

About TA (Teaching Assistants)

With VERY few exceptions, UCLA's teaching assistants in Economics are all graduate students pursuing the Ph.D. degree in Economics.

UCLA is ranked 10-12 in the nation (overall) among graduate programs in Economics—higher in some specialties

We get about 2000 requests per year for application forms for our Ph.D. program, about 550 applicants who believe themselves to meet UCLA's high standards, and about 25-30 are both accepted to the program and choose to attend. Only rarely is a UCLA Economics Ph.D. student a former UCLA undergraduate. It is rare (and typically frowned-upon) for any economist to take all of their degrees from the same university.

All TAs have completed the first-year Ph.D. coursework and passed their trial-by-fire in the first-year comprehensive examinations. Most TAs are in their 2-4th year of a roughly 5-year program.

A TA's main job is their research for their dissertation. They are all at various stages in the following list:

1. studying the state of the art in a particular subfield, or a couple of related subfields,
2. reading all of the relevant research literature, and thinking, thinking, thinking,
3. gathering data (and more data),
4. doing computer programming (and more programming),
5. interpreting (and re-interpreting) results,
6. writing and rewriting, and rewriting again,
7. participating in workshops where they make oral presentations of their own original work and listen to those of other grad students and invited outside academic visitors, mostly economics professors from other universities from the US, Canada, and abroad
8. preparing for the job market

A Ph.D. dissertation is like a massive three-year term paper where

- ?? you pick your own topic from anything that is “economics,”
- ?? you have to demonstrate a complete understanding of the state-of-the-art in that area, and showcase a spectrum of valuable analytical skills
- ?? you must create a significant amount of completely new knowledge that did not exist prior to your efforts.

TA-ships represent an opportunity for Ph.D. students to “learn by doing”--to practice and experiment with teaching in order to determine whether they have the temperament and stamina for an academic career (as a professor at some other university) or whether they would rather work for the private sector (industry/consulting) or in government agencies.

Being a grad student is a full-time job without a TA-ship, but TA-ships are one of the two main ways that graduate students can earn enough money to eat during their 5-year investment in human capital. Research assistantships are another way. There are very few pure “fellowship” deals at UCLA, where a student is privileged to be supported financially without having to work. (It is different at some prestigious private universities, but UCLA is a public institution.)