The NEH Distinguished Teaching Professor

In 1994 the Teaching Resource Center won a Special Challenge Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This grant, together with gifts secured by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, enabled the creation of three U.Va. Distinguished Teaching Professorships (DTPs). Each endowed chair, awarded to associate or full professors for a three-year period, recognizes excellent undergraduate teaching in the humanities. In the Fall 1998 edition of Teaching Concerns we highlighted the variety of innovative projects to enhance teaching pursued by the first four DTPs. This year we focus on the 1999-2002 Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Distinguished Teaching Professor of Art and Architectural History, Lisa A. Reilly.

Lisa Reilly intends to focus her DTP energies on teaching the humanities across disciplines. In particular, she will help University instructors explore how best to utilize visual materials in their teaching. Careful consideration of image analysis is a central concern for instructors in art, art history, and architecture classes. Other disciplines often use visuals as an ancillary source, with differing emphases and interests. Lisa plans to bring together colleagues from many fields to discuss their views on the use of images in order to arrive at a richer sense of the possibilities non-textual sources offer to enhance teaching. She will contact other Virginia state higher-education institutions to discover how their instructors deal with this issue. Lisa also hopes to expand the discussion to consider how the humanities are taught in engineering, architecture, and other professional schools. To complement these efforts she plans to use DTP funds to develop workshops and support a speakers’ series on pertinent topics.

Those interested in more information about the Chair’s duties can contact Marva Barnett, Director, Teaching Resource Center, at 982-2815 or e-mail Error! Bookmark not defined.. The website: Error! Bookmark not defined. may also be consulted. Questions about the nomination and selection process should be directed to Jessica Feldman, Associate Dean for Personnel and Planning, Arts and Sciences, 924-3437 or jrf2j@virginia.edu.

The Cavalier Distinguished Teaching Professor

The Cavalier Distinguished Teaching Professorship was established in 1991 to recognize an eminent scholar for outstanding teaching of undergraduates. Previous winners have included Kenneth Elzinga (Economics), Dean Harman (Chemistry), and Karen Chase (English). In addition to a monetary award, Cavalier DTPs teach University Seminars and work with the Teaching Resource Center to promote the general enhancement of teaching at the University. Teaching Concerns highlights this year’s winner, Dennis Proffitt of the Psychology Department.

Denny Proffitt specializes in perception, which has given him much insight into how best to promote student learning. His principles for good teaching are both simple and profound. He strives to make his classroom a place full of surprises, using humor, demonstrations, stories, and other tactics to pique curiosity in his students. He believes it is important to display empathy for his students, and uses various devices to read his audience each day in class. Denny also seeks to infuse in his students an appreciation for the topics he teaches by structuring his lectures and tests to emphasize conceptual and applied learning.

Denny translates his teaching imperatives into effective classroom practice. For example, after covering a portion of the day’s material, he asks students to signal if they have understood by using a “five-finger scale.” Students hold up one finger if they don’t understand at all, three if they understand somewhat, five if they understand perfectly. This technique not only enables Denny to determine whether he needs to elaborate, but it also provides a subtle indicator to students about whether they are keeping up with their peers. Denny also developed a device he uses regularly to aid in comprehension: the “Sweetie” example. He asks students to imagine how to explain a certain concept to their “sweetie,” and often places that imaginary conversation in memorable locales.

Denny enjoys mentoring undergraduates and graduate students, and also regularly acts as a mentor to colleagues, including individuals in the University Teaching Fellows Program and others writing a teaching portfolio. He hopes through his Cavalier Distinguished Teaching Professorship to
enhance his own teaching and that of others at the University.