



# International Big History Association

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## Members' Newsletter

January 2012

### **Liberal Arts education is becoming more important**

*By Nicola Pitchford*

FLORIDA Gov. Rick Scott has been promoting a plan to cut funding for liberal arts and social sciences at public universities in his state. His rationale? Graduates need jobs, so tax dollars should support only degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math.

Rather than cutting the liberal arts, now is the time to invest in a new model of liberal education, as we are doing at Dominican University of California. In truth, a liberal arts graduate may actually be better equipped for today's rough job market than students who studied a more specialized "practical" field. Recent research shows that most employers seek workers with increasingly broad skill-sets and general critical-thinking abilities. Rapid changes in job configurations demand flexibility. Humanities students are built to do well in a range of fields—in fact, they outscore business majors on standard business school admissions tests; and they beat biology and health science majors on the MCAT. But those aren't the primary grounds for seeing liberal arts education as more important now than ever. Humanistic education fosters moral discernment and civic engagement — things we vitally need at this moment in history. Critical thinking and the ability to keep teaching oneself about new fields throughout life are not just good job

### **The First Year Experience "Big History" at Dominican University of California**

invites 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, the dawn of human consciousness, and the ever-unfolding story of humans as Earth's dominant species. It explores the question of what it means to be human and our momentous role in shaping possible futures for our planet.

Mojgan Behmand, an English professor, program director at Dominican University and one of the IBHA's founding members, says that, "Dominican's First Year Experience is the combined work of 35 faculty members, including IBHA founding member and board member, Cynthia Stokes Brown, a professor emeritus in history and education at Dominican." Big History is now in its second year at Dominican and according to Behmand, combines the social sciences, the arts, humanities and sciences to look at the place of human beings within the context of the universe story.

### **What is Big History?**

In the course, the Dominican faculty explain that Big History is a universal and trans-disciplinary narrative that examines the timeline of our Universe on the largest possible scale. Coined by historian David Christian, the term "Big History" means "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

*continued on page 2*

*continued on page 3*

skills; they are the basis of informed citizenship and democratic exchange.

For that reason, far from being something only the privileged can afford, liberal education should be accessible to the widest possible cross-section of our rapidly changing community.

That vision of inclusivity is a significant change in focus for liberal arts education. Increasing access is an ongoing commitment at Dominican, with its high proportion of first-generation college students and students from economically and racially underrepresented populations.

Students in every major, from nursing to business to music, get a grounding in the full range of disciplines. But the changing vision of liberal education extends beyond student demographics; the classroom environment must also undergo transformation.

In this, Dominican is leading the way. **We are the first university in the United States to require freshmen to take an innovative, interdisciplinary First Year Experience in “Big History”—bringing together physics and chemistry, evolutionary biology, history, religion, philosophy, and the imaginative tools of literature and the visual arts to understand human endeavor within a sweeping narrative stretching from the Big Bang to the present.**

This is not the old distribution-requirements model: one course in social science, one from the arts, and so on. The Big History sequence embodies “engaged learning,” emphasizing truly integrated, hands-on study.

“Engaged learning” also means that liberal education must turn outward, engaging with the community and the wider world. We now know students learn most effectively when their coursework includes practical application and, ideally, the chance to teach others the material they are studying. So another key movement at Dominican and other liberal



*Dominican President Mary B. Marcy and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Dean Nicola Pitchford with cosmologist and IBHA member Brian Swimme*

arts-based institutions is Service-Learning, a radical approach applying textbook and classroom learning to specific problems and challenges in the community, in partnership with local organizations that best know the issues.

When we talk about reforming America’s higher education system to meet the challenges of a globalized world, we might be wisest to look at today’s liberal arts: they offer not only the basis for an adaptable, innovative workforce, not only the grounding in moral and civic thought that building democracy will require, but also methods for engaging responsibly with social and economic issues that remind us the global begins in Marin.

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histories of the earth and the Universe as a whole” (Christian, Brown, Benjamin 2010). Big History begins with the Big Bang, the creation of stars and planets, the emergence of life on Earth, and extends to human beings and societies that have existed up to the present. This is by nature a multi-disciplinary study, employing astronomy, anthropology, biology, ecology, geology, literature, economics, political science, and sociology, among other fields, in its approach to understanding our collective past and possible futures. While Big History is taught in higher education at universities around the world, Dominican University of California is the only institution that has utilized this content for a one-year course sequence.

### **What is First Year Experience “Big History?”**

First Year Experience “Big History” is not just a course; it is an expedition. In fact, it is a unique curricular and experiential expansion of the original Big History course as taught at other institutions globally. In this unique one-year course sequence, we become observers of our early solar system, researchers of evolutionary theory, analysts of fossil

**Dominican University’s  
First Year Experience  
in Big History  
was recently featured in the  
National Catholic Reporter.**

evidence from the past, examiners of human behavior and societal structures, and agents for the health of planet Earth and its inhabitants. A diverse and dynamic team of faculty developers and instructors ensures students benefit from cutting-edge work by experts in a variety of fields. Therefore, whatever a student’s major or interest, our version of Big History enhances in-depth education and offers a universal context for future learning and career ambitions.

First Year Experience “Big History” is committed

*continued on page 4*



to engaged and experiential learning practices, so participants 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 planet Jupiter, its geography, and unique climate; then, they attend the Stargazing Event to witness the planet rise with its four glowing moons. Students study the evolution of hominids, their habitats, and societal systems; then, they examine a model skull of *Australopithecus afarensis* in our Hominoid 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 semesters 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, our program equips students with the research, writing, and communication skills required for college and beyond.

### **Program Goals**

The goals of the First Year Experience “Big History” program are to promote critical and creative thinking; recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story; and the ability to evaluate and articulate understanding of one’s place in the unfolding universe. The immense fourteen billion-year framework of this course sequence communicates the natural and cultural history of our universe and emphasizes global interconnectivity. Embedded writing and research modules cultivate skills for future learning and engaged learning practices foster a deepening of acquired knowledge and abilities. All of these program goals have been designed by Dominican faculty in accordance with the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education.



*An FYE Big History student closely examines a hominoid skull for signs of bipedalism during the in-class Hominoid Skull Lab.*

### **First Year Experience “Big History” and AAC&U’s Essential Learning Outcomes**

The AAC&U provides a new framework to guide students’ cumulative progress through college. The published Essential Learning Outcomes are the result of an intensive and multi-institutional collaboration to articulate specific outcomes. Those are 1) Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World; 2) Intellectual and Practical Skills; 3) Personal and Social Responsibility; and 4) Integrative and applied Learning. First Year Experience “Big History” was created in accordance with these guidelines. It is foundational, teaches competencies, and provides context and framework for examining one’s position in the world. The first three Essential Learning Outcomes—“Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World,” “Intellectual and Practical Skills,” and “Personal and Social Responsibility” are addressed directly in this program while our second-year programming “Colloquium” addresses the first three and also the fourth Essential Learning Outcome “Integrative and Applied Learning.”

This guided transition between the First Year Experience “Big History” and Second Year Experience

*continued on page 5*



“Colloquium” provides students with a realistic way to refocus their knowledge into a current topic of concern or interest, such as imperiled watersheds, social justice, the future of modern healthcare, or changes to communication in the Information Age. Our second-year programming is integrative, building a learning community by enrolling one group of students simultaneously in two thematically linked courses which are writing and research intensive and draw on Big History to move from the global to the regional or the specific. Experiential learning components such as service-learning and community-based research are embedded and help students engage with “real world” problems.

### **Courses**

First Year Experience “Big History” is an innovative one-year program that provides freshmen at

Dominican University with a common intellectual experience while preparing them to be thoughtful global citizens in the twenty-first century. The first semester is devoted entirely to Big History, defined by Christian, Brown, and Benjamin as “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” (2010). The second semester provides a reiteration of the larger concepts and patterns of Big History through the lens of a discipline.

### ***Semester 1***

#### **FYE 1000 Big History: Nature and Culture from the Big Bang to the Present**

In Big History we take an immense voyage through time. We witness the first moments of our universe, the

*continued on page 6*



*FYE Big History professors Burke, Wolfe, Cunningham, Taylor and Behmand share a toast with Dr. Cynthia Brown, author of Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present, and Dominican's Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Luis Calingo.*

*Dominican University continued*

birth of stars and planets; we watch as life forms on earth, grows and develops in complexity, until human consciousness dawns. We then trace the evolution of human cultures through geography, migration patterns, and social structures, until we finally peer over the threshold of the present into possible futures for us and for our planet.

***Semester 2***

**FYE 1100 Visual Art through the Lens of Big History**

This course studies the significant and creative roles artistic expression plays in humanity's ongoing attempt to find meaning in an ever-changing world, examining images, monuments, ruins, and artifacts as evidence of our collective journey.

**FYE 1200 Human Cultures and Political Systems**

**through the Lens of Big History**

This course investigates factors that influence the evolution of cultures, such as geography, migration patterns, institutional and social structures, regional interactions, and technologies; additionally, this course examines the impact of culture on creation of myths and rituals, origins of government and sociological structures, and diversity of lifestyles.

**FYE 1300 Myth and Metaphor through the Lens of Big History**

This course explores the past, present, and future of the "big story" through words and writings of the world's cultures, from early human to contemporary mythologies. This comparative course examines both the modes of storytelling and the stories themselves as they seek to answer the big questions of cosmic and human life.

*continued on page 7*



*Cosmologist Dr. Brian Swimme shares the stage with some FYE Big History student volunteers at the screening of his new film Journey of the Universe in Dominican's own Angelico Hall.*



### **FYE 1400 Trade through the Lens of Big History**

Beginning with hunter/gatherers and continuing to the present, this course takes an interdisciplinary look at issues like wealth creation, how societies manage excess wealth, organization of labor, environmental impacts of business activity, marketing, the increasing complexity of business forms and trade relationships, and the role of the consumer.

### **FYE 1510: Philosophy through the Lens of Big History: Humanity's Quest for Meaning**

This course explores the developments in human cognitive and cultural evolution that led to the dawn of philosophy in the first millennium BCE. Students will study an array of global wisdom traditions, from pre-agrarian endeavors to explain the cosmos to contemporary responses to increasing complexity and future challenges.

### **FYE 1520 Religion through the Lens of Big History: Homo sapiens and the Religious Experience**

Throughout the history of humankind, Homo sapiens have developed complex systems of beliefs, doctrines and theologies; rituals and liturgical practices; and religious institutions to make sense of the world around them. This course delves more deeply into four time periods—the Paleolithic Era, the Agrarian Era, the Industrial Era, and the near future—to explore how religious responses to each of these

epochs has consistently and continuously enabled individuals to ponder their place in the universe.

### **FYE 1600 Sex and Gender through the Lens of Big History**

This course retells the story of Big History from the perspective of sex and gender. We investigate how the major turning points in this narrative—the advent of biological sexual reproduction, of hunter-gatherers, of the agricultural age, of the industrial revolution and of current social structures—have shaped our understanding of sex and gender. Conversely, we also examine how sex and gender shape our understanding of culture.

### **FYE 1900: Visualizing Big History: Art**

The wealth of narratives, innovations, and theories unfolding from the eight thresholds in Big History become points of departure for a series of visual art projects. In each project students will illuminate connections between

methods and contexts of creating art, and the key concepts in the creation of the universe to inspire new inquiries about our future and the future of our planet. Students will explore a variety of mediums and processes including poster design, collage, painting, bookmaking, and sculpture.

**In the first semester, we take an immense voyage through time. The second semester provides a reiteration of the larger concepts and patterns of Big History through the lens of a discipline.**

*continued on page 8*



### **FYE 1910 Writing Big History: Creative Writing**

Write an epic poem about the dawn of time! Create a play starring the first hominid to stand upright! Craft a short story about a love affair between two supernovae! Let the Universe be your inspiration—explore Big History through creative writing. Generative writing exercises and writing workshops will inform writing assignments for which students will consider the key thresholds of Big History, as leaps in complexity become points of departure for major creative work. What part of the story do you want to tell?

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## **BIG HISTORY NEWS END OF YEAR 2011**

In February, Big Historians and members of the IBHA Board will be attending the INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS “GLOBAL FUTURE – 2045” (GF 2045)


Conference in Moscow:

### **“Modeling and Predicting Worldwide Dynamics”**


“Russia 2045,” a global social initiative based in Moscow, together with the Eurasian Center for Big History & System Forecasting, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, will be hosting the conference on February 17-20 in Moscow. The goals of the Congress are:

- Discussion and demonstration of the newest developments in the fields of cognitive sciences, robotics, and modeling of living systems;
- Evaluation the potential for transforming planetary civilization in light of the rapid pace of technological development;
- Discussion of possible scenarios for the development of civilization in the context of new concepts regarding universal history, or “Big History”; and
- Discussion of strategic problems arising in a dynamically changing world and the potential for the appearance of a global or cosmic mode of thinking.


Among the members of the IBHA Board that will be attending are: David Christian, IBHA President; Fred Spier, IBHA Vice President; Lowell Gustafson, IBHA Secretary; Craig Benjamin, IBHA Treasurer; Barry Rodrigue, International Coordinator and co-chair of GF2045; Eric Chaisson; Cynthia Brown; and IBHA members, Akop Nazaretyanm, also co-chair of the event, Leonid Grinin, David Hookes, Rane Johnson-Stempson, Andrey Korotayev, Alexander Panov, Lazar Puhalo, John Smart, and Joseph Voros. More information on the conference can be found at <http://www.gf2045.com>.



IBHA Treasurer, **Craig Benjamin** was recently elected Vice President (President Elect) of the World History Association, and pledges to work for the success and mutual benefit of both the IBHA and the WHA. Congratulations Craig!



We are pleased to announce that the founding membership level has reached 151 members! We are excited about the growth of this association and thank all of our members for their support and look forward to the New Year with you!



Barry Woods of the University of Houston proposed the course, COSMIC NARRATIVES FOR CHILDREN, early in September; it was approved in October; it will be offered at the University of Houston in fall 2012. The pilot course, *Cosmic Narratives*, ran successfully this fall with an enrollment of 40 students, and nearly 30 have already signed up for the spring 2012 rerun. The course will run every semester.





## CALL FOR PAPERS

### ***“Teaching and Researching Big History: Exploring a New Scholarly Field”***

*An International Big History Association (IBHA)  
Inaugural Conference Event*

**August 2 - 5, 2012**

***Deadline for Paper/ Panel Submissions is March 1, 2012***

In addition to promoting the IBHA initiative, the IBHA Conference also seeks to initiate and generate dialog among scholars through a series of panels, roundtables, and discussions. The proposed outcome of the IBHA Conference is to stimulate interest in, and thinking about, Big History, and create a deeper understanding of its common origins. Also, very importantly, discussions on the expansion of scholarship in the pedagogy of Big History will be a primary focus. Among the topics that may be addressed

at the conference are:

- Graduate Work in Big History
- Research Agendas in Big History
- The History of Big History

- Little Big Histories
- Teaching Big History (all levels and formats, including E-learning)

- The Politics and Future of Big History

**“The International Big History Association (IBHA) exists to promote the unified and interdisciplinary study of Big History and the teaching of the history of Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity. It seeks not only to discover and create new knowledge, but to shape a future in which humanity understands its common origins and its common destiny. To further this objective, not only must scholarship be expanded, but the entire public must be better educated.”**

*continued on page 10*

Along with regular panels and roundtables, presentations might consist of:

- Question and answer sessions – where historians will be able to answer questions and discuss research questions that are worth pursuing
- Brainstorming sessions – with very short, provocative papers
- General discussion panels – where different points of view about Big History can be addressed in 5 minute increments, specifically addressing the different cultural perceptions of Big History
- Workshops – where participants will view short film fragments and other art forms chosen by Big Historians, and presentations on Big History from the artistic point of view from artists, musicians, and storytellers
- Conference roundup – with a keynote address that summarizes the most important things that have happened and what is learned from the conference

This is just a proposed submission guideline for planning purposes only. We encourage proposals on any topic related to Big History. A select group of papers will be included in a compilation of Big History Research that will be published after the 2012 Conference.

The time limit for presenting papers will be 20 minutes, and the deadline for submitting papers to the session moderator is three weeks in advance of the conference. Individual paper proposals must include a 100-200 word summary with the title of the paper, name, institutional affiliation, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers, and brief curriculum vitae, all integrated into a single file, preferably in MS-Word. Proposals for entire sessions or panels must contain the same information for each participant, as well as contact information and a brief C.V. for the moderator if you suggest one. (The program committee can help find moderators, if necessary.)

Please submit your paper or panel proposal through IBHA website at: [www.ibhanet.org](http://www.ibhanet.org). The conference link allows for submission information. The deadline for paper and panel submissions is March 1, 2012.

The IBHA Conference will convene at the Frederick

Meijer Honors College at the Grand Valley State University campus in Allendale, Michigan. Attendees will have the option of selecting from one of several hotels in Grand Rapids (20 minutes from the GVSU Allendale campus) or staying in on-campus accommodation.

Grand Rapids is a destination like no other: art, culture, dining, with world-class cultural museums and botanical gardens. The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, brand new Grand Rapids Art Museum and Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park are but a few of the many places to explore, while UICA is full of unique and thought-provoking contemporary art. Experience Grand Rapids at [www.experiencegr.com](http://www.experiencegr.com).

Details on the conference will be posted soon. We hope you can join us for this fantastic inaugural membership conference event!

*Program Committee: David Christian, Cynthia Brown, Craig Benjamin, and Fred Spier*

The views and opinions which may be expressed at the IBHA Conference are not necessarily those of the IBHA Board.



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