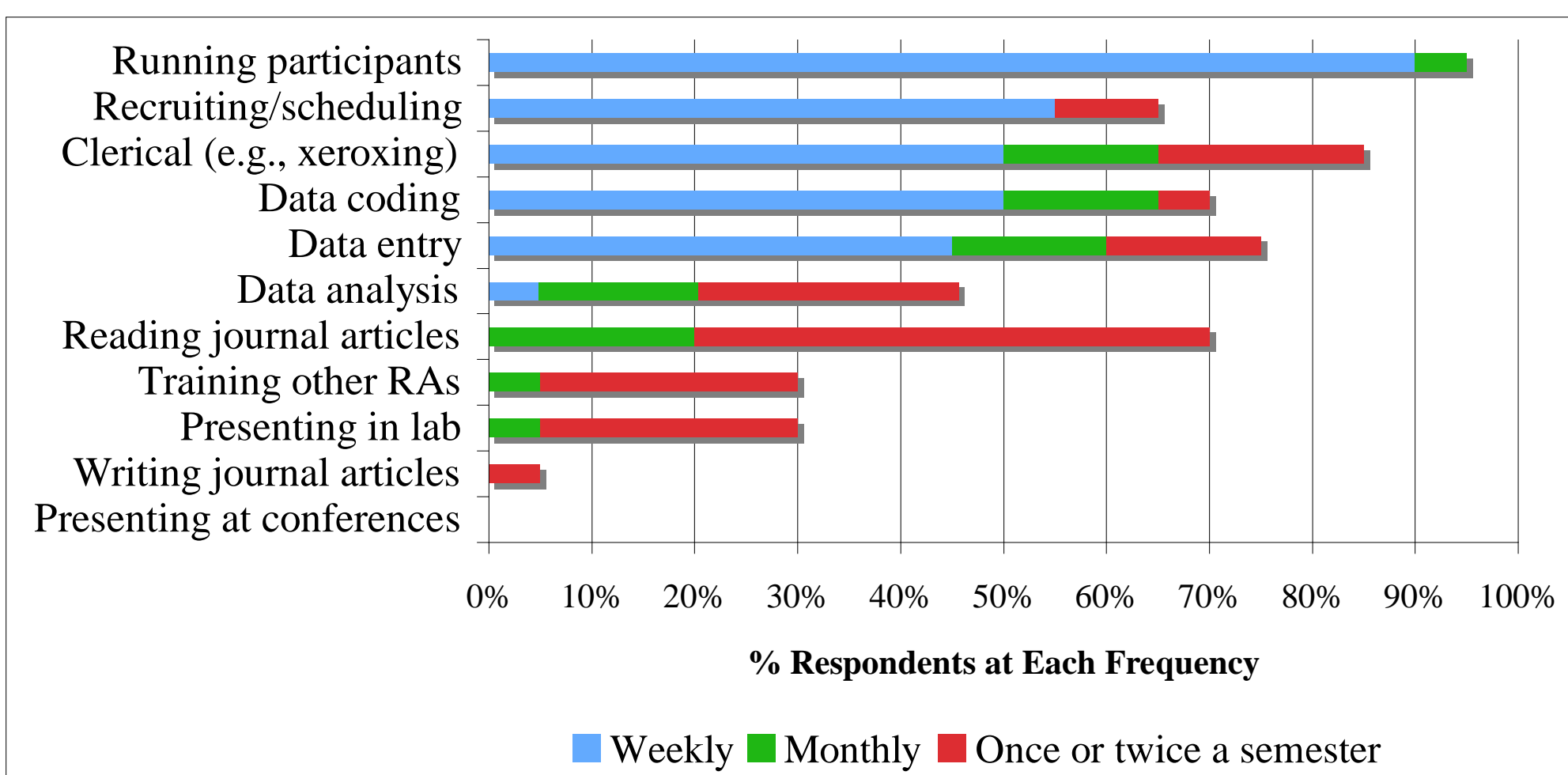
Participants

In the first survey, 21 UVA undergraduates from clinical, developmental, and cognitive psychology labs responded. All RAs worked 6-10 hours weekly for course credit; 90% were female, and 90% were upperclassmen.

In the second survey, 19 UVA graduate students from the same areas (plus social and community psychology) responded. 78% had been in graduate school for at least 3 years, and 74% supervised RAs (79% of these since their first year).

Undergraduate Activity

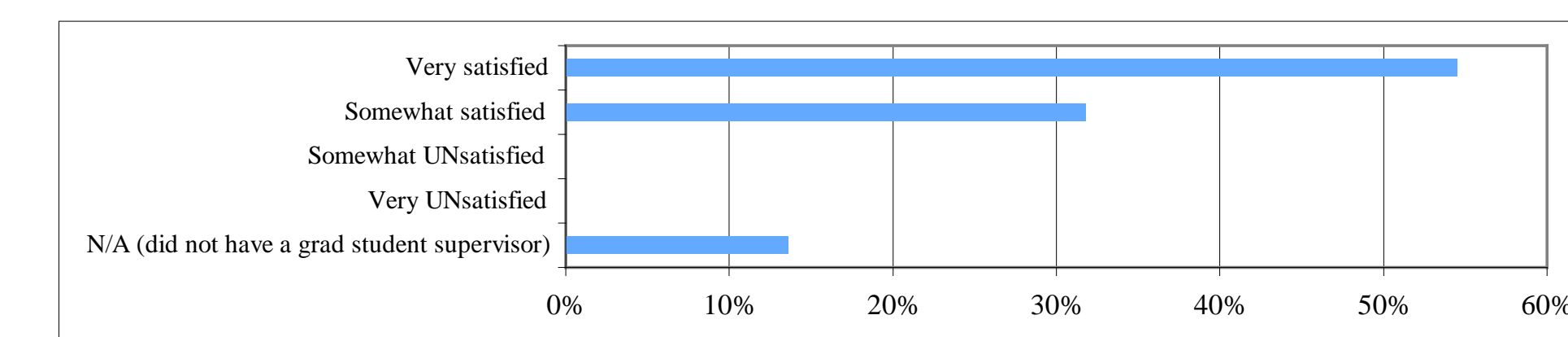
Time Spent on Different Research Activities



When asked what changes would make their experience more educational, 50% of RAs requested more data analysis, and 45% more reading literature. As the graph shows, such activities are now rare, though 63% of RAs who did data analysis found it “extremely educational”, and 42% of those who read articles found that “extremely” or “very” educational.

Mentoring Relationship

Satisfaction with the quality of mentorship



Most RAs were mentored by graduate students, and were generally satisfied with the mentorship they received. 85% of RAs who met with graduate students (either individually or in groups) found this “very” or “extremely” educational.

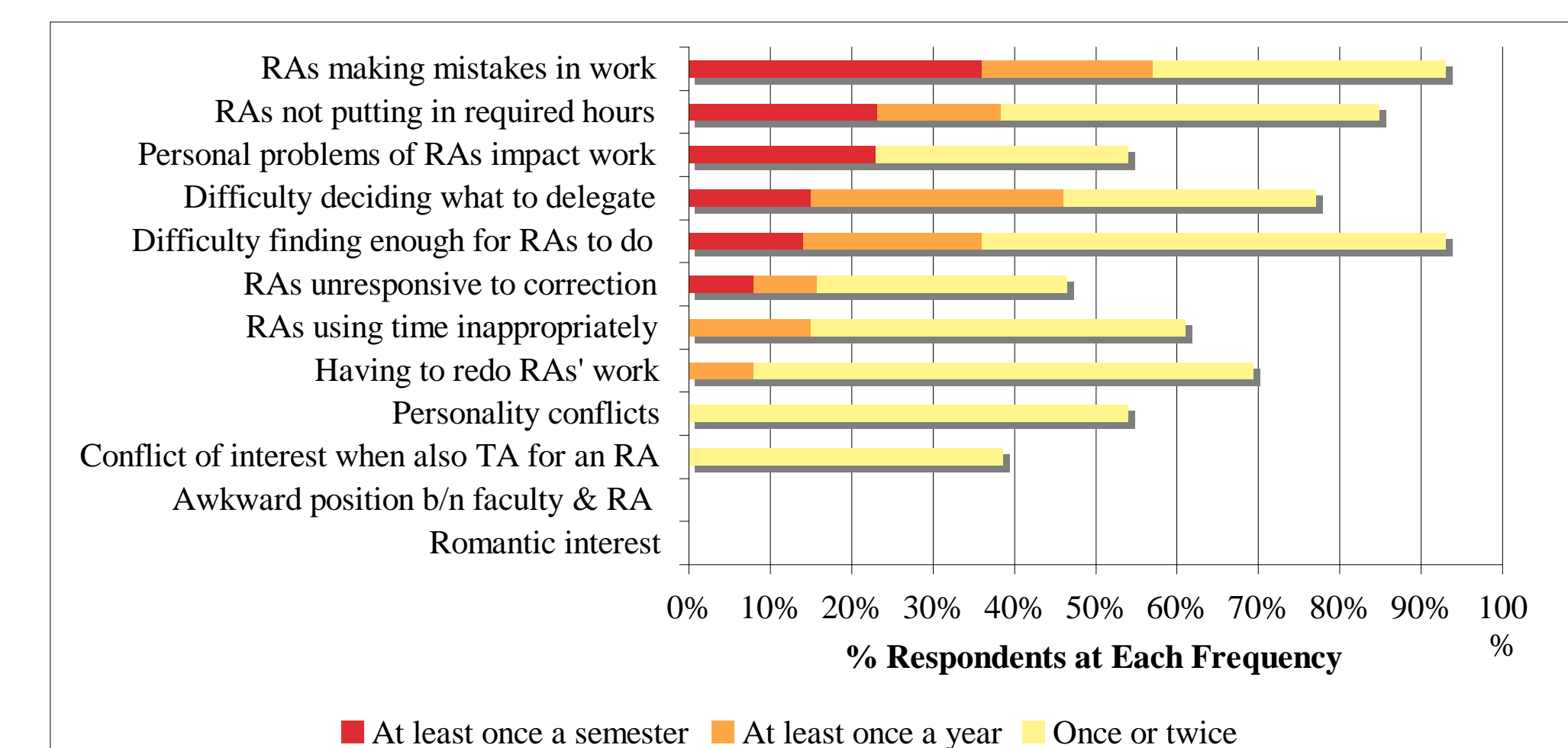
50% of RAs, however, wanted more meetings with graduate students, and 60% of RAs requested more discussion on the topic of graduate school. (100% of RAs surveyed intended a graduate career, but 45% were still unsure of that decision.)

Sample Survey Comment:

“I have worked as an RA in three areas of Psychology: social, developmental, and clinical. I have learned the most from being an RA in the clinical lab because of the weekly lab meetings and discussion of relevant literature. It makes the little tasks that I do more meaningful (even if it does involve a more significant amount of time).” - Senior RA

Graduate Perceptions

Problems Graduate Mentors Face



Graduate students report seeking multiple sources of support to solve these problems: at least once a year, 85% seek other graduate students, and 54% their advisor (69% tackle some of these problems alone). 86% said it was “very important” to them to be a good mentor, but none of the graduate students surveyed had received formal training (course or workshop) in preparation for the role. 29% were given a copy of the lab manual, 36% had a “how-to” talk with their advisor, and 64% said they received no training at all.

Conclusions

The undergraduate research assistants surveyed were generally satisfied, but sought more opportunities for advanced activities, such as data analysis and reading/discussing journal articles. Graduate students reported little training for the challenging role of mentor, and mostly resolved problems that arose amongst themselves. Greater formal support from faculty might help the RA experience reach its full educational potential for both undergraduate and graduate students.