

## GRADUATE SCHOOL

# Diversity Matters

Affirmative action is being debated in courtrooms around the country. From the *Hopwood* case to the cases of *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* at the University of Michigan, attorneys and educators are trying to reach fair decisions regarding this controversial subject. Recently, a group of UT students and professors took the courtroom arguments into the classroom to learn from them — and each other.

Lost summer, an innovative graduate class called “Does Diversity Matter?: Multicultural Issues in Higher Education,” was held through the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program. The class was cross-listed with the law school and the Office of Graduate Studies — the first class ever so listed at UT.

“Law students and graduate students experience very different forms of pedagogy and professional preparation,” explains Teresa A. Sullivan, executive vice chancellor for academic affairs of the UT System, who co-taught the class with IE Program faculty member Leslie Jarmon. “This was an opportunity to examine a pending law case that also taps into many issues and

research areas in education in a very current way.”

Described by Jarmon as “a different way of thinking,” the class used performance methodologies that engaged the diverse group. The transcripts from one of the University of Michigan cases were read out loud and re-enacted. Many students reported experiencing a more profound understanding of how to make — and how not to make — oral arguments, based on their opinions.

The students’ arguments were adapted to serve as audience presentations in two final projects. The law students crafted a statement that showed rhetorical sensitivity and presented it to an imaginary court, while the graduate students presented a research proposal to an imaginary funding board. Doug Laycock, faculty member and associate dean of the School of Law, acted as the judge who heard the law students’ briefs; and Executive Vice President and Provost Sheldon Ekland-Olson played the part of the funding board that listened to the graduate students’ proposals.

The practice of crafting an argument based on one’s own opinion was new territory for some students. “[I discovered] that it is possible to

disagree adamantly with people and still be able to carry on a normal conversation when the debate is over,” says law student Carson Fisk.

One of the most fascinating parts of “Does Diversity Matter?” was the handling of terminology. Students raised questions about what is meant when terms describing diversity are used. “There are so many ways to qualify diversity,” says Jessica Heath, a graduate student in the educational administration program. “I thought I knew what it was, but I found the subject tough to actually label.”

In addition to experiencing the complexity of the case’s terminology on a first-hand basis, the students learned a great deal from the diversity in their own classroom. Says Jarmon, “We had to engage the reality of diverse cultures meeting together nine hours a week

in a learning environment.”

The differences in the students’ academic cultures enriched the learning experience for all involved. “We were able to truly confront many [diversity] issues in an open, honest forum,” says Kelly Crook, a doctoral candidate in the educational administration program.

This unique course “was crucial in more than just an academic sense,” says Rick Cherwitz, associate dean of graduate studies and director of the IE program. “It enabled academic and legal thinkers to engage the issue of diversity as citizen-scholars — in ways that might lead to positive and innovative changes in higher education.” —Sarah A. Rodriguez, graduate research assistant at the Office of Graduate Studies, is currently working toward an MSLIS with specialization in preservation administration.

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