



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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In Their Words Students' Ideas about Teaching

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As one way to foster a dialogue about teaching and learning between undergraduate students and the teaching community, the TRC has established an ongoing series entitled "Undergraduate Student Focus Group on Teaching and Learning." Each month we invite a cross-section of about ten undergraduates to meet at the TRC to discuss various aspects of teaching and learning.

If you know any undergraduates who would be interested in taking part in a group or if you have an idea for a topic, please contact Jann Lacoss at jann@virginia.edu or 982-2815. Additional focus group results are available at our web site.

Hoo's in Class? Motivation for Attendance and Preparation

If we teach it, will they come? Getting students to class, prepared, is an issue with which instructors perennially grapple. This focus group aimed to unearth the factors that motivate students to prepare for and attend classes, as well as techniques that teachers use to encourage them to do so.

Instructors who exhibit certain qualities draw students to their courses. A passion for the material being taught, approachability, the ability to challenge students, and a sense of humor ranked among the top qualities of exceptional instructors noted by our panel. Attention to students and mutual respect also motivate students to attend classes. These qualities help maintain the interest level of the students, enticing them to further study of the given topic.

In the courses that best engaged the participants, the instructors made information understandable and broke it down into manageable chunks. Thus students perceive that the time in class is productive. Students especially appreciated opportunities to couple practical application with material presented in class. The instructor's own experiences, related through anecdotes, can provide both real life examples and the personal touch students find appealing.

Class size is an important factor in choosing a course; students perceive that they learn more in smaller, more interactive classes. Still, presentation style contributes to holding the students' attention, regardless of class size. In larger courses, an energetic presentation of lecture material helps hold student interest. In smaller classes, students place a premium on teachers who listen well, mediate discussions effectively, and operate in an interactive manner.

In general, the amount of preparation that students are willing to put into a particular class depends in great measure on how stimulating they find the course content and presentation, on how the demands of that course compare with those of other courses, and on whether they perceive that effort spent on preparation yields a corresponding payoff in the final grade.