

The Evolution of the Student

Michelle McKinzey

Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045



One the first day of class, 15 bright-eyed first-year students wonder what is in store for them. The blonde, curly-haired woman with the button nose at the front of the room introduces herself as Anne Houde, professor of biology at Lake Forest College, and welcomes them to First-Year Studies 114: Origin, Adaptation, and Evolution of Species.

"The driving principle is, as a first-year studies class, to get students to think logically," said Houde, professor of biology at Lake Forest College for 13 years.

The First-Year Studies (FIYS) program at Lake Forest College is designed to help incoming students adjust to college classes and life. Its aim is to promote critical thinking and expose students to resources. Courses are offered in all disciplines. In the biology department alone, there is Evolution, Medical Mysteries and, previously, Biology of Sex and Gender.

"I think [Evolution] does a good job of combining science and the implications of science," said Houde, who is also an editor for Behavioral Ecology and reviewer for Nature magazine.

The goal of FIYS 114 is to familiarize all students with the logic of Evolution or, what Darwin called, descent with modification. This idea states that all life forms on Earth are related to one another through a common ancestor.

It isn't just for biology students. One student in the class, from Kansas, could not be taught Evolution in High School. The class includes a number of English, philosophy, art, and politics majors among others.

"It mixes up my schedule for sure," said Kendall Clements '10, an expected Spanish major.

The goal of any FIYS course is to work on writing and teach students how to do their own learning as well as let them experience Chicago. FIYS 114 did the latter over trips to various events in the area.

The first of these was a viewing of the Evolving Planet exhibit at the Field Museum of Natural History. Joe Campagna '10, said that the exhibit "broke evolution down" and made it understandable through visual displays.

This is exactly the obstacle that Houde has to tackle with her first-year students.

"I'm continually asking myself, at what point are we going into logical details that [the non-science majors] are going to dismiss," she said.

With this in mind, Houde scheduled a diverse set of trips. The second field trip was attended in conjunction with the Medical Mysteries class and a handful of upper level biology majors. A ballet entitled "Ferocious Beauty: Genome" put on by the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange at the Museum of Contemporary Art combined dance with our understanding of human genetics.

"They showed concepts of Evolution in ways you wouldn't think of," said Campagna, an expected biology major.

The final field trip of the semester tied into what scientists still face in evolutionary science today: disbelief. The class attended "Inherit the Wind" written by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee based on the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial.

"I really didn't want to go at first," said Scott Divine '10. "But it ended up being really funny. I really enjoyed it."

Students expressed frustration at scenes where the defense was not allowed to discuss the theory of evolution and the fictional Scopes lawyer had to make his case by disproving the bible.

What Scopes faced in 1925 is still being faced today. Houde's aim is to provide information showing that Darwin's ideas are more than just a theory through science and thought. This includes principles, simulations, and hard evidence like fossils and finches.

"I thought it would be more theoretical," said Clements. "But evolution isn't a theory anymore, so, I guess that's okay."

Over the semester, the students became more and more convinced that evolution is not a theory. One student used the idea of antibiotic resistance to convince the elder lady next to her on a plane that evolution is not just some quack idea.

The science students agree that this class definitely helps them understand their other classes better, but it is also helpful to the non-science students.

"It's a good way to grasp concepts," said Clements. "I like the logic and that's a good way to think in college."

Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College. Articles published within Eukaryon should not be cited in bibliographies. Material contained herein should be treated as personal communication and should be cited as such only with the consent of the author.