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The Why and Where of Big History: Building a Program

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First Year Experience

BIG HISTORY

DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA

The Why and Where of Big History: Building a Program

AAWH Third Congress, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, May 29-31, 2015

Presenter: Mojgan Behmand

Dominican University of California and Its Commitment to Liberal Education

Dominican University of California is an independent university of Catholic heritage located 12 miles north of San Francisco. Founded in 1890 by the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, Dominican has transitioned from being a liberal arts college to a university with professional programs while retaining its commitment to liberal education and the four Dominican pillars of study, reflection, community and service. It has approximately 2,000 students, 1200 of whom are undergraduates.

AAC&U's Definition of Liberal Education and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes

The definition of liberal education and its essential learning outcomes as articulated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have informed curricular reform at Dominican. "Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."

What Is Big History?

Big History is an emerging discipline. It is a 13.8 billion-year natural and human history that draws on cosmology, astronomy, chemistry, geology, biology, archaeology, anthropology, art, literature, and much more to tell a comprehensive story of our universe. In the words of Big Historians Christian, Brown, Benjamin, it is "... a modern, scientific creation story... based on the best findings of modern science... a history that includes all human societies, and places their histories within the larger histories of the earth and the Universe as a whole." In the classroom, Big History is taught through a division into eight chronological thresholds and the future.

First Year Experience "Big History" Program Description

First Year Experience "Big History" at Dominican University of California is a one-year program that takes students on an immense journey through time to witness the first moments of our universe, the birth of stars and planets, the formation of life on earth until the dawn of human consciousness, and the ever-unfolding story of humans as Earth's dominant species. As the evolution of human cultures is studied, students engage with fundamental questions regarding the nature of the universe and our momentous role in shaping possible futures for our planet.

The Goals of Dominican University's First Year Experience "Big History"

The goals of our First Year Experience program are aligned with our institutional mission, our core values, and the goals of our General Education program. The program is designed to promote:

- 1) recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story;
- 2) critical and creative thinking in a manner that awakens curiosity and enhances openness to multiple perspectives; and,
- 3) development of reading, thinking, and research skills to enhance one's ability to evaluate and articulate understanding of one's place in the unfolding universe.

Dominican University's Big History Courses

The one-year sequence requires all freshmen to study Big History in a survey course and follow that with their choice of a second-semester course that examines a discipline or field of inquiry through the lens of Big History. All courses are taught in a small seminar format, convey Big History content, and teach competencies, such as writing and information literacy.

Semester 1: FYE 1001: Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present

Semester 2, a choice of:

- FYE 1100: Visual Art through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1210: Human Cultures through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1220: Political Systems through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1310: Mythology through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1320: Big Literature through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1330: Myth and Ritual through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1400: Business and Trade through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1510: Philosophy through the Lens of Big History: Humanity's Quest for Meaning
- FYE 1520: Religion through the Lens of Big History: *Homo sapiens* and the Religious Experience
- FYE 1600: Sex and Gender through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1700: Music through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1800: Health and Healing through the Lens of Big History
- FYE 1900: Visualizing Big History: Art
- FYE 1910: Creative Writing and Big History:

An Annual Big History Summer Institute: Backward Design and Faculty Development

Dominican offers an annual summer institute for all faculty to learn Big History content and pedagogy. Attendees have come from disciplines as diverse as Art History, Biology, Business, Humanities, Literature, Mathematics, Music, Occupational Therapy, Political Science, Psychology, and Religion, in addition to librarians and campus intellectual and spiritual leaders. External participants have come from as far as South Korea, Brazil, India, and Australia. The institute's main objectives have varied in emphasis over the years but are: 1) instruction in Big History content and pedagogy; 2) support for curricular redesign; 3) articulation of course learning outcomes, and designation of assessment tools. Not every attendee is required to teach Big History. Rather, a multi-disciplinary group creates a powerful learning community and enhances the reputation and prestige of the program on any campus. Faculty collaboration continues throughout the academic year in weekly meetings, one-day retreats, and assessment sessions.

Contact us at bighistory@dominican.edu; visit our website at <http://dominican.edu/bighistory>

University Leadership Support for Implementation of Big History

Bringing Big History to a campus needs to be a well-coordinated effort that combines support and leadership from the CAO, involves shared governance, and draws on faculty grass-roots interest and enthusiasm. In turn, the CFO ensures an approach that aligns institutional mission and academic priorities with fiscal priorities. This approach should also encourage innovation and the sharing and implementation of best practices.

The Role of the Chief Academic Officer

- Align institutional mission with program goals and outcomes
- Ensure commitment of administration and academic leadership; engage with faculty leadership, committees, opinionmakers—address issues of displacement and territory
- Provide opportunity for campus dialogue with experts and for intensive faculty development
- Provide incentives—reassigned time, campus-wide acknowledgement, travel funds, aligned tenure and promotion policy
- During implementation, ensure ongoing meaningful assessment with continuous quality improvement

The Role of the Chief Financial Officer

- Ensure an approach aligning mission and academic priorities with fiscal priorities; encourage innovation; include opinionmakers, librarians, and campus spiritual leaders
- Plan for reassigned time, visiting experts, faculty development, conference or institute attendance
- Plan for learning kits, co-curricular activities, continuous quality improvement.