TO: College Faculty
RE: Big Problems Curriculum in the College
FROM: John Kelly, Director, Big Problems Curriculum
Margot Browning, Executive Director

We invite your involvement in the College's capstone curriculum, the "Big Problems" program. We seek proposals from teams or individuals with an idea, and would be happy to recruit teaching partners if that would be helpful. Now entering its twenty-eighth year, the "Big Problems" program offers interdisciplinary, team-oriented courses for College seniors and juniors. We can provide grants for curricular development.

Please contact us if you're interested in discussing the development of a capstone course, or if you'd like to submit a proposal for a grant for curricular development; a copy of the proposal form is included at the end of this email. If you're seeking a colleague to co-teach with, we are pleased to facilitate contacts with colleagues who might be interested in teaching in the topic.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BIG PROBLEMS PROGRAM

How can the liberal arts and sciences better educate students for the 'big problems' that they will encounter in their professional careers, personal lives, and communities - from local neighborhoods to global institutions? For an undergraduate curriculum, 'Big Problems' are characteristically matters of global or universal concern that intersect with several disciplines and affect a variety of interest groups. They are problems for which solutions are crucially important but not obviously available. Therefore, 'Big Problems' courses should emphasize process as well as content: learning how to creatively confront difficult intellectual and pragmatic problems wider than one's area of expertise and to consider how to deal with the uncertainty that results.

The capstone curriculum promotes the development of new courses by several faculty members from different disciplines who share an interest in a common problem, and it provides elective courses for advanced College students that broaden their view of disciplines in relation both to the Common Core and to their majors. The curriculum offers a general, second level of interdisciplinary education that moves beyond (though it may build on) the Common Core, and also seeks to encourage teaching across divisional as well as departmental boundaries. "Big Problems" courses can be cross-listed in departments, and some are taught in alternate years. Recent and upcoming capstone courses include:

"Abortion: Morality, Politics, Philosophy"
"Disability and Design"
"Drinking Alcohol: Social Problem of Normal Cultural Practice?"
"From Fossils to Fermi's Paradox: Origin and Evolution of Intelligent Life"
"Learning How to Die"
"The Making of Human Capabilities: Skills, Measurement, Meaning and Society"
"Playable Theater and Transmedia Games"
"Sense & Sensibility & Science"
"Sensing the Anthropocene"
"State and Water Governance in Historical Perspective"

“Topics in Medical Ethics”
"Urban Design with Nature"
“The Climate and Growth Challenge”
“Thinking Psychoanalytically: From the Sciences to the Arts”
"Water Water Everywhere?"

The College catalogue description for the "Big Problems" curriculum is available at http://collegecatalog.uchicago.edu/thecollege/bigproblems/

FACULTY COLLABORATIONS

Faculty teaching a "Big Problems" course have especially enjoyed the opportunity to create a new research or interest group around a problem which they regard as particularly important or interesting - opportunities in some ways paralleling the graduate workshops in the humanities and social sciences divisions, though not limited to those divisions. In fact, we encourage adventures in interdivisional cooperation in trying to define problems among all the University’s Divisions. So ask yourself: 'What big problem would I like to work on, and with whom would I like to work on it?' Then bring it to us. With or without names of potential teaching partners, we may be able to help you realize it.

We also hope that the "Big Problems" courses will provide opportunities for collaborative work among students, and other forms of educational experimentation.

We can help you develop your course and suggest (if you wish) colleagues with whom to teach. There are also limited contexts where it may be appropriate and possible to bring in colleagues from outside the university, if it particularly serves the aim of the course.

CONTACT INFORMATION

We look forward to hearing from you about a course proposal or a funding proposal. Please contact Margot Browning (mb31@uchicago.edu) and John Kelly (jkelly@uchicago.edu) with any questions you have.

PROPOSAL FOR CURRICULAR DEVELOPMENT GRANT
Big Problems/Capstone program in the College
Please email your proposal to mb31@uchicago.edu

The purpose of these curricular grants is to support expenses of course development such as the salary of a research assistant, the purchase of course-related books or other media, and other research expenses related to course development.

I. Faculty partnership (two to three co-instructors, or one instructor for a starter grant):
Name
Department
Name
Department

Name
Department

II. Provisional course title:

III: Provisional quarter in which course will be taught:
_____Autumn 2027_____Winter 2028 _____ Spring 2028

IV. Course proposal (no more than a page):
Please include how you anticipate this elective course will address a 'big problem', which will be explored with different disciplinary perspectives, in order to provide a capstone course for juniors and seniors.

V. Proposed budget (initial maximum of $1,000 per faculty member, with additional resources possible) to include any of the following expenses:
$_____ Salary of Research Assistant
$_____ Purchase of books and other media
$_____ Travel and other research expenses related to course development

TOTAL: $_____

10/26/26