

Our Common Purpose

The vision of the university as a harmonious community may be utopian and idealized, but it is not necessarily fallacious or impossible. In fact, given the nature of the university, the prospect of creating a real community--sharing, supportive, enabling--remains more of a possibility here than almost anywhere else. This community, which is based upon the free and civilized exchange of ideas, should be a place where individuality is prized and where ideas are judged on merit alone. Neither race, gender, political ideology nor other variables can be allowed to compromise these standards of judgment.

As graduate students at a research university, we have defined ourselves as scholars, committed to the mastery of our discipline and the pursuit of truth and knowledge. We are obligated to conduct our inquiries with integrity and perseverance. The skills that we develop as researchers we naturally apply to other areas of our lives. Rather than unthinkingly reflecting the ignorance or reinforcing the prejudices of society, we must make a determined effort to see through the mist of cultural assumptions and prejudices.

TAs, as visible and influential members of this university community, can take the lead in promoting greater tolerance among their students and colleagues. Education is the key in this battle between reason and irrationality. In your words and actions, you can demonstrate your awareness and acceptance of the diversity of the experience of others.

If one chooses to do so, the Rutgers community can be broken down into an almost endless number of subgroups: male/female; graduate/undergraduate/faculty/staff; commuter/resident; part time/full time; New Jersey resident/non-resident; U.S. citizen/foreign student; white/black/brown/yellow/red; scientist/humanist; married/single; straight/gay; etc., and each of these groups can be further reduced into ever-narrower categories. These distinctions can be useful and informative, and they are indicative of the diversity of Rutgers. But these distinctions can also be destructive when they become divisive, when they are used to marginalize or to stigmatize any individual.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to acquire unreasonable and unfair prejudices unconsciously; we are all products of a particular culture, ethnic group, and socio-economic group, and we often unthinkingly accept or make assumptions or generalizations that are groundless. The beginning of a new semester is an appropriate time to step back and look closely at attitudes and beliefs, to question the motives for your actions, to examine your language for that which might offend or hurt. Do we make assumptions or generalizations that have a potentially damaging effect upon members of any group? What is the justification for these beliefs? Can they be exorcised? Examining the roots of these

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Video Workshop To Be Presented

How do you handle a hostile student? How do you deal with complaints about grades? What do you do when you think a student has cheated? How do you respond when a student asks you for a date? On Thursday, February 23, 1989, TAP will present a video workshop, "Critical Incidents in Teaching," to address some of these problems. All TAs are invited to attend this workshop which will be held in the Rutgers College Student Center, Rooms 411 A & B (CAC), from 4:30 to 6:00 p.m.

This workshop should be of interest to all TAs, whether they are teaching a lab, lecture, or recitation, or grading for an instructor. It will offer TAs an opportunity to anticipate some of the problems that may arise in the execution of their duties as a TA and to consider ways of resolving them. A series of brief vignettes will be shown, each one dramatizing a possible student/teacher confrontation. In the discussion following each scene, TAs will have the chance to exchange ideas on how to handle the situation, to evaluate the many ways of approaching such crises.

Discussing such situations can give useful glimpses into the teaching techniques and attitudes of others. Come and share your experiences and ideas on February 23rd. Refreshments will be served after the workshop, so you will have the opportunity to continue your discussion or just socialize with other TAs.

Teaching Tolerance in the Classroom

Most of us recognize the need to exhibit sensitivity to our students and colleagues on very delicate subjects. We would not make jokes in class about serious matters like religion or death; neither would we make personal remarks about someone's physical appearance. In general, we try to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated, with sensitivity and respect.

Since most TAs are still taking courses, it is not difficult for them to empathize with their students *as* students, to understand what it feels like to be on the other side of the desk. But treating students as you would like to be treated does not necessarily mean that you should assume that they are all exactly like you. In fact, it is vital that you recognize and acknowledge and respect each student's individuality. When you stand in front of a classroom or meet with students in your office, you can assume that all are students at Rutgers, but beyond that it is risky to assume anything. Otherwise, a thoughtless joke or a careless word can cause discomfort, even pain, to a student in your class. Be aware of the power you have to wound others and guard against doing so.

Students must also be held to the same standard of behavior, and one of the responsibilities of the TA is to help their students understand this; it is a necessary part of their education at Rutgers. A large number of Rutgers students are from New Jersey and have little experience with people outside of their own race or ethnic group. Some of your students have come from countries where cultural attitudes are radically different. Lack of experience, however, does not excuse intolerance. As TAs we must address problems when they arise, to help our students learn to understand people who are different from themselves.

RACISM:

One of the dirty little secrets of college life in the 1980s is that racism and xenophobia are alive and well. A number of vicious incidents have been reported at colleges across the United States. Rutgers is, unfortunately, no exception to the rule, having joined the ranks of institutions that have experienced troubling incidents, such as racist graffiti on campus buildings. People are singled out for their skin color or their ethnic lineage--black, brown, yellow, red, Semitic, Asian, Eastern European, etc.--and subjected to various forms of harassment because of this. The harassment can range from *seemingly* innocent jokes to verbal or written abuse (swastikas or racial epithets carved into desks or painted on walls) to physical violence. None of these are innocent, none can be dismissed as pranks, for all can be devastating to their victims. Recent sobering events on Rutgers' campuses demonstrate the need for renewed efforts by all members of the university to demand tolerance, to

call attention to and condemn racist behavior in any of its manifestations.

Of course, these problems are not confined to college campuses--the university is, after all, a microcosm of the larger society--but their presence here is somehow more disturbing. Although many reasons are offered for this resurgence of racism, ignorance and fear are always at the base of prejudice. As educators, it is our responsibility to rid people of their ignorance, thus helping to free them of their irrational fears. We are often blind, however, to our *own* bigotry; our personal biases seem reasonable and are only exposed through painstaking self-examination and honesty. Furthermore, racism is not always blatant, and the subtler forms--exhibited in body language, tone of voice, or overall attitude--are sometimes more destructive than the more violent types.

Prejudicial beliefs and attitudes may unknowingly influence our teaching, interfering with our development as teachers and scholars. For example, do we believe that some ethnic groups are more capable of learning than others? Do we teach down to members of certain groups, lowering our expectations? Do we assume that a minority student has been admitted under a different standard than other students? Or that someone whose English is accented will not be able to keep up with the class? Even if you never voice these opinions--and certainly to do so would be contemptible--you can be sure that your students will sense them. The end result is to harm all of your students: the minority students will be damaged by your unreasonable assumptions, the remaining students will have their own racist beliefs validated.

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by TAP, the Teaching Assistant Project, The Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:

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Teaching Tolerance

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SEXISM:

To many, sexism seems a trivial issue or a non-issue, and those who are fighting to change social attitudes toward women (and, simultaneously, toward men) are viewed as trouble-makers or radicals. Attempts are made to trivialize the movement by portraying feminists as humorless and self-centered, their demands selfish and silly. But sexism is a serious issue, one of the most insidious forms of discrimination in this society and, therefore, one of the most difficult to eradicate. We have been conditioned from birth to make distinctions between the sexes, some of which, of course, may be valid and necessary, but some of which seriously affect the growth and potential of both women and men in this country.

Where do you begin to fight sexism? Language is the obvious starting place. Our everyday language is gender-coded, a minefield for those who wish to avoid falling into traditional stereotypes. Using non-sexist language does not only mean that you avoid defining people in sexual or demeaning ways but also that you do not use the pronoun "he" when you mean "he or she." Be aware of words that automatically assume the sex of the person about whom you speak: chairman, salesman, housewife, congressman--unless you are speaking about a specific person.

Treat all students equally. It is just as wrong to make predictions about student performance based on gender as on race. Give both women and men a fair chance to participate, and listen to all responses with equal attention. Go out of the way to make eye contact with all of the students in the class. Do not let your class be dominated by mem-

bers of one sex. By responsibly monitoring your interactions with students, you can eliminate a great deal of unthinking sexist behavior.

HOMOPHOBIA:

According to conservative estimates, one out of every ten people in this country is either homosexual or bisexual. Consider this number carefully. This means that if you are teaching even a small class--20 to 30 students--there is a good chance that at least one or two students will be gay, and unless they decide to tell you, there is no way you can distinguish them from any of the other members of the class.

Although homosexuals have long been the victims of discrimination, fear of homosexuals and the resulting expressions of hatred and intolerance have intensified in the past few years, since the onset of the AIDs epidemic. A small but vocal group of people in this country now feels that it is justified, even laudatory, to subject homosexuals to ridicule, scorn, and even violence. In addition, many people who would not tolerate racial or sexist slurs seem unwilling to speak out against jokes or expressions of anger and contempt aimed at homosexuals. As a result, the role of the teacher as the voice of reason is needed now more than ever.

Perhaps more difficult is the task of avoiding heterosexism, that is, speaking and acting as if heterosexual relationships were the only kind of arrangement. Do not assume that all couples, all lovers, are male/female--other possibilities exist. Not acknowledging this is denying an important part of some of your students' lives.

Notes From the Field

TAs were asked to comment on the relevancy of these issues to their experience at Rutgers.

In the lab I taught I found that most students prefer to have contacts with students of the same race. . . . I don't believe it is because they are racists, only that it is easier to approach someone they have something in common with.
Farag Abuhasanayn
Chemistry

I have recently moved here from Oregon. The atmosphere is very different here--charged with the sense of the possibility of racism. People feel free here to make racist comments. . . . On the other hand, I am amazed at the open policy of the administration and student organizations on homophobia; they are making a very strong statement here.
Ann Mussey
History Department

I think that most of the students at Rutgers can easily accept the fact that their TAs are international students. . . . I have never had problems because of this.
Ching-Hsuan Tung
Chemistry Department

THE UNIVERSITY IS COMMITTED TO A POLICY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE ON THE BASIS OF RACE, RELIGION, COLOR, NATIONAL ORIGIN, ANCESTRY, AGE, SEX, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HANDICAP, OR MARITAL, MILITARY, OR VETERAN'S STATUS.

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TO REPORT ANY INCIDENTS OF HARASSMENT.

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Common Purpose

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prejudices and identifying those which are baseless is to begin to dispel them--but only to begin. Next, we must speak out against them. Silence is not always golden. It can be a powerful weapon, an eloquent way of excluding or marginalizing without displaying overt hostility and seemingly without incurring blame. However, not doing anything or saying anything in the face of some injustice does not imply innocence but suggests complicity. Pretending not to see something which makes us uncomfortable does not make it go away but merely makes it more threatening. Silence can be injurious in another way. Refusing to acknowledge that another is indeed different is to deny that person's self, that person's individuality. Differences should not be mocked, ignored or persecuted, but celebrated.

President Bloustein has made a major, university-wide commitment to solving these problems and promoting the idea of a common purpose at Rutgers. TAs have a responsibility to see that their classroom behavior and that of their students reflects this stated goal, thus helping Rutgers to develop into a strong, supportive community.

NOTICE

The Graduate Association of Women in Science, Mathematics and Engineering is now forming to bring women graduate students in diversified disciplines together. The purpose is to have fun while discussing issues important to females working in non-traditional fields. The first meeting will be on Tuesday, February 21 from 4:30 to 6:00 in the Busch Student Center, Rooms 122 A-B. Come on out for light refreshments and share your ideas! For information call Carol Ruge at (609) 799-5679, Michelle Bellinger at (201) 878-1837, or Michelle Evans at (201) 246-3126.

DATES TO REMEMBER



3	Last day to withdraw from class with full refund
8	Ash Wednesday
15	Nehane
12	Lincoln's B'day
14	Valentine's Day
22	Washington's B'day
23	TAP Video Workshop

Teaching Assistant Project

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