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**Teaching a
Diverse
Student Body**



Teaching a Diverse Student Body:

Practical Strategies for Enhancing Our Students' Learning

A Handbook for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Adapted from a previous edition by
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FOREWORD



Jean-Francois Revel's book, *Anti-Americanism*, analyzes European attitudes and occasional hypocrisy towards the United States. In one of

the later chapters Revel reflects on the remarkable success of American universities, why the world's brightest flock to American institutions. He points to the catalytic environment of American academies where close integration of teaching and research reinforce one another. The fast pace of research has provided new excitement for the classroom but also new challenges for faculty in their effort to translate increasing amounts of information into course content.

Faculty today face other challenges as well. Technology in the classroom provides an opportunity for enhancing knowledge transfer through the capacity for both parallel and serial multi-media presentations within the classroom. However, used awkwardly, such technology can be disruptive to the coherence and cadence of the class and consequently detract from the learning experience. Other challenges arise from the busyness of today's students, who are accustomed both to a more rapid delivery of information from multiple media and to more scheduled, even overscheduled, lives.

Perhaps some of the greatest opportunities and challenges for effective teaching arise from the changing dynamics of the student population. Within the working lifetime of some long-serving U.Va. faculty, the student body has moved from primarily southern, white male

domination to an ethnically and culturally diverse population with both national and international textures. Gone are the days when one could expect students to arrive with relatively homogenous experiences and views. Oftentimes students now absorb information in a language that is not native, place new knowledge into a wide-ranging set of cultural contexts, and respond to information with varied emotions. Students struggle for recognition of their place in our community as they are pushed to move out of their comfort zones and into our vital but challenging intellectual community. This process can be rewarding but stressful, and nowhere will sensitivities be more evident than in the classroom. An understanding and appreciation of the complexity of contemporary student experience will help faculty harness this tension in productive and creative ways. There is little doubt that the opportunities for profound learning by both students and faculty have never been greater.

I am certain that you will find *Teaching a Diverse Student Body* a helpful tool as you work to create the best possible learning environment for your students.

Gene Block
Vice President and Provost
Alumni Council Thomas Jefferson
Professor of Biology

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of racial incidents at the University during the spring of 2003, President John T. Casteen III and Gordon F. Rainey, Jr., the newly elected rector of the University's Board of Visitors, created two groups charged with evaluating University initiatives that address diversity and identifying action steps and policy changes. The Special Committee on Diversity of the Board of Visitors and the President's Commission on Diversity and Equity are currently working in concert to create a vision and action plan to achieve a more welcoming community for every individual.

The President's Commission specifically is "charged with assessing the quality of the student experience within the University in all of its aspects, with special attention to experiences unique or generally germane to women and minority students." We divided the Commission into four main subgroups: Student Life and Climate; Faculty and Staff Recruitment and Retention; Curriculum; and Community and Business Models. We are working diligently gathering current data, following up on recommendations from prior reports, considering the merits of a wide range of proposals and studying "best practices" here and elsewhere. We are operating as a working commission by engaging members of the University community in focused discussions about all of these issues and when possible working with appropriate offices to put recommendations into place now instead of waiting until the final report.

Our final report will acknowledge the Teaching Resource Center as the home and source of many of the "best practices" to be found anywhere across the nation. The TRC has consistently provided services and resource materials designed to enhance the teaching abilities of faculty and teaching assistants at U.Va. *Teaching a Diverse Student Body* has been an

invaluable resource guide since 1994. The editor of this handbook has revised it to keep in step with U.Va.'s increasingly diverse student population. TRC staff understand the importance of embracing diversity within our classrooms because of the opportunities it creates for teaching and learning. They are in step with current research which informs us that "students who interact with peers of different backgrounds or who take courses with diversified curricular content show greater growth in their critical thinking skills than those who do not do so, and they also tend to be more engaged in learning."*

We highly recommend *Teaching a Diverse Student Body*. We encourage you to embrace its principles: keep it close at hand, refer to it often, and try out its teaching strategies. Your effort will certainly be rewarded—both in the quality of your classroom dynamics and in meeting the challenge of preparing *all* our students for the diverse world of the 21st century.

* Jeffrey Milem, "Why Race Matters," *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, Volume 86, Number 5 (September-October 2000).

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PREFACE

This handbook serves as a supplement to the Teaching Resource Center publication *Teaching at the University of Virginia*. Though some material will necessarily overlap that in the other handbook, *Teaching a Diverse Student Body* expands upon issues of diversity in a series of interrelated chapters. At the end of the book, you'll find appendices listing relevant university and community offices and organizations as well as additional print, web, and video resources to consult for further information. Please note that the handbook is meant to be a helpful source of ideas based on current research and not a doctrine insisting upon certain "correct" procedures or beliefs.

The handbook chapters can be read separately: the table of contents and lists of chapter sections will help you locate specific topics. Because some will prefer to read a chapter at a time, particularly effective teaching strategies may appear in more than one chapter. Overall, though, the chapters are meant to build upon one another to form a general scheme for responsive and inclusive teaching. Since students vary in their backgrounds and learning preferences, these suggestions—taken as a whole—should prove helpful in recognizing and addressing the individual learning styles of all our students, not just those who fit into specific categories.

Recognizing and responding to the increasing diversity of our student body can help us become more effective teachers, enriching our classrooms in the process.

Nearly 30% of the entering Class of 2007 were students from underrepresented groups (9% African American, 11% Asian American, 3% Hispanic American, and 5% international). Over half were women. Racial, ethnic and gender differences account for only a part of our students' diversity, however. U.Va. students vary in many other ways as well, including religious values, sexual orientation, fluency in English, cultural background, and types of

physical ability. Although knowing these details helps us become more aware of the differences among our students, "[n]aming patterns is like charting the prevailing winds over a continent, which does not imply that every individual and item in the landscape is identically affected" (Frye 180). As Marilyn Frye suggests, while it is sometimes useful to recognize patterns of differences, we must also remember that these general patterns will not apply to every individual student and that many students fall into more than one category. Terms such as "female student," "African American student," or "Asian American student" can encompass vast differences in cultures, educational backgrounds, psychological types, and learning preferences. The suggestions in this handbook are meant to help faculty and teaching assistants recognize some broad ways in which students may differ from one another—and from each of us—and to examine what effect these differences may have on our students' learning and our teaching. The most effective ways we can recognize and teach this diverse student body are by following the same general principles good teachers use:

- making our students comfortable in the classroom
- recognizing differences in their reactions and learning preferences
- teaching in a flexible manner
- varying the ways our students participate in the classroom
- responding to students equitably and inclusively.

We hope this handbook will help you to enact these principles in your classroom. Please let us know what you think by contacting us at trc-uva@virginia.edu.