

# Virginia Tech Conductor

A GUIDE FOR OUR JOURNEY TOWARD EXCELLENCE, EQUITY AND EFFECTIVENESS

## In this issue

Page 2 - Four people answer the question: *What nonacademic experiences should a student have to prepare them to come to Virginia Tech?*

Page 2 - Ten things you can do

Page 3 - Unpack your assumptions about what your students think

Page 4 - Share your diversity 'ah ha' moments with us

## What do you think?

### Should Virginia Tech admission practices be reviewed?

by Richard Connors, professor of electrical and computer engineering and a Multicultural Fellow

Admission officers at colleges and universities are, in a way, gate keepers to the American dream. While it is true that one can succeed without a college education, people who get one inevitably have starting salaries that put them in the middle class. With hard work and some good saving practices, these people may rise financially to the upper middle class or possibly even become rich. Because of this, I believe that reviewing admissions procedures should be an ongoing process at all colleges and universities.

From my perspective, there are two points that seem self-evident with regard to admission policies. First and foremost, **admission policies should be absolutely fair and equitable.** They should not favor the better off over the poor, one ethnic or racial group over others, one gender over the other, people with one physical or mental condition over others with different conditions, or people with one sexual orientation versus someone with different orientations. We are talking about the American dream here! Access to it must be proportioned as fairly and as equitably as possible.

The second point that should be self-evident is that **admission decisions must be based on measures that are as predictive of student performance as possible.** How else can fair decisions be made? We owe it to the students to accept those who have a high probability of success in matriculating our programs. And, in these financially strapped times, we owe it to the teachers to have highly qualified students come here -- students

See 'Admission' on page 4

## International students respond to survey

by Kim Beisecker, director, Cranwell International Center

During the 2002 spring semester, an on-line survey of international graduate students was conducted for the Cranwell International Center by Ph.D. student Aristides Duerto, funded by a grant from the Equal Opportunity Office. The purpose was to help determine the students' experiences at Virginia Tech.

In our quest to become a top research institution while carefully examining the use of our precious resources, this survey could be interpreted in two ways. The first is to feel satisfied that, statistically, the majority of participating students responded positively. The second, is to discuss the number of students who do not rate their experiences as positive and ask how many is too many?

Of the approximately 1,300 international graduate students, 448 on-line responses were received. All colleges were represented. Respondents were from 53 countries with approximate representation of these countries proportionate to the international population with the exception of China, which had a lower percentage of respondents.

### Information provided prior to enrollment

- 68% received sufficient financial information about VT (117 students did not)
- 50% received sufficient social information about VT (194 did not)
- 69% received sufficient academic information about VT (125 did not)

### Regarding first two months at Virginia Tech:

- 69% received necessary technical support services (84 did not)

- 70% received necessary social support services (79 did not)
- 65% received necessary academic support services (104 did not)

### United States/ American culture:

- 84% are comfortable in the U.S./American culture (62 students are not)
- 66% feel well integrated to the U.S./American culture (137 do not)
- 32% are often lonely (288 students are not)

### Maintenance of relationships in home country:

- 93% maintain good relations with friends in the home country
- 99% maintain good relations with their families in the home country

### Involvement in activities:

- 38% are involved in cultural activities not related to their own culture
- 42% are involved in on-campus social activities
- 61% are involved in off-campus leisure activities

Of survey respondents, 11.5% were Muslim, 38% Hindi, and 25% stated they had no religion or it was not applicable.

- 64% feel they are able to practice their religion to their satisfaction at VT (26% stated the question was not applicable, 40 students could not).
- 79% stated they were able to express their cultural beliefs freely at VT (55 could not)

See 'Survey' on page 2

## A letter from Anytown

### What I did on my summer vacation

by Eric Peterson

The bus pulled up in front of the Biden Center early. We weren't expecting the delegates (we were asked not to call them "kids") until around 2:00, so when they arrived at 1:15, it was a little disconcerting. Nonetheless, we sprang into action -- helping them to their assigned rooms, then quickly herding them into a large conference room where 35 chairs were arranged in a large circle, and a buffet of soda and junk food had been laid out just moments before. They weren't exceptionally hungry. Most of them either stared at the floor or stared at the ceiling with a vague expression that seemed to say, "I don't ... want ... to be here." I was beginning to empathize.

"Here" was a unique sort of summer-camp-meets-diversity-training called "Anytown Delaware," sponsored by the National Conference on Community and Justice. Here, delegates aged 14 to 18 from high schools, Boys & Girls Clubs, Girl Scout troops, and community centers from across the state had been chosen to represent their communities. They had come to learn about bias, bigotry, discrimination, and oppression -- to hear the stories of others and to tell their own.

As an advisor -- one of eight adults who would guide the delegates through the week's activities -- I was expected to tell my story too. I would talk about what it is to be an able-bodied middle-class white man in a racist, sexist, ableist, classist society. Hopefully, I would be able to convey that I wasn't their enemy, but their ally. What they didn't know was that I would eventually tell more than 25 delegates that I was a gay man. What I didn't know was whether or not I'd be able to do it.

I'll admit it; I was scared. Some of these kids (oops, delegates) had lived their lives in inner-city housing projects.

I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but had I met them the night before in a dark alley, I would probably have run in the opposite direction. The delegates who appeared to come from more privileged households scared me less -- until it was announced that all delegates were expected to be up and ready for breakfast at 8 a.m. sharp the next day, and I was greeted by a chorus of teenage girls whining, "Ugh, that is so gay." Great.

The first day was all about team building. We played games that were fun, but were cleverly designed to force them to trust each other with little things -- since they'd have to trust each other with big things later on. Advisors and delegates played together. They would have to trust me as the week went on. And I'd need to trust them.

As requested, the delegates arrived for breakfast the next morning promptly at eight. As they entered the dining room, they were each given a "disability." Some were blindfolded, others were given earplugs and were told to be silent. The lucky ones were asked to assist a blind person; the unlucky ones were denied the use of a hand or an arm. We spent the next two days discussing the oppression of the disabled, the lower classes, the young, the old, and those of different faiths. We defined words like oppression, privilege, power, discrimination, and bias.

And slowly, the delegates began to emerge from their shells. One boy, a tall, lanky African-American who wore a doo-rag on his head and boxer-baring baggy jeans around his waist, and untied sneakers with puffy laces on his feet during the day, emerged at night in a pair of striped flannel PJ's. Greeted with laughter from his fellow delegates, he was quickly christened "Pop Pop" (Grandpa). The name stuck. For the remainder of the week,

See 'A Letter from Anytown' on page 3

## What nonacademic experiences should a student have to prepare them to come to Virginia Tech?

Compiled by Kimberly S. Brown, director, University Academic Advising Center, and Multicultural Fellow



With a fairly diverse population here at Virginia Tech, one of the most valuable nonacademic experiences a student can have to prepare to come to Tech is being involved in clubs, organizations, and activities that encourage a healthy exposure to various

people and perspectives. Getting involved in extracurricular endeavors, such as volunteer groups, community service organizations, and cultural experiences, could have a substantial influence on increasing one's understanding and tolerance for the diverse people a student coming to Tech will encounter. Participating in extracurricular clubs and organizations enhances not only one's fundamental people skills, but also the ability to get along with most anyone, despite differing personalities and temperament. So, in terms of nonacademic experiences, I encourage a student preparing to come to Tech to engage in activities that foster encounters with diverse people, perspectives, personalities, and the like.

*Kia Wood*, graduate assistant  
Center for Academic Enrichment and Excellence



The best thing a student can do before coming to Tech is experience life. To be exposed to those things that they have been insulated from goes a long way once one gets to college. There are so many things that go on daily

that can be overwhelming to somebody who can not

handle all the commotion. The more experiences somebody has, the better prepared they are to not only handle the commotion, but also appreciate and enjoy it.

*Peter da Silva Vint*, undergraduate student  
Communication Studies



A student coming to Virginia Tech should not only possess academic skills but also great interpersonal communication skills. You have to be able to get along and deal with different types of people and their personalities.

You have to be able to talk less and listen more. Being a well-rounded individual will make college life much easier.

*Larissa Johnson*, undergraduate student  
Public and Urban Affairs



The most important non academic experiences that a student should have before coming to VT are careful time management and a solid budget plan.

Students quickly find the fast pace of most college courses consumes much more time for study than they experienced in high school. New students must be ready to shift into high speed and manage their personal time carefully. Proper budgeting of money is also essential because, like time, it has a way of quickly evaporating with new college temptations.

*Jerry W. Via*, assistant dean  
College of Arts and Sciences

## Ten (self-)critical things I can do to be a better multicultural educator

by Paul C. Gorski, assistant director, Office of Human Relations Programs, University of Maryland

This list emerged from a presentation I conducted for Every Teacher, Every Student, The Special Education Resource Center's fourth annual conference in March. The presentation was entitled "Self-critique as Self-development: A First Step for Multicultural Educators." Many of the items in the list require us to step out of our comfort box and focus on a real shift in thinking. Address comments and questions to Paul Gorski at [gorski@earthlink.net](mailto:gorski@earthlink.net).

1. I can engage in self-reflective writing or journaling to explore my own process of identity development and how I react to different events or people.
2. I can invite critique from colleagues and accept it openly. Though it's easy to become defensive in the face of critique, I can thank the person for their feedback, remembering that people may experience me differently from how I see and experience myself.
3. I can understand the relationship between "intent" and "impact." Many times, especially when I'm in a situation in which I experience a level of privilege, I have the luxury of referring and responding only to what I intended, no matter what impact I have on somebody. I must take responsibility for impact, recognizing that I can never be totally aware of the biases and prejudices I carry into the classroom and how my students or colleagues experience me.
4. I can reject the myth of color-blindness. As painful as it is to admit sometimes, I know that I react differently when I'm in a room full of people who share

many dimensions of my identity than I do in a room full of people who are very different from me. I have to be open and honest about that, because those shifts inevitably inform the experiences of people in my classes or workshops. In addition, color-blindness denies people validation of their whole person.

5. I can recognize my own social identity group memberships and how they may affect my students' experiences and learning processes. People do not always experience me the way I intend them to, even if I am an active advocate for all my students. If I appreciate this, I will find deeper ways to connect with all my students.
6. I can build coalitions with teachers who are different from me (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, first language, disability, and other identities). These can be valuable relationships of trust and honest critique. At the same time, I must not rely on other people to identify my weaknesses. In particular, in the areas of my identity that I experience privilege, I must not rely on people from historically underprivileged groups to teach me how to improve myself (which is, in and of itself, a practice of privilege).
7. I can invite critique from my students, and when I do so, I can dedicate to listening actively and modeling a willingness to change if necessary.
8. I can reflect on my own experiences as a student and how that informs my teaching. Research indicates that my teaching is most closely informed by my own

See 'Ten things' on 4

## Survey ...

Continued from page 1

### Academic concerns:

- 88% are comfortable with their classes (39 students were not)
- 86% are comfortable with their interaction with faculty members (56 students are not)
- 91% are comfortable with their interaction with staff members (34 students are not)
- 65% feel they are achieving their full academic potential (145 students are not)
- 84% have a good relationship with their advisor (39 students do not)
- 79% make use of educational services provided at VT (68 do not)
- 53% do not believe the use of English as a second language results in lower performance (175 students see lower results)
- 76% are meeting their expectations for academic achievement (91 students are not)

### Graduate Assistant, Graduate Teaching Assistant, or Graduate Research Assistant experiences:

- 20% believe they are being exploited (277 students feel they are not, 16% found the question not applicable)
- 80% state that their experience contributes to their educational experience (29 students do not, 14% find question not applicable)
- 74% of these graduate students were paid to work 20 hours per week. When asked how many hours they actually worked, 63% worked 20 hours per week or less. 37% worked more than 20 hours and of these 12% worked more than 40 hours per week.
- 68.5% have a productive working relationship with supervisor (95 do not)
- 81% do not doubt their decision to study in the US (65 students do doubt the decision)
- 85% are satisfied with their experiences at Virginia Tech (63 students are not)

Should we congratulate ourselves that 80 percent of the survey participants find that being a GA, GTA, or RA contributes positively to their educational experience or be worried about the 91 respondents who feel they are being exploited? Should we be content with 65 percent of participants who feel they receive good academic support during their first two months at Virginia Tech, or ask how we can improve to meet the needs of the 104 who feel they did not? While some of these statistics are reassuring, the survey reveals significant cause for concern, which should prompt further discussion on this campus.

## About The Conductor

*The Conductor* is produced twice during the fall and twice during the spring semesters by the Multicultural Fellows and is published by the Office of Multicultural Affairs. All members of the university community are invited to contribute. Please submit articles to [multicultural@vt.edu](mailto:multicultural@vt.edu). Back issues are on-line at [www.multicultural.vt.edu/conductor.html](http://www.multicultural.vt.edu/conductor.html).

### Editors

Martha L. Mullen, 231-3754, [mlaster@vt.edu](mailto:mlaster@vt.edu)  
Charlotte Waggoner, 231-5864, [ren@vt.edu](mailto:ren@vt.edu)

### Editorial Board

Kimberly S. Brown, 231-8440, [ksbrown@vt.edu](mailto:ksbrown@vt.edu)  
Richard Conners, 2316896, [rconners@vt.edu](mailto:rconners@vt.edu)  
Benjamin Dixon, 231-1820, [bdixon@vt.edu](mailto:bdixon@vt.edu)  
Mahmood A. Khan, 703-538-8398, [mahmood@vt.edu](mailto:mahmood@vt.edu)

The deadline for the next issue is January 31, 2003.

## Unpack your assumptions

# Egocentrism and classroom climate

by Danny Axsom, associate professor of psychology and a Multicultural Fellow

A professor during lecture tells a joke, one that has evoked laughter from students for years. This time word gets back indirectly that some students were offended. The professor is surprised and a bit defensive, lamenting the upsurge in “political correctness.”

Another faculty member begins a course by noting her religious affiliation and inviting students, at least a third of whom come from a different religious tradition, to witness their faith with her. Many of the students, regardless of their religious background, wonder about the relevance of the information for their science-based course. The faculty member feels she is merely letting students get to know her better and wonders why some are uneasy.

Yet another faculty member invites an outside speaker to class to share his expertise. In the course of his presentation, the speaker makes an insensitive comment regarding sexual orientation. The faculty member is caught

off guard, and some of the students look down or away. But nobody speaks up, so the faculty member lets the incident slide, assuming that whatever ill effects the comments might have caused will be transitory.

These all-too-common examples highlight the difference that sometimes exists in the subjective experience of a course by faculty members and their students. In

istics, and behaviors (social psychologists call this the false-consensus effect). No two people will construe a situation exactly the same, especially if the parties come from different cultural traditions. Our failure to recognize this simple fact no doubt accounts for the cultural admonition not to judge someone until we have walked a mile in their shoes. So stop and ask, how might this look from

students’ perspectives.

Second, our egocentrism is compounded by what is sometimes called “niche-picking,” our tendency to affiliate

## When we take students’ silence as tacit acceptance of a situation, we are committing a perceptual mistake so common that social psychologists have coined it the fundamental attribution error.

each case the end result is likely to be a classroom climate that inhibits opportunities for learning.

A common thread in the above examples is that the faculty member’s offending behavior is not deliberate.

How can we minimize the frequency of such incidents?

First, all of us need to be reminded just how egocentric people tend to be. We often overestimate how many others share our own beliefs, perceptions, character-

primarily with like-minded (and behaving) others. In many ways this is understandable and unavoidable. But its consequences are troubling when we fail to account for this built-in “sampling bias.” Thus, we should not assume that just because others close to us agree with our characterization of an event, or condone our behavior, that it is correct or acceptable. When in doubt, seek out others who may have a different point of view

See ‘Climate’ on 4

## A letter from Anytown...

Continued from page 1

he was everyone’s “Pop Pop,” and he proved to be as gentle as any grandfather you could imagine.

Saturday was Day 4 of “Anytown.” In the morning, I led the delegates through an exercise called the “Level Playing Field.” The delegates stood shoulder to shoulder in a straight line facing me, as I read from my binder. “If one or both of your parents completed college, please take a step forward. If one of both of your parents never completed high school, please take a step back.” Suddenly, the line wasn’t so straight anymore. “If your ancestors were forced to move to this country, or were ever forced out of their homes, please take a step back. If you think of the police as someone who’s there to help you out in times of emergency, please take a step forward.” By the end of the exercise, I was nose-to-nose with a sea of white faces. Behind the whites were the Latinos and East Indians, and a few of the African-Americans. The majority of black faces were backed up against the wall, seeing nothing in front of them but the backs of heads. I then announced that we were going to race to the far wall. On the count of three, many of the delegates in the back sprinted forward, but they had no chance of winning the race; all the white kids had to do was lift their hand and touch the wall in front of them; the race was over before it had even begun.

As Saturday progressed, we talked about the “Level Playing Field.” We arranged the room so that the white delegates and advisors could safely share our stories with the room, and so that the people of color could relate their experiences in the same safe space. It wasn’t the first time I’d engaged in these discussions, but I learn something every time the topic of race is brought forth.

That night, we prepared for an activity called “Crossing the Lines.” Everyone lined up, once again shoulder to shoulder, facing two of my colleagues, who stood at the “target” side of the room. One read, “If you grew up in poverty, as opposed to the middle or upper classes, please move to the target side of the room.” Several delegates and advisors moved to the target side and faced me. Then, some statistics were read about people who grow up in impoverished homes. Some of the information was very difficult to hear, especially as you looked into the faces of those who were currently experiencing this in their own lives. Other groups were then asked to move to the target side: children and grandchildren of immigrants, descendants of slaves, Jews, and teenagers.

About halfway through the activity, one of my colleagues read, “if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, please move to the target side of the room.” I walked forward. I could see three of my peers walking with me. We weren’t joined by any of our delegates. When I turned around to face the students that I’d been eating, laughing, crying, and learning with for the past four days, I was greeted with open mouths and eyes as big as saucers. I had just turned a very sharp corner. And there were three more days to go.

When the activity was over, we went back to our now-familiar circle. While the activity stirred up many troubling issues for our delegates – such as learning that people with disabilities are 60 percent more likely to be unemployed, or that one quarter of all women in this country will be raped – it wasn’t surprising that the first issue to be raised by the delegates centered around sexuality.

“Why’d you guys lie to us?” was the first question. “I don’t understand why you were so ashamed of your sexuality.”

Luckily, I didn’t have to field that question. Another delegate quickly responded with, “I’m glad they waited. If I would have stepped off that bus three days ago and Eric would have come up to me and said, ‘Hi, I’m Eric and I’m gay,’ I would have gone right back home.”

This seemed to be the general consensus. “We know them as people now, not just gay people. She’s still Amena. She’s still Lisa. He’s still Eric.”

Naturally, there was a voice of dissent. “I look at it from a Biblical perspective,” said one delegate. “In my house, I’m allowed to respect homosexual people as people, but I’m not allowed to respect their actions.” Later, he would use words like “sick” and “unnatural.”

I was neither surprised nor offended by these words; I had been expecting them. Here was a child who had been raised in a fundamentalist household, who had tagged along with his parents to picket gay events and abortion clinics for years, who was a card-carrying member of the NRA at the age of 15. He could speak about racism and classism, but when it came to gay issues, he could only speak of what he was “allowed” to think. For the remainder of the retreat, he spoke with the lesbians on staff, but could or would not speak to me. I could only hope that when he leaves his house, he’ll allow his mind to open, just a bit. I hope that he’ll remember his experience at Anytown at that time. Mostly, I hope that he never

questions his own sexuality; I have no doubt that if gay, his parents would disown him immediately, or worse – he’d become another kind of statistic.

The next day, our topic was sexism. This day held the biggest surprise for me. I had expected emotional discussions the day before, and had not been disappointed. I was not prepared for the bravery of these delegates on this day. Three of the boys talked about having attempted suicide after not being able to “be a man” as their communities had defined that term. Several of the girls talked about their experiences with rape – heartbreakingly, the room fit into the one-in-four statistic pretty well. I saw boys who had never been taught nor encouraged to look at their female peers as human beings. I witnessed them understanding, for the first time, their mothers, sisters, and friends. Midway through the day, we conducted a silent exercise; all you had to do was to look into someone’s eyes. At the end of the exercise, very few of those eyes were dry.

The next evening, we gathered for Talent Night, a summer camp staple. However, you’d be hard pressed to find a traditional Hindu “Prayer Dance” being performed at your typical summer camp talent night, in full costume, no less. One delegate, who had been methodically breaking my heart into little pieces throughout the week, finished the deal by sharing a poem with the group. The confidence and surety of his poetic voice belied his sad eyes and rocky history. When he finished, I could do little more than clap my hands and shake my head.

Too soon after, the delegates were getting back on the bus, headed home. As I stood with several of my colleagues waving good-bye, there was no question that we had significantly opened some minds, hearts, and eyes. But some questions still circled my head. Why don’t all children learn this stuff? Why isn’t diversity taught in our schools? Why is it left to a nonprofit organization to write grants and stretch every dollar for seven months to make this one week possible? In a nation that preaches equality, how can we be so lax about fighting prejudice? Do we not see it? Or do we simply not care?

Eric Peterson is a corporate trainer with Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., and a PFLAG volunteer. Anytown Delaware is sponsored by the National Conference on Community and Justice. For more information, visit them on-line at [www.nccj.org](http://www.nccj.org), or contact Amena Johnson at [ajohnson@nccj.org](mailto:ajohnson@nccj.org).

## Admission ...

*Continued from page 1*

who can pass their courses the first time so there is as little wasted effort as possible in the education process.

When one speaks of college admission, one inevitably must mention standardized exams, either the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) that was first given in its present form in 1926 or the American College Test (ACT) that was first given in 1959. Many colleges and universities, including Virginia Tech, rely heavily on a student's grade point average, class ranking, standardized test scores, and the perceived rigor of the high school curriculum to make admission decisions.

Unfortunately, a few of these performance measures have significant problems when it comes to the two self-evident points described above.

First, let's consider grade point average and class rank. There has been and continues to be grade inflation in our country's high schools. Data from the College Board, *i.e.*, the people who created and administer the SAT exams, show that the percentage of college-bound students who reported an A average increased from 28 percent in 1987 to 37 percent in 1997. While I do not have hard evidence to prove it, I believe this trend has continued. To me this suggests that these two variables are becoming less valuable at predicting student performance in college and, hence, should receive less weight with regard to admission policy.

Next, let's consider the standardized test. I see two problems with such tests. The first involves issues of fairness and equity. It has been well documented that students from families with higher income levels generally score better on standardized tests than students from families with lower income levels. Recent studies have shown that performance on standardized tests is a skill that can be developed with practice and coaching. Hence students from higher income families get further advantage since these students are the ones who are affluent enough to afford the coaching and associated practice. Women also score an average of 45 points lower on standardized tests than do men, even though women as a group outperform men in the classroom on both the secondary and college level. Lastly, according to a 1997 article in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, only 659 of the 110,000 African American college-bound seniors who took the SAT in 1996-1997 scored above 700 on the math section, and only 900 scored above 700 on the verbal section. This is a very amazing statistic and I do not see how this reflects the true educational capabilities of these students.

Then there is the point about standardized tests' ability to predict college-bound student performance. The SAT, for example, was designed so that its scores would be predictive for a student's first year college grades. Yet the correlation coefficient between SAT scores and first year college grades is only 0.42. This figure comes from a study that was conducted by the College Board at some 685 colleges and universities. The same study showed that high school grade point had a correlation coefficient of 0.48 with first year college grades and that both combined, *i.e.*, SAT scores and high school grades, had a correlation coefficient of 0.55. These are not stellar correlations.

Perhaps one of the reasons the SAT is not a particularly good predictor of student performance is that many psychologists believe that humans have a number of different types of mental abilities. For example, Robert J. Sternberg, professor of psychology and education at Yale University, proposes that a person may show ability in three different ways. The first of these is "compositional" or analytical intelligence. This type of ability is typically associated with traditional

social and educational experiences, the type that is measured by standardized test and high school grades. The second way a person may show ability Sternberg calls "experiential" ability. This involves the ability to be creative or adaptive, a very important ability for one that is doing research. The third type of intelligence Sternberg calls "contextual" or practical intelligence. This relates to a person's ability to understand and negotiate a system to his or her advantage.

Based on this theory, the SAT is not a good predictor because it does not test all the types of intelligence a person might have. It is also appears that this may be the reason this type of test is discriminatory.

Well, what are the alternatives? Recently, researchers like William Sedlacek, professor of education at the University of Maryland at College Park, have

### Combining noncognitive variables with the more standard ones provides additional insight into a student's true abilities.

suggested combining high school grades, student rank, standardized tests scores, and perceptions of high

school quality with other measures -- measures called noncognitive variables. Sedlacek has been doing research on noncognitive measures for many years. Based on his research, he contends that combining noncognitive variables with the more standard ones provides additional insight into a student's true abilities. In particular, this combination allows better prediction of retention and graduation rates, and better prediction of grades beyond the first year of college.

In my mind, the greater the predictive ability of the variables in the evaluation tool, the better and more accurate the assessment. Furthermore, these noncognitive variables can be gauged using a relatively short form -- a form that is not labor intensive to evaluation. Hence incorporating these measures into our admission procedures should not markedly tax the system and will provide a better student evaluation mechanism.

Lastly, these noncognitive variables seemingly provide a mechanism for evaluating a student that is completely fair and nondiscriminatory. I say this because studies suggest that using these measures typically result in a more diverse student body. Consequently, they form the basis of an evaluation process that meets our above two self-evident goals.

It is not as though the incorporation of such variables into a admission process is an untested idea. North Carolina State University and the University of Maryland both incorporate Sedlacek's ideas in their admissions process.

In closing, let me say that while I am not an expert in education measurement, I think the research that has been done suggests that Virginia Tech should consider whether there might not be a better way to go about evaluating student applications. There has to be a fairer, more equitable way to unlock the gates to the American dream for those whose current access to higher education is constrained by factors discussed above.

Well that's what I think. What do you think? My e-mail address is [rcanners@vt.edu](mailto:rcanners@vt.edu) and my phone number is 540-231-6896.

## Climate ...

*Continued from page 3*

(this is, after all, a university). Ultimately, we may not agree with what they have to say, but the input is likely to be valuable.

Third, recognize that silence is not consent. Maybe some students have always been uncomfortable with our pet joke, but simply said nothing. Faced with differences in power, students may choose to take the path of least resistance. By virtue of their role and responsibilities, faculty members wield power over students. As clear as this is, what is also clear is that we sometimes underestimate the extent to which that power affects how students respond to us. When we take students' silence as tacit acceptance of a situation, we are committing a perceptual mistake so common that social psychologists have coined it the fundamental attribution error. Students are not immune to this error; they often see faculty silence (e.g., the outside speaker scenario) as tacit acceptance of the remarks. It is incumbent upon faculty, then, not to let remarks slide. In the above example, discussing the incident with the class afterward would be advisable (as would subsequently approaching the guest speaker).

Finally, we all need to recognize that classroom demographics have changed, and that practices students might have found acceptable a generation ago (or less!) won't necessarily be received the same now. To say that students didn't used to be offended by something misses the point; these aren't the same students. The increasing diversity we see in our students mirrors the growing diversity in the larger society into which students will go upon graduation. To those who might lament this change, who is being out-of-touch?

Vigorous debate and exchange of ideas is and always should be at the heart of the academic experience. One hope is that we emerge from these exchanges a little less egocentric. Being aware of our egocentrism beforehand, and taking a few precautions before we enter into interactions, will make outcomes, and the climate in which we operate, more fulfilling for everyone.

## Ten things ...

*Continued from page 2*

- experiences as a student (even more so than my pre-service training). The practice of drawing on these experiences, the positive and the negative, provide important insights regarding my teaching practice.
9. I can challenge myself to take personal responsibility before looking for fault elsewhere. For example, if I have one student who is falling behind and misbehaving, I will consider what I am doing or not doing that may be contributing to their disengagement before problematizing their behavior or effort.
  10. I can celebrate myself as an educator and total person. I can, and should, also celebrate every moment I spend in self-critique, however difficult and painful, because it will make me a better educator. And that is something to celebrate!

From the Multicultural Pavilion: <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/multicultural>

### Please share a 'diversity moment' with us

We would like your help in promoting a dialogue about the value of diversity at Virginia Tech. Please share with us a meaningful experience that you have had while interacting with someone different from yourself. By "diversity moment," we mean an experience that you had in talking to, interacting with, or observing someone who differs from you in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, first language, disability, or any other identity. We are looking for a short item, approximately 500 words. We hope to publish these experiences in *The Conductor*.

Please send your experience to us at [multicultural@vt.edu](mailto:multicultural@vt.edu).