

2014

## Dominican Big History Scholars Student-Led Focus Groups

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# Dominican Big History Scholars Student-Led Focus Groups

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# Problem of Study and Research Questions



# The Problem of Study

- ✦ The Problem of Study:

First Year Students struggle to connect the Big History Narrative to Self

- ✦ Connection between the Problem of Study and Big History Program Goals

*Recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story, including insight into the interdependence of humans and their environment.*

# Methodology



# Research Questions

- ✦ Where do students connect to the Big History narrative?
- ✦ How does the delivery of content affect the way students connect to content?
- ✦ How/where can BH connect to a major or possible career choice?

After deciding on the 3 principal areas of inquiry, the Dominican Big History Scholars:

- ✓ developed questions to use in the focus groups,
- ✓ participated in mock focus group sessions, and
- ✓ revised the final list of focus group questions.



# Focus Groups

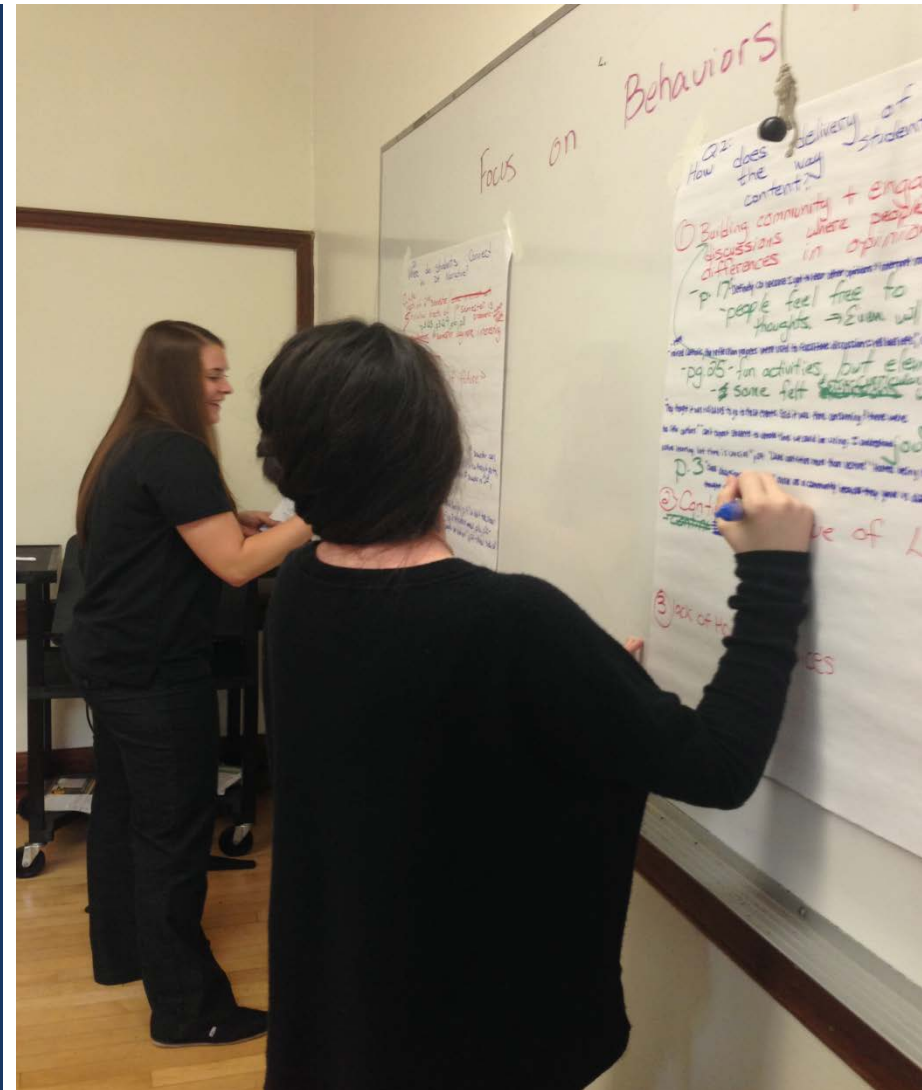
- ✦ Big History Scholars announced the focus groups in all FYE classes and passed out focus group flyers to all First Year students. Flyers were placed in the residence halls and email reminders were sent to students encouraging them to participate.
- ✦ 8 one-hour focus groups were held at lunchtime in the faculty dining room in Caleruega between March 24 and April 3.
- ✦ A total of 40 First Year Students (14%) participated in the focus groups: 34 participants and 6 First Year Big History Scholars (290 First Year Students are currently enrolled in Big History).
- ✦ Participants received free pizza and Big History mugs.





# Data Analysis

- ✦ Note takers individually coded data and then Big History Scholars collectively organized codes according to our three research questions
- ✦ Faculty and Big History Scholars analyzed data to generate emergent themes (data includes notes and in-depth interviews of facilitators and note takers).
- ✦ Findings are based on evidence within emergent themes



# Findings and Recommendations



# Where do students connect to the Big History narrative?

*Many students in the first semester have difficulty seeing the relevance of the factual content of Big History.*

- ✦ *15 students made more connections to the second semester material*
- ✦ *7 students, however, preferred the first semester*

S13: Second semester is, “WAY more interesting than first semester.” Felt second semester professor made them feel closer as a class. First semester, did not feel close at all. Second semester has more involvement in students’ lives.

S18: Second semester is much better....My second semester group atmosphere is much more open to others’ ideas...Each student pretty much says something each class.

S29: Had already learned science info like bio and chemistry before. “It’s more interpretive this semester with reading and writing on the reading instead of just facts....I had literally no interest at all the first semester but the second semester is consistently interesting.”



## Recommendation: Focus on the Future

- ✦ Begin the first semester with the opinion snake in addition to ending the semester with the snake.
- ✦ In the first week, have the students write a notecard to themselves answering the question: What does the future hold for me?
  - ✓ Reflections can be personal or a big picture statement for humanity.
  - ✓ The cards can be returned at the end of the first semester.
- ✦ Be explicit and explain how the first semester will later connect to the second semester and all courses at Dominican.



# Recommendation: Little Big History Papers

- ✦ Provide more guidance in the selection of the Little Big History Topics.
- ✦ If students are told, “Pick something you like,” they may choose insignificant objects such as coffee, nail polish or a golf ball.
  - ✓ Pick something that has influenced you in a strong way.
  - ✓ What would you grab if there was a fire in your house?
  - ✓ Choose a topic that you connect to on a personal level, such as a family heirloom.
  - ✓ Think of a pivotal experience in your life and pick an object you associate with this experience.



# How does the delivery of content affect the way students connect to content?

*Students were engaged with the content when discussions supported their ability to explore differences in opinions (17 related comments).*

S4: “Class discussion made you feel close as a community because they gave us different perspectives of what classmates thought of certain topics...although some people in class can be ignorant and attack fellow classmates’ views and opinions. I feel like it takes some growing up to understand that different people have different opinions and can express them without being attacked.”

S17: A feeling of community togetherness was created in class, “When we were allowed to get into groups according to what interested us...I feel open to share. My class now really bounces ideas off each other.”

S19: “I related more to first semester because I took what I learned and could see where I was making these connections which happened to be mostly when I was talking to people. Definitely the class discussion [helped to make connections] because I got to hear others opinions and interpret the material in a different way which also helped me to learn it better.”



## Subtheme: Religion and Beliefs

*Students did not feel excluded or threatened during discussions of religion, beliefs, or values (14 related comments).*

S13: Student said they talked about religion more freely. People thought that some origin stories were ridiculous though. Professor was very good and emphasized that everyone should believe what he or she wants to believe. Professor “never said anything was right or wrong”

S23: raised Jewish, no issues... “Someone was upset with how the book patronized other religions, especially non-western ones and our teacher acknowledged how the book could come across that way.”

S24: “the Vatican lecturer helped because he said even the Vatican doesn’t reject the Big Bang and evolution” so it’s possible to “maintain your religious beliefs but not be ignorant and reject scientific research...At the beginning of first semester, we talked about how we were going to reconcile our religious beliefs with BH so there were no issues.”



# Recommendation: Explore Differences of Opinions

- ✦ It can be scary at first to express differences in opinion so professors should consider how to set the stage so that everyone can have a voice.
- ✦ Sitting in a circle is important. It's hard to express differences of opinion if someone is sitting behind you. (Plus it's harder to text when you're in a circle!)
- ✦ Pose questions that encourage differences in opinion.
- ✦ Reflection journals need to be more directed and allow students to explore opinions. Students do not want to always summarize the readings.





# How/where can BH connect to a major or possible career choice?

*Some students connect Big History to their major or understand how the skills learned in Big History will help them in their future careers (21 related comments).*

S1: BH teaches life skills, in general. Student “learned how to talk to people without offending them. Which will definitely help with nursing and talking to patients.”

S16: Student thinks outside of the box now; “more than just us...I’m thinking broader than usual.”

S20: “I am a communications major and when we learned about collective learning I found myself relating to the material and I got a sense of the background and beginning of my major so to speak. Learning together vs. individual learning really impacted our development as humans. The way we interact with more than one person is really the root of communications.”

S22: liberal studies: learning how “everything is connected and everything builds off everything else” just like how people learn... “It makes me want to teach my future students how to be more environmentally conscience.”



# Recommendation: Reflect on the Significance of Big History for Students after they Graduate

- ✦ While some students connect Big History to their major, career choice or future after they graduate, many do not. At the same time, it doesn't take that much reflection for students to make these connections.
- ✦ Hold an in-class focus group the second semester to help all students reflect on their first year experience.
- ✦ A journal reflection can ask students to connect Big History to their future after they graduate.
- ✦ An important question to reflect on together is whether Big History makes you feel more or less significant. This encourages students to think about their future.

*Thank you to all the First Year  
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Big History focus groups!*

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supporting our student-led focus  
groups!*

# Questions & Discussion