

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 part of the foundations of learning in the general education program 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 communicative fluency, ethical reasoning, global and cultural responsiveness, information literacy and problem solving 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 skills by developing an inquiry project through a semester-long collaborative process of questioning, researching, writing, reflecting and revising in a variety of modalities.

The department also offers five other interdisciplinary 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). UNIV 299 fulfills the diversities in the human experience area of inquiry requirement and the humanities/ fine arts breadth of knowledge requirement within VCU's general education program. All of these courses have received REAL Level 2 designation.

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. The UTA program courses are designated as service learning and REAL Level 3.

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 phase of the program, GTAs shadow sections of UNIV 111 and UNIV 112 or UNIV 200 taught by an assigned faculty mentor. In the second phase, GTAs either teach their own section of UNIV 111 and UNIV 112 or 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.