

How Did We Get Here?

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Have you ever wondered where your ancestral roots lie? Why there are there no kangaroos in America? If you find yourself unable to answer these questions or yearning for more knowledge on the subject, you may want to consider enrolling in one of the two newly offered biology courses. Human Evolution, taught by Dr. Houde, will expand your understanding of human advancement over time. Biogeography, taught by Dr. Menke, will provide possible explanations for the global distribution of different species. If you're looking for diversity in your biology



major, look no further!

Dr. Houde has taught at Lake Forest College for over 20 years. While she teaches many courses in biology, she specializes in

the behavior and evolution of guppies, ecology and evolution, and the evolution of sexual behavior. While she used to offer Human Evolution as a FIYS class in the fall of 2013, it is now offered as a Biol inquiry class for the spring of 2014. As an inquiry course, it can be taken by both biology majors and minors. Dr. Houde is considering teaching this class as an inquiry again, allowing biology majors and minors to take it for credit, but will most likely not offer it next year.

When I asked Dr. Houde why she decided to teach this course she replied, "I hope to expand student knowledge on our ancestors and origins". She plans to accomplish this through three labs. The first lab, is an observation of many different skulls, such as a those from the Neanderthal and the Ardipithecus. The students are asked to create their own hypothesis on a topic relating to the skulls they choose. The second is a research assignment that spans from hominids to homo-sapiens. Students are expected to research and share their findings about one of our common ancestors. The final lab is a DNA analysis of each individual student. The students send in their DNA to a lab off campus. After some time, the students are sent back information about their DNA and origins. Dr. Houde explained that this lab not only helps students learn about their ancestors, but their own history as well. The three labs help pull together student understanding of the material by starting with the study of our most basic ancestors, researching our more recent ones, and finishing with an understanding of their personal ancestry.

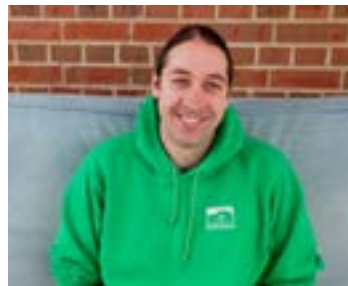
While the material taught in class sparks interest, there are other considerations in enrolling in a class. Some of these considerations include book cost and workload. Dr. Houde told me she was not a fan of textbooks, at least for this topic. Any text books used in class would be relatively small and inexpensive. When I asked about the work-load, she jokingly told me that I would need to ask her students.

So far, Dr. Houde has taught the course a total of three times. Each class, she confidently stated, turned out very well.

However, if human evolution isn't for you, Dr. Menke's course explores a whole different territory.

Dr. Menke, like professor Houde, has dedicated much of his time to Lake Forest College. He has taught many biology courses, with his specialties including ecology, biogeography, and the study of invasive species. His course, Biogeography, an upper level biology course, is recommended for both biology majors and minors. He is currently working towards making the course more available to students majoring in environmental studies.

I asked Dr. Menke what made this course special. Dr. Menke replied, "This class is designed for students to think on a much larger spatial and temporal scale than any other course taken in the biology department". He plans to teach students about the organization of life on the planet. Throughout the planet are patterns of plant and animal distribution. When I



asked him to elaborate he smiled and turned the question back at me: "Why don't we have kangaroos in North America?" The class will help students understand these questions, along with the mechanisms behind them.

Dr. Menke went on to explain that the course is very student driven. Students lead discussion for two out of the three lectures every week. The first class is like many other standard science lectures taught by professors. The second class is presented by students who will lead a discussion on a foundation article on the same topic. The third class is lead by another student on a more recent article of the same topic. This is intended to show how science has developed and changed over time. Dr. Menke ensured me that the reading, writing, and lab will all be tied together, making the class fluid.

Dr. Menke has ideas for future direction of the class. One idea he offered was to view things on a smaller scale. Instead of observing global distribution, Dr. Menke introduces the idea of studying human microbes on the body, or possibly the biogeography of student dorm rooms. Like Dr. Houde, he has taught this course three times and is excited to see where it leads in the future.

Both of these classes have been stimulating for teachers and students alike. The ability to learn about our own species, along with the diversity of other organisms around us is not only interesting, but important to gaining perspective about the world we live in. The continued success of these two courses could open up further doors in terms of broadening the range of biology courses offered.

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