

Dealing with Difference

Rutgers students come from a wide variety of backgrounds. The undergraduate student body is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, and socioeconomic class. It includes non-traditional students, students with families and jobs, first-generation college students, immigrants, and international students. The diversity of the University enriches academic life, but requires instructors to take their students' backgrounds into account instead of basing their teaching on assumptions about what students' lives are like. Otherwise, instructors may shortchange students who don't fit the instructor's mental image of who their students are. Especially important, instructors need to make sure that their teaching practices don't inadvertently favor some students over others.

An important part of treating your students fairly is to see them as individuals. Get to know your students. Without asking students to reveal private information, you can give them the opportunity to share their background with you if they choose to. On the first day of class, have students complete note cards with information about themselves, such as their year and major, and tell them that they may provide other information about their life "situation" if they wish, such as whether they commute long distances or work full-time. Make yourself accessible to students and encourage them to meet with you during office hours. Learn your students' names, and chat with them before class starts, whenever you have the chance. If you know your students, you are less likely to stereotype them or see them as representatives of some particular group.

Some differences among students are obvious. A student's sex, age, and race are, most likely, visible. Other differences, including religion, sexual orientation, and class status, are not. Instructors may make various assumptions about who their students are based on their idea of a "typical" student, but not all students will meet this standard, and the ways in which they depart from it may be invisible. Getting to know your students and learning about their differences, however, does not mean that you should treat some students differently from others. It does

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Planning for Your Future

This month, the TA Project is offering two important workshops to help graduate students prepare for their personal and professional lives beyond graduate school.

Balancing Career and Family
Tuesday, March 8
12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.
Busch Campus Center
Graduate Student Lounge

A panel of faculty members will discuss how they manage the conflicts between an academic career and family life and talk about strategies for leading a balanced life.

Writing Your Dissertation with the Book in Mind
Wednesday, March 30
12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.
Rutgers Student Center
Graduate Student Lounge

Faculty members from the humanities and social sciences will offer advice on how to prepare now to get your dissertation published when it's finished.

For further information, or to register for either of these programs, please call 732-932-7747 or email tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu.

Difference...

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mean that you should think about your own experiences, values, and beliefs and how they affect the way you behave in the classroom and interact with students. It also means that you should recognize that some classroom policies will impact different students very differently.

Instructors may design courses based on the assumption that their students are young people who may hold part-time jobs or be involved in cocurricular activities, but whose main occupation is college student. Older students who work full-time or have family responsibilities (or both) will not be well-served by such an assumption. For instance, such students may have trouble completing group projects which require group members to meet outside of class. These students have to schedule their time carefully and well in advance, and last-minute changes to assignment schedules can throw their lives into turmoil. Non-traditional students may be focused and dedicated, and they may have much to contribute to your classroom, but they may require a bit more flexibility. In addition, some of them may feel out of place or insecure

about their academic skills if they've been out of school for a long time. They may also be more concerned about the relevance of what they're learning and the purpose of assignments. Try to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of non-traditional students and give them encouragement and support.

While you may recognize that an obviously older student has serious outside work and family commitments, you should also be aware that many traditionally-aged Rutgers students must work long hours to stay in school or may have extensive family obligations. Don't assume that all of your students can afford the expenses related to class. Try to keep costs down; put copies of books and course packets on reserve at the library. Recognize that discussions about poverty or welfare policy may not be abstract or academic for your students, and that examples which refer to a middle-class lifestyle (assuming that your students took family vacations, drove a car in high school, lived in a suburban neighborhood, etc.) may leave some members of your class feeling alienated and isolated.

Differences among students can also have an impact on class discussions and student participation. Instructors tend to call on the first students to raise their hands, which means that only the most confident and

assertive students will have a voice in the discussion. Once a few students begin to monopolize the discussion, others may be unwilling to compete for speaking time, especially if they don't feel fully comfortable in the classroom. Many classrooms display a gender dynamic in which males dominate class discussion and female students are more likely to be interrupted.¹

When you pose a question to the class, don't always call on the first student whose hand shoots up. Wait awhile to give less confident students time to gather their thoughts and formulate a response. Have students write down ideas before asking for participation. Look around the room and make eye contact with students who haven't participated. Have students take turns presenting material to the class. Don't allow students to interrupt each other, and make sure that you don't interrupt your students. When there is an interruption, direct your attention back to the person who was speaking, acknowledge that he or she was interrupted, and encourage him or her to finish the thought.

Analyze your behavior and that of your students. Make a note of which students attempt to participate, who you call on, and how you respond to the comments of different students. Is class discussion dominated by a particular type of student? Do you make eye contact on an equal basis with men and women, and with students of all ethnic and racial groups? Be aware of your prejudices and

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preconceptions, and make sure that you do not value contributions from one sex or ethnic group more highly than those from others, or have higher expectations for one group over another. Try to elicit participation from all of your students, and listen to all of your students with equal attention.

Think about your lectures and the material you present to your class. Be careful to use non-sexist language. When you give examples, try to make sure that they are relevant to all students—for example, don't always use sports analogies, or make reference to one particular type of music. Examine course reading materials and any videos/films or websites that you use to see how they represent members of different groups. If they present people in stereotypical ways, or focus exclusively on people from particular groups, consider adding more inclusive material, or talk with your class about the messages the material may be sending.

If you come to know your students as individuals and think seriously about your own assumptions and preconceptions, you can recognize and respect the differences among your students and make your classroom a positive learning environment for everyone.

¹ For a discussion of these tendencies see Catherine G. Krupnik, "Women and Men in the Classroom: Inequality and Its Remedies" reprinted from *On Teaching and Learning*, Volume 1 (1985) by the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/docs/krupnick.html>.

Handling Grade Challenges

When students receive grades on papers or exams, a few will inevitably complain, either because they honestly believe their work was unfairly judged, or because they think they can talk the instructor into a few more points. During mid-term season, TAs should be prepared to be approached by students challenging their grades, particularly if the mid-term is the first time in the semester that students have received a grade.

If a student asks you for a higher grade, give the student a fair hearing. Don't dismiss all questions out of hand; you will appear inflexible and uncaring and may alienate your students. In addition, your students may have a valid complaint: your question may have been ambiguous; the student's answer may not be what you originally had in mind as the correct answer, but may be valid nonetheless based on course material; or you may simply have made a mistake while grading.

On the other hand, you shouldn't award points that a student doesn't deserve simply to avoid conflict. Don't allow students to make you feel guilty because they need a certain grade in the class to get into medical school or a graduate program. Make it clear that a grade is something they earn, not something you bestow upon them.

Plan how you would like students to ask questions about grades. Don't entertain requests as soon as you hand back work, for example. If you allow

one or two students to start asking for points and challenging questions during class, other students will probably start to chime in, realizing that as a group they may be able to pressure you for higher grades. Advise students to go home and look over their work and your comments on it, and if they have questions, they can come to your office hours, email you, or see you before or after class.

When students do come to you with questions, you needn't feel compelled to give them an immediate answer or review their work in front of them. Take the time to reassess the assignment or exam and consider the grade. You may also ask students to put any complaints about their grades in writing, using course materials to demonstrate the validity of their claims. Whatever decision you make, explain it to the student, and stick to it.

If you are a TA for a multi-section course, discuss grading policies with the instructor in charge of the course, and coordinate with the other TAs.

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30 am - 4:30 pm

TAP Calendar

3/4	12:00-1:30 pm	CV Writing	BCC+
3/8	12:00-1:30 pm	Balancing Career and Family	BCC*
3/29	4:30-6:00 pm	Career Options in Social/Behavioral Sciences	CAC+
3/30	12:00-1:30 pm	Writing Your Dissertation with the Book in Mind	CAC*

+Call 732-445-6127 for information or to register.

*Call 732-932-7747 for information or to register.

Want to be a Movie Star?

Get your class videotaped!

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

Call 932-11TA for details

The Master Faculty Observation Program

TAP has assembled a select group of outstanding faculty members who have volunteered to provide graduate students with the opportunity to observe their classes. The names, teaching schedules, and contact information of these veteran teachers are listed on our website. Earn a certificate by visiting three or more classes. For more information visit:

http://taproject.rutgers.edu/services_tips/Master_Faculty.php3

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