

TATP Teaching Excellence Award – Nominator Comments

Name: Alexis Lerner

Please describe the impact the TA you are nominating has had on your learning experience. Please be as descriptive as possible - your comments are given the greatest weight when evaluating a TA's nomination.

Alexis was primarily concerned about her students. This was clearly illustrated every week that I had her as my tutorial leader. Her focus was not on passing the required amount of time, but rather ensuring her students understood the material and could subsequently be successful in the course.

She was incredibly relaxed and confident in her teaching. Unlike some of the other TA, she never rambled on about a foreign concept and always took the time to explain things in a comprehensible level. She was very insightful and to the point in the reasons for her grading and advices on how to start a paper. She is really good at organizing classroom activities that gives us a hands on approach to the concepts she is teaching. She is a really good teacher.

Alexis always comes to tutorial prepared and gets us to really engage with everyone. She has done creative things in the past to get us more into the course. Last tutorial we had to hand in our proposals for a paper and she paired us off with partners to edit each others work. It was a very helpful exercise.

Alexis lead very constructed and interesting discussions, which aided greatly in my comprehension of the course material. Through discussion difficult political theories were explained and discussed in interesting ways because of the ways Alexis guided the tutorial.

The learning experience Alexis provides her students is very positive, warm, and welcoming. She is readily available with e-mail and after class hours.

Throughout the year, Alexis has been a source of tremendous help and support for her students. When I enrolled in the class that Alexis is TA'ing, I had very little interest in the subject matter. I enrolled in the class to simply complete my degree requirements and graduate as soon as possible. However, Alexis's fantastic teaching skills and her ability to engage students in a tutorial setting completely changed my opinion of the subject matter of the class. While the lectures for the class seem a little bit dry, the tutorials have very much been a pleasant environment for learning. Alexis does a great job encouraging students to participate. She also provides great feedback on the coursework and is always open to talk with students about areas in which they could improve. Her feedback and tips on how to be a better writer have had a clear effect: my mark on the second assignment was better than on the first one, even though the second assignment was a longer and more complicated one. Last but not least, Alexis encourages her students to think critically by asking provoking questions in tutorial that are directly linked to the subject matter. I have never had such an excellent tutorial experiences in the four years that I have been in this university, and I would definitely recommend Alexis Zimberg for the TA Award.

I am so fortunate that I happened to choose Alexis as my TA for Politics in Europe. While she has only been given six tutorials per semester, she has used each and every one of them to the best of her (and our) advantage. She is really able to focus in on the more challenging

concepts that were addressed in lecture and in our readings, helping us to engage with and understand the trickier concepts of European politics.

Truthfully, my tutorial is filled with exceptionally bright people who have very insightful contributions to make, and often times I find it intimidating to contribute. However, Alexis' obviously warm and encouraging disposition creates an academic environment that makes me feel comfortable to be a part of that conversation, and really, that's what a good TA does; empowers students to contribute to that dialogue.

I am nominating Alexis because she is an outstanding TA. She really does whatever it takes to help her students succeed and excel in understanding the course material. Having Alexis as my TA has enhanced my learning experience and knowledge of European politics, especially for her ability to connect theoretical notions to its practical application and existence in the field. Her tutorials are incredibly engaging and non-confrontational, while still providing an excellent forum for students to debate, engage and grapple with the material. She would be an excellent recipient of the TA Teaching Excellence Award

Alexis is a very enthusiastic and charismatic TA. It is clear she takes the matter of European politics close to heart and would like to transmit a similar passion for the subject to her students. She is creative in organizing her TA classes. For example, she put us in pairs to review each other's assignment proposals and give each other feedback. I found that useful, because as a student for me it is important to see how other students approach an assignment and it is helpful to get acquainted with different writing styles and approaches. In general, Alexis always insists in involving everyone in class in discussions and debates to which she serves as a moderator. No one can slack off and be lazy in class.

Alexis was an amazing TA, the best I've had so far at my two years at UofT! She was very helpful when studying for exams and tests. We did lots of activities to get prepared and Alexis always made sure every student understood the content before leaving the tutorial. Although tutorials were only an hour we made the most of them and there was no rush to get through all the activities, we would spend more time on one topic if it wasn't understood. She even made sure shy students who didn't want to participate in class discussions understood. Overall, Alexis was an amazing TA, and she definitely made an impact on every student's academic career!

Very flexible, lenient, and understanding in guiding first year students through the course. Really encouraged class discussion and gave opportunities for participation. Super friendly and easy to talk to. Always remembered names.

In the complex topic of European Politics, Alexis has displayed a tremendous competence of the content. Considering the amount of different states with different political systems and varying mechanisms in Europe, Alexis proved to be highly knowledgeable. In a course that mostly deals with the concepts of comparative politics in the first half of the course, Alexis always offered applications of the concepts in Europe, thus stimulating discussion and aiding students to comprehend the often abstract concepts.

Alexis, furthermore, manages to find a great balance between teaching and moderating a discussion. In a tutorial of about 20 - 25 people, it is not always easy to facilitate a discussion that allows all students to participate AND cover all materials. Often discussion is omitted in order to cover material. Alexis strikes an excellent balance between the two,.

Lastly, Alexis has gone the extra mile to provide help for students. I have asked her questions in office hours and over email (which she promptly replied to). In order to prepare her students for assignments, papers and exams, Alexis has offered many resources and options for students to take advantage of, if they so desire. This is important - Alexis does not force her help upon students, thus allowing students to have an individual approach to learning. Instead she offers her students help, if they want it. Thus, Alexis' work helps to facilitate the best possible success for each student.

Alexis has been an outstanding Teaching Assistant this year. The reason why I nominate her for the TA award is threefold. First, Alexis has demonstrated excellent knowledge of the subject. Second, she has an effective method finding the balance between teaching and moderating a discussion. Lastly, Alexis has gone the extra mile to help every student succeed.

Alexis Zimberg has made a significant difference in my understanding of the academic world by developing a collaborative learning experience with students in her tutorials. From day one, Alexis approached the students differently than other TAs because she has a unique passion for Political Science, and established an equal opportunity field for participation regardless of students' past knowledge. Alexis creates effective discussions because she does not presuppose a 'correct' answer, unlike many other TAs. Instead, students are encouraged to generate new ideas building off others' contributions - she even has a hand signal system so that students can indicate whether they are debating or adding a point. Our discussions are compelling because Alexis has a genuine interest in students' new ideas especially as they are informed by their unique educational backgrounds, and tutorial feels like a safe space in which to explore new theories. Additionally, Alexis makes every class unique and provides varying options for participation, including role plays of political science scenarios, peer-evaluations for paper proposals, and sign-up reviews of readings. The latter activity has undoubtedly inspired feelings of team-based learning and impacted the success of students in exams because an individual writes up a response to a reading, and then we share our expertise in one area through the entire tutorial group. Ultimately, in tutorials Alexis creates a flexible, intriguing, and collaborative environment which, through enhanced interaction with course content and peers, has improved my academic performance and application of the subject to the real world.

They really encouraged me with their enthusiasm and their feedback was extremely helpful. It taught me to focus on the areas that I was still unclear and unsure about. She was very informative during office hours and always willing to take the time to explain something that I didn't understand. For her, students always came first.

I've been Alexis' student for two years now in POL101Y1Y (last year) and POL207Y1Y (this year). In my eyes, Alexis is the epitome of what I had expected a TA to be when I choose to attend the University of Toronto. She is engaging, well-spoken, patient and helpful as a tutorial leader and is extremely fair as a marker.

As I am majoring in the political science, I also share Alexis' enthusiasm for politics and foreign affairs, however some my classmates (both this year and last) are taking political science classes for other reasons; i.e. to fulfill our BREADTH or other program requirements. Alexis is able to not only strengthen political science student's passion for this subject but also effectively engage the other students by drawing upon multiple concepts from a variety of fields ranging from history to geography to music and drama. Not only does this method help engage students in the course but it also aids in clearing up concepts and drawing connections between what we're studying and real life.

Alexis draws on her own experience in the field, personal knowledge of political science and offer relatable material to help further our understanding of the course concepts. Her students value her opinions and respect her feedback. In my opinion, Alexis always makes her student's learning progress a first priority, even going above the call of duty to meet with students who cannot make her designated office hours. Alexis is engaging, passionate and approachable. She has had such a strong impact on my personal learning experience and I would gladly take another one of her courses.

Please provide a specific example from your experience with this TA that would best illustrate the TA's teaching.

There were times when Alexis provided additional help to students who had questions and/or concerns regarding the course material. Specifically, there was a tutorial in which my participation was inconsistent with previous tutorials. Alexis approached me after tutorial to ensure that I had support as well as opportunities to approach her during her office hours in the event that I had any questions. Alexis clearly cares about her students, and is an exemplary teaching assistant.

She was incredibly efficient at preparing student for the finals. She created a system where we all had to write a summary on an article that was assigned or a lecture. At the time of the finals, she compiled all of the material together and posted it on blackboard for all to see. It was due to her efforts that I managed to study for the finals efficiently without over stretching myself, and I doubt i would have done as well on the test without her help.

Alexis stays longer than she has to in her office hours. I was once waiting and it had passed the time that she had to be there and stayed to talk to me and did not rush. She is very committed to her job and helping us learn.

When discussing the topic of the Holodomor, the Ukrainian genocide that occurred in Ukraine between 1932-33, Alexis and I were able to discuss the topic and relate it to the political situations around the world. Even though at times Alexis and I could disagree, she suggested I continue to research into it and speak with her more about topics that interest the students. I went and researched more about this topic because I found it interesting because of the discussions Alexis lead in class.

Alexis gives great feedback on assignments and if you ever need to just chit-chat with her about life or anything in general after class! Great T.A.!

Alexis is particularly good at engaging students and making them feel like the tutorial is a small class in which they are all colleagues and classmates, rather than just individuals who convene for an hour and go their separate ways afterwards. I believe that the short presentations that students are required to do on the readings/lecture material makes students feel more comfortable when talking to a group of people, and it also facilitates the resulting discussions that students have with one another. In addition, I think that the peer review tutorial in which students are assigned a partner and are required to go over each other's proposal is a fantastic exercise that helps students develop critical thinking and reading skills. Once again, I would like to emphasize the fact that Alexis's tutorials have been the absolute best in terms of student engagement in class discussions, and also in terms of the student-to-student cooperation that goes on in the tutorial setting.

In Alexis' case, I think it would more appropriate to talk about a certain energy that she gives off. She is just so approachable, and through that approachability she makes the course material more approachable. For example, a week or so before one of our essays was due, she answered 20 people's questions in a hallway after our tutorial was over, and after addressing all of them, she took 10 minutes to run over ideas with me and help me understand what I had to do. She ultimately stayed 30-45 minutes longer than she had to, and by the time she got to me (mind you I was the last person) she was just as friendly, helpful, and energetic as she was with everyone else.

Alexis' teaching method is more than just reciting what was read. Her method focuses on frequent informal debates that grapple with the course material regularly, including the case of European supranationalism, the issue of sovereignty, and current issues affecting Europe, including migration and economic recessions. The best example of this is how she encourages students to think of the pros and cons of each situation or prompt by asking us to pick sides, switch sides based on our current opinion and debate with each other to engage in the material. The result of this is a lively discussion and tutorial, but also applied knowledge that has helped me enhance my knowledge in the course's assignments, exams and more.

I already illustrated example above, but another example which was also very helpful to me personally was her finding time out of her usual office hours to sit with me and answers my questions and clarify my doubts concerning an assignment which we had to write. I was quite lost and had a lot of questions but I appreciate that she showed limitless amounts of patience.

Because I was a really shy student, Alexis teaching techniques really stood out to me. Alexis really made sure that everyone was really comfortable and there were no stupid questions. The more classes I went to, the more I felt comfortable to speak out in class, which was usually uncommon in other tutorials. She somehow knew how the students thoughts occurred, probably from studying our writing techniques or something, and she really helped us further understand. A specific example of Alexis teaching was the way she helped students understand and encouraged students to participate in class. First she would encourage questions and group discussion. If that didn't work she would do a group activity to help students understand. If that activity did not encourage students to participate then Alexis would directly ask students questions with lots of room for discussion. She was not like other TAs who would call students out with one ended questions. Alexis did very little things that made huge differences in tutorials and describing her teaching is beyond description.

Easy to communicate with. Would bring up examples from the readings and help practice writing thesis for essays. Can be reached through email at all times. Told us to summarize readings in class which helped to actually get them done and focus on what was important. Would ensure everyone understood the requirements for exams and essays and the readings themselves. Would help organize what professors said in lectures.

When working on an assignment during first semester, I needed to confirm the use of some citations (especially of foreign languages). As I was unable to attend office hours that week, I send Alexis an email, which she promptly responded to answering my question and anticipating my follow up question (and answering it). In my entire time at the University I have dealt with a lot of TA's. While all of them have done a great job, Alexis' level of professionalism and exceptional attention given to student's need is outstanding.

A great example of Alexis' effectiveness as a TA was using a role play to clarify a complicated concept in political science: the Prisoner's Dilemma. Many students expressed their confusion regarding how to comprehend game theory and the Prisoner's Dilemma scenario so Alexis decided to address it in a totally different way from our lectures. 6 students participated in the role play at the front of the room and divided into 2 groups. The groups symbolized 2 countries in a cold war situation, without negotiations. We determined there were 4 options: both countries could strike, one country could strike and the other refrain and vice versa, or both could countries could refrain. As in the Prisoner's Dilemma, without knowing for sure what the other country would do, it would be most rational to strike, either to give you the advantage if the other country refrained or to remain on par if the other country also struck. Without an agreement to refrain nor an enforcement to do so, such as the threat of punishment from a third party, it would be irrational for both countries to refrain. The role play, which incorporated visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning, received immediate positive feedback from the students. Importantly, Alexis invited the students to discuss what may not have worked about the role play scenario she had created. This included the unusually high stakes of a nuclear war, wherein the ethical dilemma of the destruction of humankind is so intense that it undermines the Prisoner's Dilemma's assumption that participants are rational actors. The class settled on a preference in future role plays for an in-person combat war scenario. Not only did this discussion serve as an opportunity for Alexis to receive feedback on her teaching, but also as a way to foster collaboration among the students and take responsibility for our own learning. Overall,

Alexis' encouragement for students to express their own learning needs and her creative ability to respond through role play in a university setting was effective and engaging, leading me to share the experience with friends outside of the class.

The TA would hold interactive stimulations to help us understand political theories (e.g. the state of nature etc.) and make sure that everyone got involved. She would also check afterwards with us if we still had any questions. If we did, she would go over the subject thoroughly again, specifically addressing the question we had in mind.

During one of the earlier weeks in our course, the concept of the "prisoner's dilemma" and "game theory" confused many of us. After a few of us approached Alexis seeking clarification on the readings and lecture, Alexis dedicated a part of our next tutorial to explaining these tricky concepts.

In tutorial, rather than regurgitating what had been written in our texts and said by the professor, Alexis created an engaging activity to demonstrate how game theory works in real life. Using a relatable scenario and making a fun "game" for us to actively understand how game theory was applied, we were able to visually watch a scenario in which "game theory" would be applied in everyday life (the odds of everyday life experiences). The combination of relatable material and visual aid (the game was mapped out on the board) was thoroughly engaging and truly helpful. I was very, very confused going into tutorial and left feeling much more confident with the material.

Alexis made a very good first impression from the first moment she entered the class. She is open, very approachable and extremely enthusiastic about political science. This encourages students, even those who are shy to speak up like myself, to engage more and express their point of view. Her focus is to make all concepts clear to all and for this she introduces very diverse tools and teaching methods. Some examples: group game to understand prisoner's dilemma, short (2-3 min) individual presentation of the readings, cross evaluation of each other's papers, debates (rules vary from class to class), short question - short answer exercise before term papers (very effective to clarify and remember key concepts), discussion board on blackboard etc.

She has a broad view and she is very knowledgeable of the subject matter, therefore she can easily answer questions very clearly, which is rarely the case with other TA's who come across more like students than instructors. Having her as my TA greatly improved my learning experience because I trust that whatever she says is scientifically correct and because she is clear and concise.

Please provide any additional comments.

Alexis provided a stimulating atmosphere in which students could voice any questions or concerns as well as request additional clarification.

Truthfully, she is just an all around great academic and human. She is so obviously passionate about her discipline and teaching students, and I know that she has so many incredible things ahead of her. She really, truly deserves it.

Alexis was the best!!!!

I was lost for the first three tutorials because my room had gotten switched. She took time out to ensure that I could catch up on the things that I missed. She was really friendly.

Alexis truly deserves the award and recognition that comes with it. She has excelled in a difficult tutorial situation and has been influential in my perception of politics (especially comparative politics).

I feel very fortunate to learn from Alexis and would gladly welcome the opportunity again in my years to follow at UofT.

Neo-functionalism was a difficult concept to explain so she started to brainstorm what each of us thought about it by deconstructing and then reconstructing the word neo-functionalism (functional+neo). Using our ideas she explained the term with examples. She did not stop here. She asked students to explain the notion to others again as if it were just introduced. She kept doing this until everyone had a clear understanding.