

# VTGrATE Survey Report

## Graduate Student Teaching Needs, Concerns, and Interests for Fall 2020

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## Introduction

The VT Graduate Academy for Teaching Excellence (VTGrATE) is dedicated to supporting graduate students involved in teaching at Virginia Tech. Graduate students are integral to the teaching operations at Virginia Tech, and do not always have access to the same level of resources as faculty, even when serving as instructors of record. Given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were especially interested in identifying graduate student teaching and learning needs and sharing questions and concerns for the upcoming academic year. All survey responses are available here: <https://ql.tc/p6WkiD>

## General Concerns for Fall 2020

Graduate students provided responses for their general concerns for Fall 2020. The following section summarizes these concerns.

### Safety

Of the 102 students that expressed their general concerns for Fall 2020, 30% of them expressed concerns for safety. The top concerns included:

- Their own **personal safety on campus**, while undertaking their research or teaching responsibilities, such as *“I could get sick from being exposed to others in my classes and labs”* and *“Getting sick, being stressed because of risk of becoming infected”*
- The **safety of family and others**. For example, one student expressed, *“I don't want to get COVID. I live with my grandmother and I can't lose her”* and *“I'm worried about spreading Covid to my children and spouse or to folks on campus (parent of 2 young children)”*
- **Outbreak of COVID-19 within the community**. Many were concerned that the influx of undergraduate students would be the cause: *“Many people becoming infected because students come from areas with high chance of infection.”*
- **Availability and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE)**. One student, for example, stated: *“I hope there are sanitizing wipes everywhere so that room-users can wipe down their space after use and before use”*

### Enforcement of safety guidelines

Related to safety, 14% of respondents explicitly stated concerns about the enforcement of safety guidelines. In particular, they were concerned that people would not follow guidelines: *“That I will be forced to be in an overcrowded classroom with students who barely follow protocols and I will die...for \$20k a year”*

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These students predominantly expressed **distrust that undergraduate students will follow protocols** on campus: “*The responsibility of undergraduates to social distance*” and “*I do not trust students to properly social distance or maintain hygiene in the dorms and with their social lives*”.

### Undervaluing concerns of graduate students

About 9% of respondents shared concerns about the University administration undervaluing graduate student needs and concerns. Instead, graduate students would be overworked and placed in unsafe conditions: “*That the administration isn't thinking about us*”, “*left behind/forgotten in University-wide decisions for a safe campus*”, and “*I know some people believe that we are disposable, but I hope they don't think we're THAT disposable*”

Additional and unsafe labor: “*I am afraid [the administration] will, like always, use the grad students and adjuncts to fill in the gaps where the full-time tenured faculty don't want to work*” and “*pressuring departments to offload unsafe in-person assignments to GTAs in order to accommodate the "30%" promise by Sands and to avoid irritating tenured faculty.*”

### Lack of information

Respondents (7%) mentioned uncertainty about the plans for the upcoming semester: “*I just want to know the plan so I can be prepared. That's all I ask.*” Uncertainties revolved around:

- Format for classes
- New safety rules and regulations
- Changing requirements for assistantships and graduate work
- Who can and should work remotely
- University plans for a potential breakout

A few students felt that they would be left to “*figure it out*” and that “*we are not going to be well prepared for teaching our classes in the fall*”.

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## Financial situation

About 14% of respondents mentioned their financial situation. These students were worried about:

- Losing employment
- Incomes being reduced, while doing more work
- Securing funding for research or tuition
- Availability of jobs
- COVID-19 related financial burden, such as healthcare expenses, PPE costs, increases in tuition,

A few of these students expressed **having to leave school**: *“I don’t want to take a leave, but it is likely my only option. The worry then is finding the money to come back”*.

## Education progress

Approximately 13% of the respondents stated concerns about their degree progress. Many were worried their degree attainment would be delayed. Reasons included:

- Impact of COVID-19 on research, such as *“Outbreaks on campus, having to pause research again”*
- Lack of productivity
- Lack of access to labs
- Skipping semesters, if offline, to mitigate health risks
- Taking on extra work, if undergraduate students are unavailable to assist or more teaching burdens
- Uncertainty if work can be done internationally

## Quality of education

Respondents (9%) were also concerned about the quality of their education: *“The quality of my learning”* and *“the quality of my own graduate education”*. The concerns included how online learning impacts their ability to learn, mid-semester changes, and the requirements needed for online learning, such as home network bandwidth.

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In addition to the themes previously outlined, a few respondents expressed the following concerns:

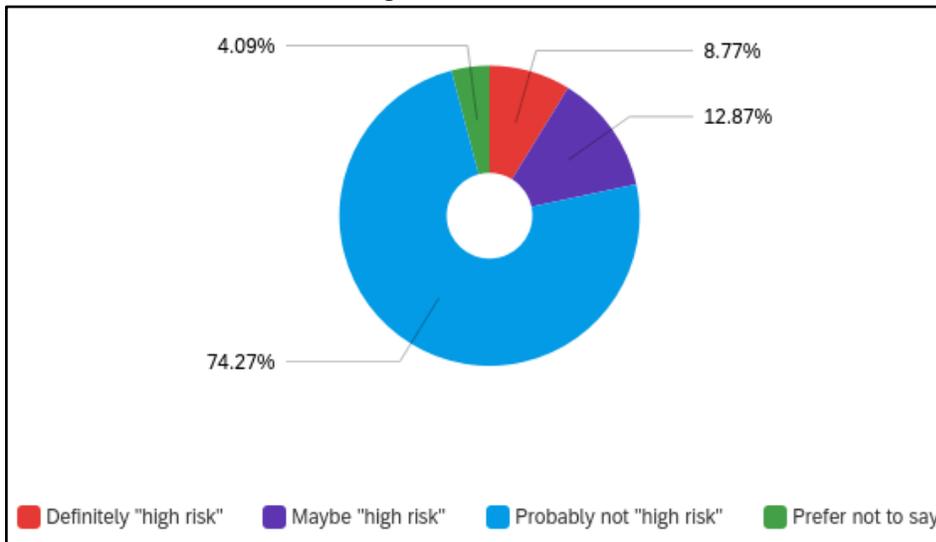
- Childcare: childcare accessibility and affordability, and balancing childcare responsibilities with research, service, conferences, and teaching.
- Relationship and community building: “build[ing] meaningful relationships with other students as well as relationships with my mentors”, the lack of options to interact with peers
- The increased teaching need and difficulties balancing tasks: Students are worried that the teaching role might overshadow their research and other student roles, such as *“Balancing teaching, an ambitious research agenda, departmental service and multiple conference presentations would be daunting for anyone.”*
- The impacts of COVID cases on their teaching, such as meaningfully engage with students and teaching content, and keep students motivated.
- The impacts of COVID protocols on mental health, such as feeling isolated, having low self-esteem, added stress, and anxiety. For example, *“The isolation of taking remote classes wasn’t what I signed up for and motivation is lacking.”*
- Workplace locations: loss of graduate offices and associated privacy, the availability of safe and socially distanced spaces
- Teaching: uncertainty surrounding assessment of students, particularly for attendance.
- Adequate and accessible medical services
- Parking

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## Household risk for COVID-19

Respondents were asked, “Based on CDC’s description of “people who are at high risk for severe illness” for COVID-19, how would you identify your household?” Although most folks identified as probably not at “high risk”, this does not mean that if they were to contract the virus, that they would not suffer serious complications, permanent disability, or death. 22% of respondents identified as maybe or definitely “high risk” and this is a significant proportion of people who we should trust know themselves well enough to know that exposure to COVID-19 would potentially be catastrophic.

Each of the classroom roles are considered independently for respondents who identify as definitely or maybe “high risk,” and 27% of instructors, 25% of graders, 20% of assistants, 28% of technical support, 26% of lab assistants, and 0% of “others” identified in these two categories.

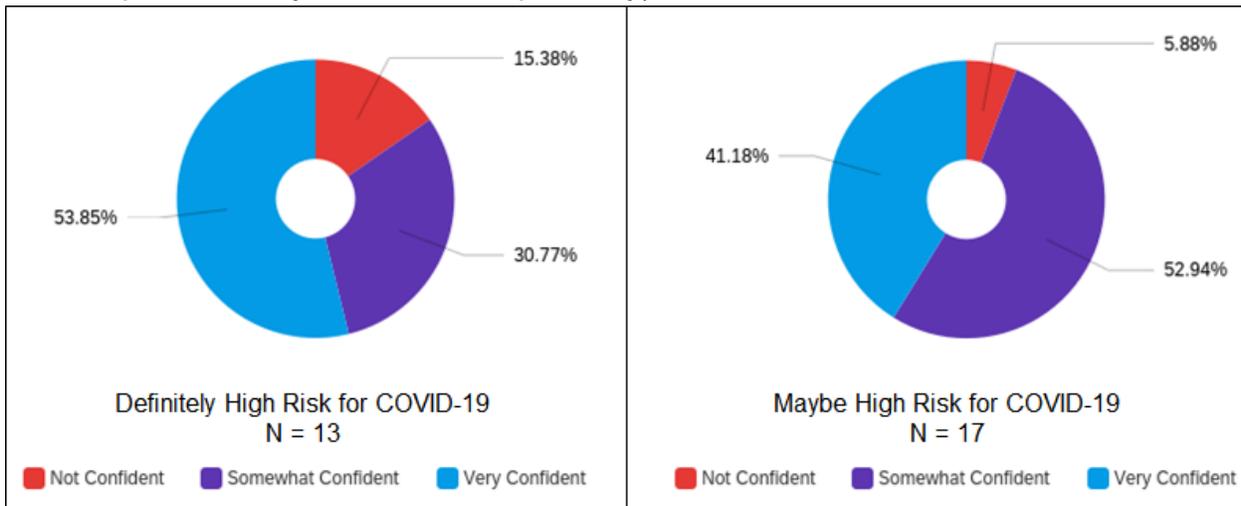


Overall responses to Q12 - Based on CDC's description of "people who are at high risk for severe illness" for COVID-19, how would you identify your household? CDC Page: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>. N= 171; 15 definitely “high risk,” 22 maybe “high risk,” 127 probably not “high risk,” and 7 chose not to disclose.

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## Confidence in supervisors

Overall, respondents are very confident (58%) that their supervisor will be accommodating to their individual needs to minimize the risk of COVID-19 while fulfilling their employment obligations. 36% of respondents are somewhat confident and 6% are not confident. When confidence is considered by role identified by graduate students, Instructors were the least likely to hold confidence in their supervisors (combining responses: “not” 10% and “somewhat” 39%), compared to the Graders and Assistants groups, who were the most likely to be very confident in their supervisors (62% and 60% responded “very confident”, respectively).



Q 13: How confident are you that your supervisor will be accommodating? Filtered for respondents who identify as Definitely High Risk or Maybe High Risk for COVID-19.

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## Conditions to accommodate risk of COVID-19

We asked graduate students about the conditions that must be in place for them to accommodate the risk of COVID-19 and to fulfill their employment obligations at VT. 8% of respondents indicated that they did not need anything or that they were content with the status quo. The following summarizes the concerns reported.

### Personal Protective Equipment

Of the 87 respondents who explicitly communicated the conditions that should be in place, 54% of them expressed a need for PPE. The top concerns included:

- The requirement that all individuals on campus are wearing masks. Some said *“If I have to [be] in person I [will] require students to wear [a] mask at the minimum and I will do the same”* and *“masks on while on campus.”* Many linked social distancing with the mask requirement, saying *“Commitment from students to wearing masks in my classroom and social distancing,” “PPE and social distancing to be maintained,”* and *“I mean, the basic guidelines for safety? Everyone, students and teachers wearing masks, assigned seating 6 feet apart.”*
- Some specifically expressed the need for face shields, saying *“Face shields would make me feel the most comfortable... I have a hard time hearing and I rely on lip reading a lot to interpret conversation. Otherwise, I have to be very close to someone to hear what they're saying”* and *“For the lab part, I would prefer all the people have masks and protective face shields and goggles.”* was
- Availability of Virginia Tech provided PPE, where a *“sanitation station [is] in every classroom,” “availability of gloves, face masks and hand sanitizers in public places like library and computer labs,”* and *“regular cleaning of classes between each class session to protect students and faculty; provisions of PPEs and masks, hand sanitizers at entrance of each class and most likely on each class table.”*
- Many felt strongly about PPE policy and expressed that it should be a mandatory, enforceable requirement, saying *“Mandatory face coverings and physical distancing, and enforce those rules”* and *“everyone should be required to wear a mask if coming on campus. I would like there to be a way to enforce mask-wearing of students that does not fall on my shoulders.”*

### Face to Face Instruction

Almost 80% of respondents expressed conditions that would need to be met before they would be able to fulfill their contracts. This does not mean that they necessarily prefer face to face instruction, just that these are the minimum requirements:

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- **Adequate social distance** was the most common answer. Graduate students said *“Taking all safety considerations, social distancing, masks,”* and *“Social distancing rules being followed and masks are provided.”*
  - **Sanitation of physical spaces**, where they expressed that *“regular cleaning of classes between each class session to protect students and faculty; provisions of PPEs and masks, hand sanitizers at entrance of each class and most likely on each class table”* and *“there should also be sanitizing wipes available for people to wipe down surfaces before they use them/after they use them.”*
  - **Reducing face to face interactions** in general came across in many of the responses. Graduate students said they needed *“zero contact with students and [to meet over] zoom...little to no contact with instructor.”*
  - **Context of face to face interactions** also matter, where there should be *“no meetings in faculty offices or other small rooms,”* a *“barrier between me and students, no close contact. Adequate ventilation,”* and *“several masks provided, building and hall population[s limited, and] more cleaning procedures (implemented in hallways, door handles, etc.).”*
  - **Concerns about class size and workload:** *“Half-size classes (for social distancing) but also guarantee we aren’t expected to teach twice as many hours to accommodate half size. Assurances that SPOT scores will be weighted less/not included in reviews due to the nature of the semester. Back-up plans if GTAs get sick and will be out or if students get sick and will miss many classes.”*

### Online and Hybrid Instruction

Many different reasons were cited as necessary accommodations for fulfilling contract requirements and having a hybrid or completely virtual classroom was indicated or preferred by 54% of respondents.

- The **ability to work remotely** ranked high within this category of conditions:
  - *“Work from home or from a remote location as much as possible, minimizing contact with as many people as possible, [and the] ability to have less meetings, potentially work from home. Even if classes are in person, having exams online so we can grade them online could help,”*
  - *“I would prefer to teach remotely. I do not feel comfortable teaching in person.”*
  - *“I would need to be able to perform all duties remotely, as I don’t see it possible/safe/logical for me to return to Blacksburg. I’d need to guarantee that all my duties can be completed remotely, even outside the USA.”*
  - *“I do not feel safe on campus with the student body unless there are clear consequences for students who disregard safety rules (which also seem to prioritize university \$\$ over population health). I would need to be able to continue to work remotely.”*

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- The **need for flexibility** was also indicated. Several students indicated *“maintaining current flexibility would be fine,” “Flexible work hours to ensure access to laboratory space while maintaining social distancing,” and “the opportunity to work remotely if the virus was to be found to be spreading on campus.”*
  - Still others reported **access, resource, and technology needs**:
    - *“Access to good internet and a feasible schedule with routine changing. Also access to library resources.”*
    - *“Stable access to university servers.”*
    - *“I am a GTA and I want a more convenient online tool for the office hour. For example, the remote control function. I also want [to] have a touch screen laptop like [the] Microsoft Surface that I can [use to] explain the course more easily online.”*
    - *“As I am part of a high risk household, I would like funding for at-home lab kits for all enrolled students. Only this will allow me to opt out of face-to-face lab option which would have me mixing in the lab with 40 to 50 VT undergrads who may not have been as cautious as I am about their COVID exposure.”*

## Safety

Of the respondents to this question, 34% explicitly communicated concern for personal and/or family and community safety.

- Having a **safe place to work** was a top priority. A student expressed *“[I need] safe spaces to do work on campus (even in my own department) where I won't have to be afraid of plenty of people coming in. If I have to be on the front lines, along with my not-so-young advisor and other colleagues, I need a guarantee that we can get the tools for prevention (masks, hand sanitizer, etc.) and recovery (in the worst-case scenario.”* Another said *“Mask[s], sanitizers, comfortable and safe space for working should be provided and arranged.”*
- Students expressed feeling **uncertain about their working conditions**.
  - Some said *“My assistantship is not under my PI's purview, i.e. she does not teach or manage the class I will be the lab instructor for. My PI will be supportive and accommodating because she's a good person but it's not up to her; I have no idea what to expect from the lab course machinery people (they are nice and I like them but they don't care about me in the same way and again I have heard NOTHING about how things will go).”*

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- Another student said "holding in-person classes places students and instructors at increased risk. Best practice would be to hold all feasible activities online."
  - *"I would need a clear answer regarding my teaching assignment. It is yet unclear whether I will be teaching in person, online, or in a hybrid setting. My class is structured to run in person and is difficult to adjust if that is not possible, so I need time to make those moves. Additionally, if the expectation from the university is to teach "some" students in class while the rest Zoom in, then I would be unable to accommodate that request due to technological concerns, as well as would struggle with providing due attention"* was offered by still another graduate student.
- Concern with **becoming exposed to COVID and/or spreading it to others:** Students communicated their concern across a range of scenarios.
    - One said *"I live with several individuals classified by the CDC as "high risk" and am of higher risk myself. Thankfully, my particular assistantship allows me to work remotely. With the current state of the pandemic, I do not see the situation changing dramatically between now and spring semester, so I fully intend to continue working remotely in the spring. As much as Tech tries, from what I have seen so far, the student population does not comply with mask recommendations, social distancing, or general safety measures as a whole. Based on this experience, I will not be confident teaching in front of a class of students until the pandemic is over."*
    - Another said *"I think that departments/the university should be required to provide PPE for graduate students who are teaching in person. It is a huge risk to teach in person, and let's be real here, there are going to be more graduate students than professors teaching in person, with some labs being in person. Based on that, this means that some of the lowest paid members of the community will be teaching in person and taking on much of the risk. The university should acknowledge this and provide us with PPE."*
  - Establishment of **adequate testing and contact tracing:**
    - *"guaranteed PPE for us (GTAs) and students and some way to enforce students wearing them while in the building/class. Adequate testing available for the Blacksburg area with contact-tracing and transparency on the state of things."* and *"The university needs contact tracing on campus and COVID testing for more than students who feel ill."*
    - *"classrooms sizes that meet CDC guidelines (such as no more than 10 people in an enclosed space), MANDATORY mask rules WITH*
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*consequences, school-provided PPE (preferably face shields AND gloves/shoe gloves if we are expected to be in person), pay increases for the staff expected to sterilize rooms between each class, and a drive-thru testing location ON campus available to anyone during regular business hours. Otherwise, it seems we are merely a petri dish for a case study in rapid COVID infection.”*

## Support

Respondents also indicated needing the following support:

- **Childcare:** *“Affordable childcare during teaching and preparation. My child is in elementary school and they will only be at school for 12 hours per week. Personal protection to not transmit germs to child.”*
- **Transportation:** *“I need a car.”*
- **Financial compensation:** *“A very significant pay raise would help ameliorate the risk.”*

## The Survey Instrument

The Survey Instrument was created on Qualtrics and had a total of 16 questions, which were grouped into the following sections:

- Duties and Responsibilities: This section contained questions gathering information about where the respondents would be located in the fall, what kind of assistantship contracts they have, what their teaching roles are, and if they had any prior teaching experience. This section also asked for a description of the respondents’ teaching duties, course modality, and the kind of material the respondents would engage with. The questions in this section provided us additional context for the survey analysis.
- Assessing needs: This section asked the respondents to select resources they need and do not currently have, technical and interpersonal skills they were interested in, and other teaching related workshops they might want more information about. We will use this information to either connect graduate students with already existing resources, and to develop workshops for the fall and spring semesters.
- Additional concerns: This section of the survey asked the respondents to self-characterize their household risk of severe illness due to COVID-19, based on the CDC’s description. The respondents were then asked to rate how confident they were of supervisors being accommodating of their concerns, followed by a description of the conditions that would need to be in place for them to accommodate the risk of COVID-19 and fulfill their employment obligations at

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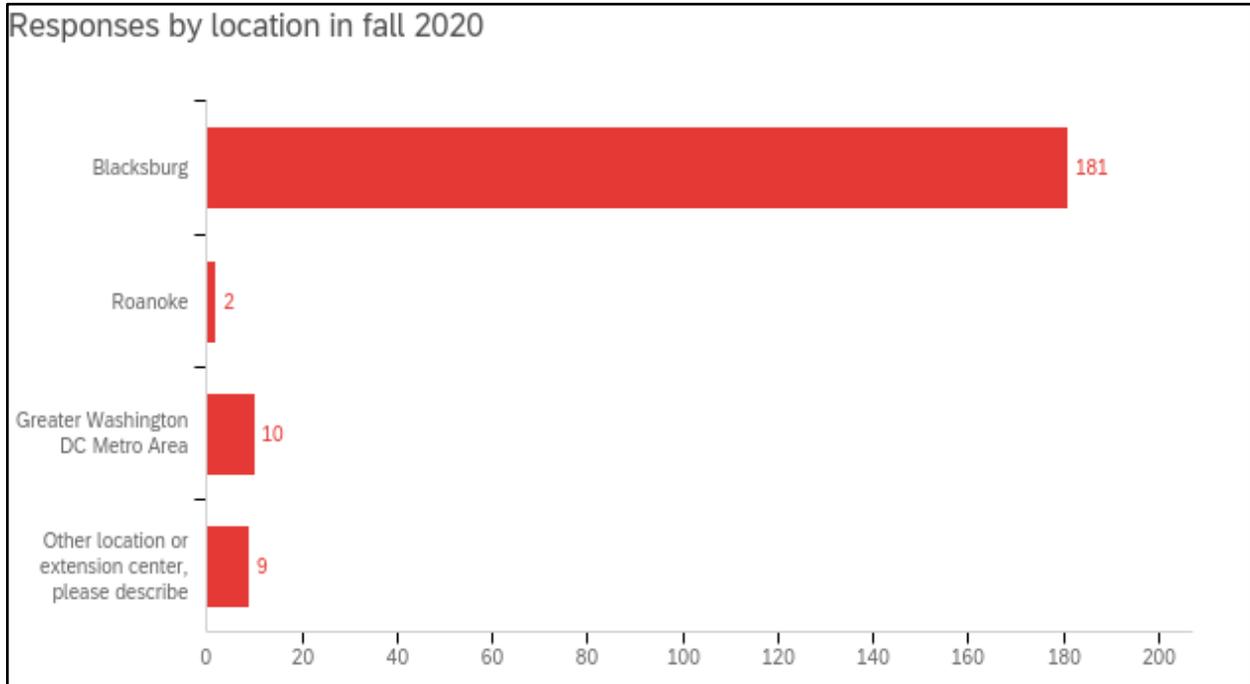
Virginia Tech. Finally, this section also asked for the respondents to outline any general concerns they had for the Fall 2020 semester in their roles as graduate students.

## Survey Respondents

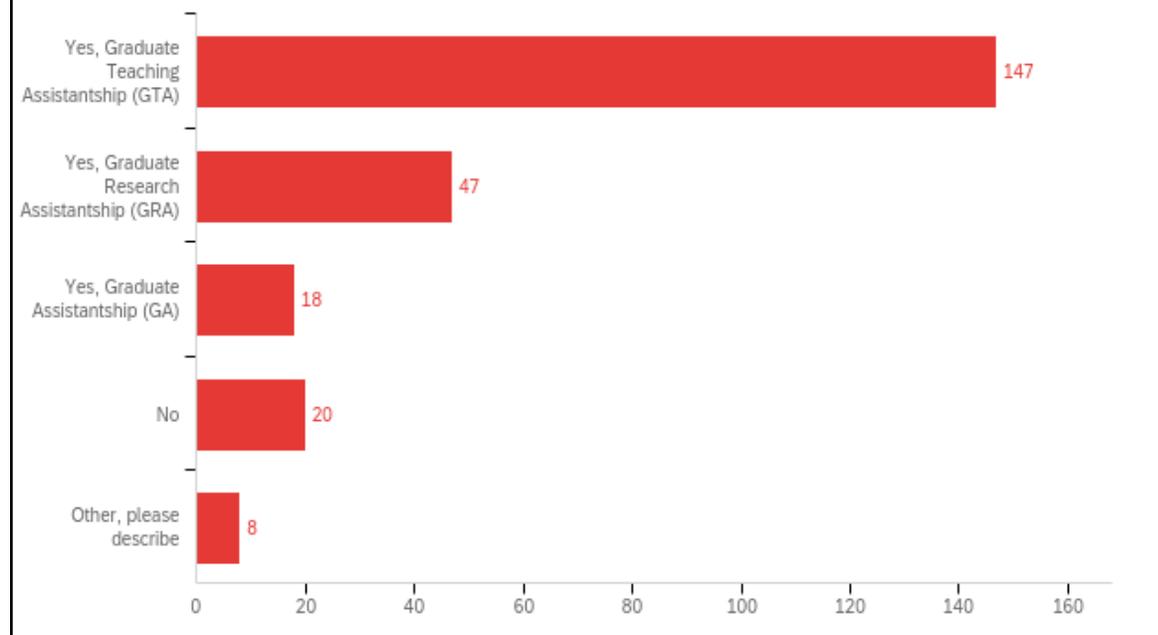
Graduate students were invited to participate through the following channels:

- All graduate students enrolled in the Blacksburg campus through the GLC Weekly emails
- All graduate students enrolled in the Washington D.C. Metro Region through the weekly newsletter
- 1557 current GTAs in a direct email from the Graduate Student Services Office in the Graduate School
- Direct email to the VTGrATE email list of 160 members, which includes currently enrolled students and alumni

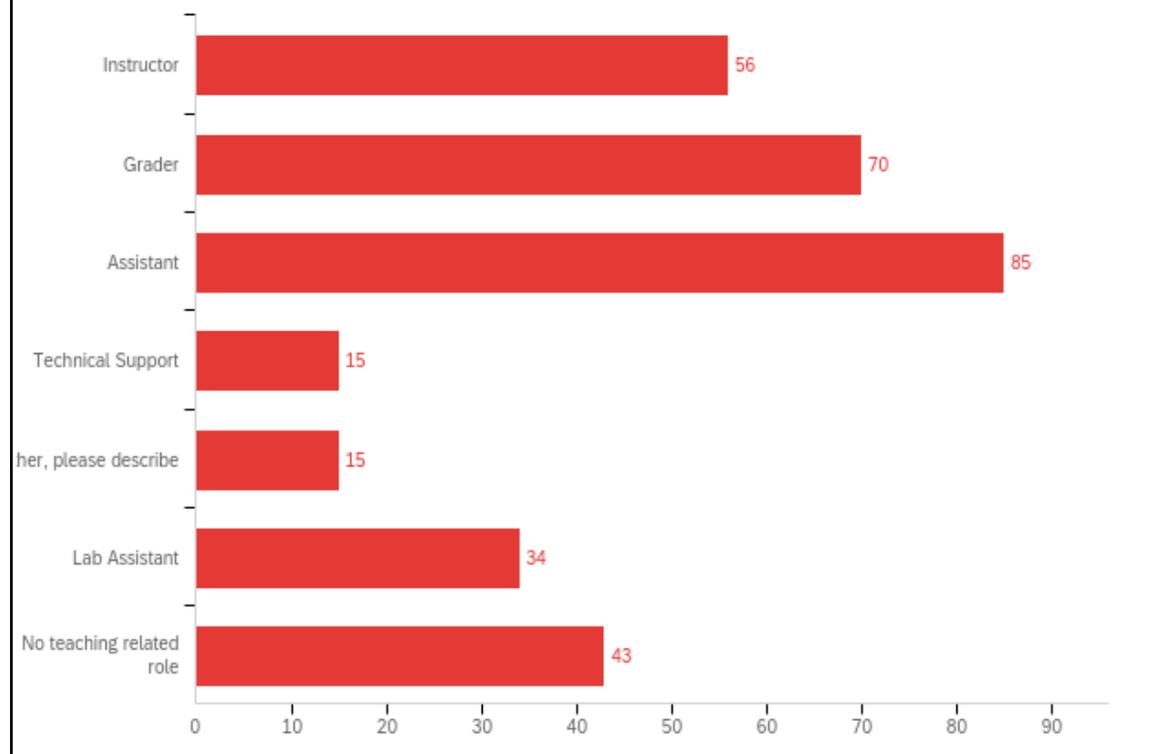
Overall, we received 202 responses from graduate students and around 90% (181/202) of the responses were from graduate students who will be in Blacksburg in the fall. The remaining responses to the questions are visualized in the following section and also in the Public Report: <https://ql.tc/p6WkiD>



### Responses by assistantship contract type



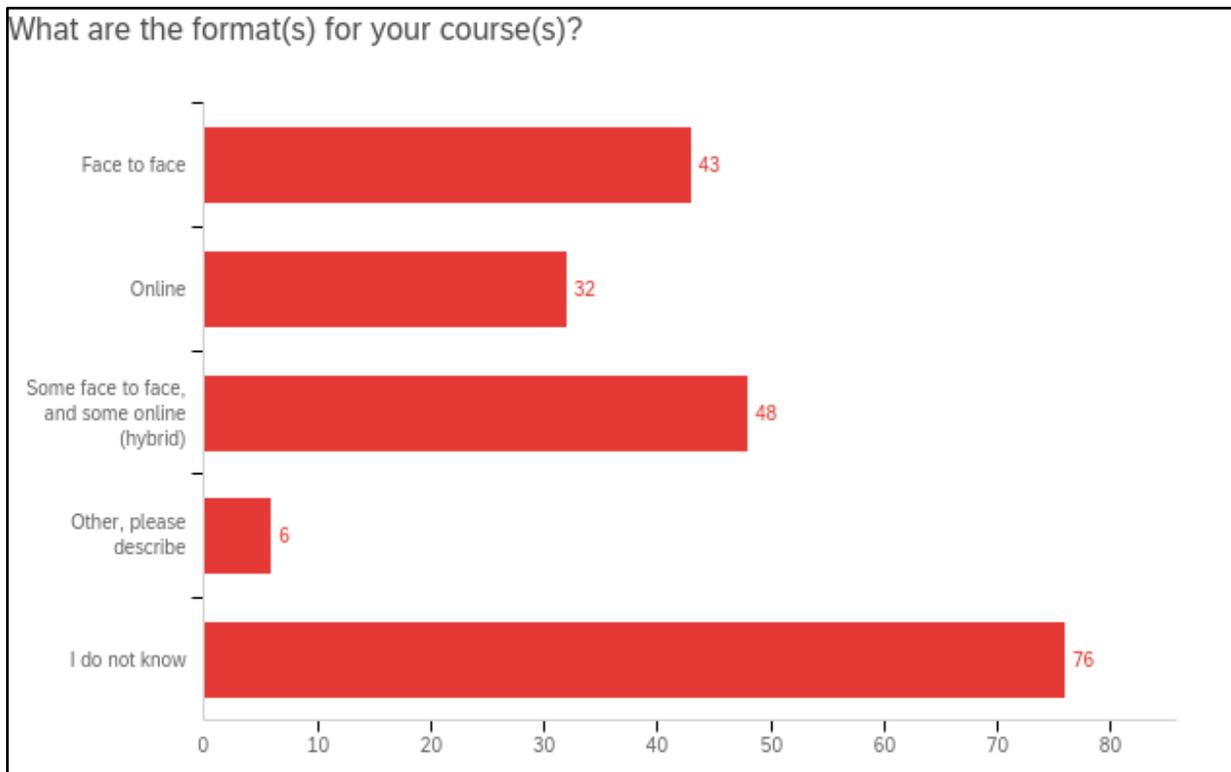
### Responses by teaching role



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## Course Format

This question asked the format(s) of course(s) they teach. Respondents could select multiple choices, with an “other” option and a text entry for describing it. A total of 205 participants responded to this question. Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they did not know the course format, 23.41% hybrid (some face-to-face, and some online), 20.98% face-to-face, 15.61% online, and 2.93% other. The six respondents who selected “other” described their respective formats as: *I will teach both via Zoom and require asynchronous work; I expect that there may be some hybrid approaches but am not completely sure; still trying to figure out what will work best; not sure it will be in fall 2020; TBD; and Not sure yet - TBD in cooperation with the Jill Sible team helping us develop our lab teaching plan for the fall.*



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## Resources Needed

While in excess of 40% respondents said they either had access to everything they needed, or they were not teaching in the fall, 22.6% responded that they need personal-protective equipment (face coverings, gloves, etc) for in-person or hybrid courses. For online courses, 8.29% said they need space on-campus to conduct their office hours in private while 7.39% indicated they need space on-campus to lead classes in private for their online courses. Those who need laptop with Zoom make up 4.35% of respondents. In the “other” responses, access to stable internet connection, tablet with a stylus or pen, and additional help for the increased workload due to the hybrid modality were requested.

