

DEPARTMENT OF FOCUSED INQUIRY

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The purpose of the Department of Focused Inquiry is to cultivate in all VCU students the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for collegiate and lifelong success through learning-centered experiences; to foster an environment of collaboration among its faculty; and to encourage excellence in the practice and scholarship of teaching and learning. Faculty members are specialists in a range of disciplines and are dedicated to engaging students in curricular material that prepares them to become advanced thinkers in their majors, to be engaged citizens and to thrive as innovative and adaptable professionals.

The department offers small, seminar-style classes for first- and second-year students as the foundation of the University Core Curriculum at VCU. All courses are designed to cultivate curiosity and critical thinking through a rigorous, process-oriented shared curriculum grounded in experiential and problem-based learning. First year students in UNIV 111 and UNIV 112 focus on developing skills in written and oral communication, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, information fluency and quantitative reasoning in a collaborative learning environment, remaining with the same classmates and instructor for both courses and exploring a shared course theme. In UNIV 200 students further hone their written communication, critical thinking and information fluency skills by developing an individually designed inquiry project through a semester-long collaborative process of questioning, researching, writing, reflecting and revising in a variety of modalities. The unit also offers five interdisciplinary Tier 2 courses: Food for Thought (UNIV 211), The Truth About Lying (UNIV 213), Finding Your Voice in Contemporary Society (UNIV 217), Pseudoscience (UNIV 222) and What's the Big Idea? (UNIV 299).

Teaching assistant programs

Undergraduate teaching assistant program

The undergraduate teaching assistant program (offered in UNIV 250 and UNIV 251) provides successful Focused Inquiry students the opportunity to engage in experiential education and real-world applications of their FI course work through collaboration, mentorship and reflection and to earn service-learning credit. UTAs work in the Focused Inquiry classroom, modeling successful student behavior and adding a crucial layer of support that helps both their students and their faculty mentors.

Upon completing a year of service in the UTA program, UTAs may apply to the peer leadership seminar (offered as UNIV 350). This application-only seminar offers its students a three-fold approach to leadership: They practice leadership through the mentorship they offer UTAs in the 250/251 sequence; they study leadership through the model of the Richmond metropolitan region; finally, they meet regional leaders.

Graduate teaching assistant program

The Focused Inquiry GTA program provides VCU graduate students the opportunity to gain valuable teaching experience and professional development. The highly structured program includes mentorship and guidance toward the goal of developing teaching expertise in a two-step process. In the first year of the program, GTAs shadow a course of UNIV 111, UNIV 112 and UNIV 200 with an assigned mentor faculty member. In the second year, GTAs either teach their own section of UNIV 111, UNIV 112 and UNIV 200 or work on a research, professional development or departmental service project under the guidance of a faculty member. As a result, GTAs have a strong track record in the unit as highly committed, effective teachers of the UNIV courses. GTA positions are funded through the Graduate School and the Department of English.