



The Harvard Crimson

ONLINE EDITION

News

History of Science Reinvents Tutorials

Published On 5/12/2004 12:00:00 AM

By RISHENG XU

Crimson Staff Writer

The history of science department will restructure its three-year tutorial program in order to provide students with additional opportunities to work closely with faculty members starting next Fall.

“We hadn’t really reviewed our undergraduate studies in over a decade, and it was a sensible thing to do,” said Peter Buck, director of undergraduate studies on the history of science. “With the changes in the curricular review, we wanted to provide our concentrators with a better education and increase the opportunities to work with senior faculty members.”

According to David I. Spanagel, lecturer on the history of science, the main changes will come to the curriculum of the sophomore tutorial.

“[The current tutorial] was taught to sophomores year after year more or less along the same conceptual lines—but with longer and longer lists of readings—since the late 1960s,” said Spanagel.

Professor of the History of Science Anne Harrington said that the move to revise the current sophomore tutorial arose from dissatisfaction with current modes of teaching.

“Currently [the tutorial] tracks history of science across time. The course is lectured by different Faculty members every week, and it tries to do too much,” Harrington said. “We are trying to focus our goals more and make the course more user friendly—more engaging to both Faculty and students.”

Spanagel said that both Buck and Steven Shapin, professor of the history of science, will co-teach the revised Fall semester sophomore tutorial. Peter Galison, Mallinckrodt professor of the history of science and of physics, will be joined by newly appointed Jimena Canales, assistant professor of the history of science, to co-teach the Spring semester of the sophomore tutorial.

“Each of these pairs of Faculty members have been entrusted to develop the courses for the coming year, to replace the current two-semester comprehensive ‘Plato to NATO’ survey of the history and methods of the history of science,” Spanagel said.

Buck said that the Fall tutorial will focus on specific links between history and science instead of providing a general overview.

“What we hope to do in the Fall is to try to answer why it makes a difference that science has a history, and why science should matter to anyone other than scientists,” said Buck.

In the Spring, Buck said that the tutorial will be organized around four to five topics, including the hydrogen and atomic bombs, as well as smoking and cancer. Students will spend part of their time looking at books, but they will also look at the primary documents upon which the books were based.

“Basically, during the first semester, we’re looking at what’s exciting about the history of science,” Harrington said. “Second semester, we are looking at how do we do the work of analyzing? How do we think about the craft of creating the history of science?”

Although this newly devised tutorial will be implemented next school year, Harrington said that it may only remain in effect for a short time.

Because of the recent curricular review, she said, students soon may not be required to declare their concentration until the middle of their sophomore year. As a result, Harrington said that eventually the history of science department may have to reduce the sophomore tutorial to a one semester course.

“If or when we are asked to reduce our sophomore tutorial, we’re going to develop a large course for all Harvard undergraduates—an introductory course to the history of science which students may use to fulfill other distribution requirements,” Harrington said.

As for the junior tutorial, the content will remain largely the same, but Faculty members will lead the seminars currently taught by graduate students, Buck said.

He said that senior tutorials are in the process of revision as well, with the creation of an additional senior thesis tutorial on top of current seminars, giving students the opportunity to work closely with two senior Faculty members.

“In the past, seniors have had individual mentors,” said Buck. “Now, they will still have individual mentors, but in addition, students will also have senior thesis tutorials where a faculty member will work with a small group of students.”

These thesis writing tutorials, according to Harrington, will place students with similar broad themes together to help them collectively shape their goals.

Faris F. Haykal '07, who declared history of science as his concentration on Monday, said he supports the upcoming changes.

“[The tutorial restructuring] sounds like an improvement, so it makes me more interested,” Haykal said. “It inspires confidence that the concentration is trying to give us a better education.”

However, history of science concentrator Courtney M. Campbell '06 said that she has enjoyed the required seminars.

“I really love all of the tutorials,” Campbell said. “It contributed greatly toward my overall experience in history of science.”

—*Staff writer Risheng Xu can be reached at xu4@fas.harvard.edu.*

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