# Graduate TA Certification Process

To ensure the quality of graduate TAs, we have implemented the following system. This system was created in response to issues we had with PhD students needing a TAship due to funding demands but not having basic circuits knowledge needed to TA a course with an available TAship. TA training should not be viewed as a punitive action, but rather a space where grad students of all backgrounds can come together and improve in their teaching, which is a skill they may need as a professor or manager in the future.

TA Training

All grad students who are going to TA need to complete TA training (6960 for Masters and ECE 7951 Teaching Engineering for PhDs). It is recommended students take TA training the term before they TA, but if absolutely necessary (like an emergency funding situation) they can take it concurrently.

### Proficiency Exam

TA training will include a proficiency exam, which will be a timed exam allowing a calculator and single note sheet. Students can choose to take an ECE 2210 Final Exam or an ECE 3530 Final Exam to fulfill this requirement. This is based off the introductory classes PhDs are most likely to teach. Students will be given access to a Canvas page containing all the course material so they can study.

This proficiency exam requirement in essence sets a minimum standard for someone to TA. This policy is being implemented due to a larger than insignificant number of PhDs coming in from various backgrounds who do not have circuits experience and therefore are not qualified to TA most of our intro courses, which is where the large majority of TAs are placed. In the case that they need emergency funding, we need to know they meet a minimum level of proficiency to TA.

If they want to take a 3200, 3300, 3500, or 3700 final exam instead to fulfill their proficiency requirement instead, we can work that out on an individual basis, but Amy does not have the bandwidth in TA training to cover more tests.

Please note that by taking the ECE 3530 Final Exam, the student is only certified for teaching in Fall Terms.

If the student passes this exam with a score of at least 80%, they will be considered proficient.

### Lab Skills Exam

Additionally, grad students will be given a lab skills exam. If they do not pass this exam, then they will not be eligible for Lab TA positions.

### ITAP

International students are not eligible to TA unless they are cleared by the ITAP program from the central university, which certifies their English skills. There are no exceptions to this legally, so please make sure your student signs up well in advanced for this training or gets written proof that they are exempt. Liz Rowberry manages the ITAP clearances for our department, so please speak to her if you have questions about this.

### Oral Presentation Score

Our department additionally grades students on their oral presentations in TA training. If a students’ oral presentation skills are found sufficiently lacking, they will be flagged for additional support. This may require the student to take ITAP even if they were automatically cleared by test scores, or it may result in an oral presentation class being added to the students’ required classes for graduation. Additionally, the student will be marked down in the certified TA list as “Grading Only”, meaning they should only be considered for grading roles and may not be ready for direct face-to-face interaction with students. This limits the possible TA roles the student may fill, which can have repercussions on emergency funding if all those spots are already filled.

Repercussions on Emergency Funding

If a student is not TA certified and needs emergency funding as a TA, there are very limited options for that student, which is why we encourage students to take TA training in their first year in the graduate program, so they are prepared for any unexpected situations (like they are kicked out of a lab).

For faculty who want their student to TA, they need to help the student plan accordingly and take TA training ahead of time to be prepared for this job. In order to support the best education possible for our students we need the best TAs. TAing should be seen as a privilege not a right.   
  
If for some reason a student needs to TA because their faculty member does not currently have funds to support them, the department works hard to support faculty and students in this case. If the student is not TA certified, then the student is limited to TAing for their own advisor or for a faculty member that specifically requests them. This means that if a faculty member is teaching an upper-level course without a TA, or is gone on sabbatical or family leave, the student may not have a class they can TA for, unless you find a colleague teaching another class willing to help you out.

Please note that if a student severely under performs as a TA, then the department reserves the right to not hire them again in future terms. Examples of this include a TA having numerous student complaints or a TA who misses lab without notifying anyone or a TA who regularly fails to grade on time.

Grad students who are on academic probation are also not eligible to TA.

Warnings to Students in Danger of Losing Funding

If a student does not meet proficiency requirements in TA training, the TA trainer (Amy), will let the advising staff (John and Liz) know right away that the student has not met the proficiency requirements. John or Liz will reach out to the faculty advisor and let them know of the situation. If the faculty member is also feels the student is underperforming, they should let John and Liz know. It is important to share this information with the advising staff sooner rather than later, so the advising staff can meet with the student and make a plan or make changes before it is too late. The advising staff will clearly outline the potential ramifications if the student does not improve performance in lab and pass the proficiency tests in TA training—namely that the student is at risk of not having funding in future terms.

Sometimes students are dropped from labs due to personality conflicts rather than issues with their work capability. In cases like this, it is our department’s duty to support this student through the transition, or risk our reputation due to inhumane treatment of grad students. Therefore, we must clearly and regularly inform grad students that are not TA certified that the best path to funding security if there are hiccups in their program is to make sure they pass the TA proficiency requirements.

Our hope is that as we work to increase the quality of our PhD students, it will simultaneously increase the quality of our TAs.