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Dominican faculty collaborate on Teaching Big History

Faculty from Dominican University of California have collaborated on a new book designed to serve as comprehensive guide for teaching Big History, a new and growing academic discipline now taught in more than 50 colleges and 200 high schools in the U.S. and overseas.

Published in January by University of California Press, *Teaching Big History* also provides a first-hand account of how these professors, from a wide range of academic disciplines, collaborated to build a Big History curriculum, exemplifying liberal education at its best.

On January 18, the *Teaching Big History* co-editors discussed their book at Book Passage in Corte Madera.

Because Big History begins history at the Big Bang, 13.8 billion years ago, rather than with the advent of written records some 5000 years ago, a Big History approach connects the disciplines, including physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, biology, archaeology, anthropology, and environmental geography. This gives students a fuller understanding of the larger narrative and their place in it.

In 2010, Dominican made Big History the core of its general education program for first-year students. The faculty formed a learning community and practiced collective learning, a key concept in Big History. They designed and implemented the program under the leadership of Mojgan Behmand, associate vice president for Academic Affairs and the program's founding director. She soon realized that the fruits of their collective efforts were in fact a much needed guide on Big History pedagogy. She recruited Richard B. Simon, adjunct professor of English at Dominican, to lead the writing of *Teaching Big History*, and they co-edited the new book with Thomas Burke, assistant professor of English and cultural studies.

Today, Dominican is the first U.S. university to require that all first year students study Big History. Dominican's Big History faculty are at the forefront of designing and teaching innovative Big History courses for undergraduate students.

The Dominican faculty predict that Big History will replace earlier models for General Education such as Western Civilization, "The Great Books", and World Cultures, because it is particularly well-suited to prepare students for the intellectual demands they face in the 21st century.

In recent years Big History has expanded into high schools thanks to the efforts of Bill Gates and the Gates-funded Big History Project. Gates has called Big History his "favorite course of all time."

At Dominican, Big History courses are designed "to help students make sense of their studies in all disciplines by illuminating the structures that underlie the universe and the connections among them," says Richard B. Simon. "With our book, we're hoping to share what we've learned about how to teach this content and build this kind of deeply collaborative and profoundly interdisciplinary program – to help other educators who want to do the same."

Some twenty faculty members contributed chapters or other content.

While Big History courses are being added at a growing list of universities, Dominican's is the only program to be offered as a cohesive course sequence rather than a single course.

"The Big History course sequence emphasizes global interconnectivity as the foundation for recognizing and addressing today's challenges," Behmand says. "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." Big History students have responded well to the courses. More than 70% have asserted that their Big History experience has changed the way they see or understand

aspects of the world, while more than half have indicated that their Big History experience has changed the way that they see their role in the world.

Dominican's path to Big History formally began in 2008 when the University overhauled its general education curriculum and first-year programming, positing the creation of first-year seminars that were both foundational and global in intent. The seminars also were to incorporate the teaching of competencies, such as writing and research. In 2009, the faculty voted to adopt Big History as the focus of the seminars. The course sequence was launched in 2010.

A key advisor to the project is Big Historian and Dominican faculty member Cynthia Stokes Brown, the author of *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*. Brown has been at forefront of the Big History movement since the 1990s.

Big History courses are led by 15 Dominican faculty drawing on the collaboration of 30 faculty across the disciplines, including art, business, English, history, mathematics, music, occupational therapy, political science, psychology, religion, and humanities.

"We emphasize engaged learning and the development of community. Students participate in a lot of hands-on activities. For example, we teach students about the solar system in an activity that involves students going outside and simulating the formation of the solar system and the planets. We have also integrated reflection time for the student to contemplate learned content and its personal significance," Behmand says.

Each summer, Big History faculty participate in intensive summer institutes and weekly meetings in order to fine-tune the Big History courses and learning outcomes. Faculty development is ongoing, including one-day retreats pre- and post-semester and weekly two-hour lunch meetings throughout the semesters. Last August, Dominican hosted the International Big History Association conference.

"Our collaborative and collective effort has rendered the program expansive in its goals and interactive and engaging in its methods," Behmand says. "Most importantly, this program has incorporated a holistic vision that moves from the general narrative of Big History in the first semester to a reiteration of the major themes and patterns in discipline-based courses in the second semester to specialized courses in the following years." "Students study the past, make projections for the future, and then enter other Dominican courses that address essential learning outcomes – specifically personal and social responsibility – through components such as service-learning, community based research, or engaging with 'real world' problems," Behmand says. "We are providing students with the forum to develop knowledge and practical skills needed to act to transform issues of vital importance for our shared future, and to do so in a manner that is realistic but positively empowered."