

*Thirty-six current and former undergraduate Research Assistants (RAs) assessed the educational quality of their experience. Responses indicate extreme satisfaction with the amount and educational value of data collection, yet insufficient opportunity for interaction with faculty and for data analysis and interpretation. We discuss suggestions for maximizing RAs' educational benefit.*

### **Assessing the Educational Quality of the Undergraduate Research Assistantship in Psychology**

The principle purpose of the undergraduate Research Assistantship in Psychology is to train students to design and conduct research, analyze data, and interpret findings. However, to date, no research on how to make this experience more educational has been published. Although the role of the Research Assistant (RA) in conducting research is often vital, those who benefit from this assistance do not always teach and mentor in order to make the experience mutually beneficial. To investigate this topic, we designed a 105-item survey that assessed how educational RAs felt their experience was and asked them for suggestions for improvement. Thirty-six current and former RAs representing research conducted in Clinical, Cognitive, Community, Developmental, and Social Psychology at the University of Virginia completed the survey.

In response to questions about how educational respondents found certain tasks, 47.06% indicated that they found data collection to be the *one* most educational aspect of being an RA. The next highest rated activity was discussing graduate school and careers in psychology (14.71%). Additionally, 94.12% of respondents suggested that “no change” be made to the amount of data collection assigned and 63.89% found meetings regarding data analysis and interpretation to be “Extremely” or “Moderately” educational. Together, these findings indicate that RAs are satisfied with the amount of data collection and the educational benefit they receive from collecting data.

Although RAs reported satisfaction with many aspects of their experience, two main suggestions for improvement surfaced. One is to afford RAs more opportunities to interact with the faculty advisors of the labs in which they work. Specifically, 57.57% of respondents indicated that the *one* change that would most improve the educational experience of the RA is increased interaction specifically with faculty members, including discussing the overall research process (12.12%), gaining insight on and discussing data analysis of specific research projects (15.15%), discussing psychology careers and/or graduate school (12.12%), reading and discussing research articles (9.09%), and generally “getting to know” faculty (9.09%). Another area of improvement is that of data analysis and interpretation. Many participants (33.33%) responded that the *one* change that would most improve RAs' educational benefit would be increased data analysis and meetings with graduate students, project supervisors, and lab supervisors regarding data analysis and interpretation. In fact, nearly all participants who did not suggest more faculty interaction as the single most important improvement chose increased data analysis and interpretation.

In summary, four main conclusions emerged:

1. RAs are very satisfied with the amount of data collection assigned to them.
2. RAs find data collection to be the most educational aspect of the RA experience.
3. RAs expect more opportunity to interact with faculty members.
4. RAs expect more hands-on experience with data analysis and interpretation.

Graduate students, project coordinators, and faculty members should note these findings and work to maximize the educational experience of the undergraduate Research Assistant. One step toward accomplishing this goal is to administer an RA feedback survey at the end of each semester, an idea that 67.65% of respondents supported.