To Whom it May Concern:

My name is Olivia Gearner, and I was a Teaching Assistant for BIOL 121, a lab coordinated by Dr. Natalie Mountjoy, during the 2018-2019 school year. Dr. Mountjoy is an excellent lab coordinator and works hard to meet both the needs of the students as well as of those of the TAs.

Dr. Mountjoy always made sure we were prepared for lab each week, including providing us with well-designed Powerpoints to use for the short lecture at the beginning of lab. Our version of the lab book had extensive comments which pointed out common problems students run in to, how to set up the lab, things to point out to students, and general advice on teaching and running the lab. Each week we met and discussed how the previous lab went and if there were any problems. She would always take advice from the TAs on ways in which the labs could be improved. Additionally, we would go over the upcoming lab, and any homework assignments or exams that were coming up. Throughout the week, she was always available to answer questions, help with Blackboard issues, and help with any problems we had with students. She is a very attentive lab coordinator and especially great at helping first time TAs learn how to teach and manage students.

During my year working with her, Dr. Mountjoy was constantly working on improving the labs, as well as developing an entirely new inquiry-based curriculum for the class. As I mentioned previously, if there were common problems with a certain lab (students running out of time, experiments not working correctly) she would try to trouble shoot and fix the lab for the next semester. At the same time, she is also working on a much larger overhaul of the labs to put more of the learning in the hands of the students and to demonstrate how science really works. The previous lab set up involved experiments with known outcomes designed to reinforce concepts taught in BIOL 120. Dr. Mountjoy's newly designed curriculum still emphasizes key topics from the lecture but is also set up to allow students to form hypotheses and design experiments to test those hypotheses. This way students still develop lab skills and apply what they learned in lecture, while also learning how to think scientifically. Additionally, rather than having a 20-minute lecture at the beginning of lab, students will work through a pre-lab exercise before class. This will give students more time to complete the labs, while also allowing the TAs to have more one-on-one time with the students. In my experience, students tended to better understand the concepts if I was able to talk to them individually or with their groups, rather than lecturing to the whole class.

Overall, Dr. Mountjoy is an excellent lab coordinator. She cares about students, and she is extraordinarily helpful to TAs. I think the changes she is making to the labs will really benefit students and may even recruit more students to the biology major. As a Teaching Assistant, I would have loved to teach the new labs she has designed.

Sincerely,

Olivia Gearner