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Poster presentation: Big History: From a History Course to a First Year Contextualization of the Whole Person

Mojgan Behmand
Department of Literature and Languages, Dominican University of California,
mojgan.behmand@dominican.edu

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Big History: From a History Course to a First Year Contextualization of the Whole Person

Presenter: Dr. Mojgan Behmand, Director of General Education and First Year Experience

Big History is a universal and transdisciplinary narrative that draws on astronomy, chemistry, biology, geology, anthropology, and sociology, and history, amongst other disciplines to tell the 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.”

Dominican University has understood its first year programming to be an opportunity for discovery of the self and the world. In fact, this program is a unique curricular and experiential expansion of the original Big History course as taught at other institutions across the globe. In this unique one-year course sequence, faculty and students become observers of the early solar system, researchers of evolutionary theory, analysts of fossil evidence from the past, examiners of human behavior and societal structures, and agents for the health of planet Earth and its inhabitants. Whatever a student’s major or interest, Dominican’s version of Big History offers a universal context for future learning and professional ambitions.

First Year Experience “Big History” is designed with engaged and experiential learning components, so students can make the most out of their college years. Co- and extra-curricular activities, such as the Stargazing Event, enhance classroom learning. Students study the evolution of hominids, their habitats, and societal systems; then, they examine a model skull of Australopithecus afarensis in our Hominid Skull Lab to look her in the eye socket. In addition, First Year Experience “Big History” incorporates lectures by renowned scientists and celebrated philosophers throughout the semester to complement students’ in-class studies. The essence of First Year Experience “Big History” is living content, designed to give students the relevant, applicable information they need to be informed and productive global citizens. To this end, the program equips students with the research, writing, and communication skills required for college and beyond.

First Year Experience “Big History” Courses

| Semester 1 | FYE 1000: Big History: Nature and Culture from the Big Bang to the Present |
| Semester 2 | FYE 1010: Visual Art through the Lens of Big History |
| FYE 1100: Human Cultures and Political Systems through the Lens of Big History |
| FYE 1200: Myth and Metaphor through the Lens of Big History |
| FYE 1400: 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: Visualizing Big History: Art |
| FYE 1900: Writing Big History: Creative Writing |

Big History 1000 Student Survey Aggregated Results

n=77, 33% of students

1) recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story.

2) critical and creative thinking in a manner that awakening curiosity and enhances openness to multiple perspectives.

3) development of reading, thinking, and research skills to enhance one’s ability to evaluate and articulate one’s understanding of one’s place in the unfolding universe.

Faculty Training for Big History: An Annual Summer Institute

Every summer, Dominican offers a summer institute for faculty across campus to learn Big History content and pedagogy. Attendees have come from disciplines diverse as Art, Art History, Biology, Business, English, History, Humanities, Mathematics, Music, Occupational Therapy, Philosophy, Political Sciences, Psychology, Religion, Social and Cultural Studies, Women and Gender Studies and expert guest speakers such as our resident Big Historian, Cynthia Brown, and Brian Swimme, Craig Benjamin, and Russell Garret have added their expertise. In summer 2012, the summer institute will be open to outside faculty. It will provide instructions in Big History content, but more importantly it will share best practices in pedagogy.

Those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizen…

Thomas Jefferson