2007 Dean’s Forum

Guests at this year’s Dean’s Forum heard Paul Farmer talk on AIDS in 2007: Building a Health Care Movement. A medical anthropologist and physician, Farmer has dedicated his life to caring for some of the world’s poorest and sickest populations. He is the subject of Tracy Kidder’s character study, Mountains Beyond Mountains. Farmer divides his time between the Harvard Medical School, where he is a professor of social medicine, and Clinique Bon Sauveur, the hospital he founded in rural Haiti while still a medical student. In 1987, he co-founded Partners in Health, which provides medical care to impoverished communities in Haiti, Rwanda, Peru, Russia and elsewhere. Before his afternoon lecture, Farmer met with several groups of students, including majors in the Health and Societies Program, medical students of the Global Health Interest Group and students associated with Civic House, Penn’s hub for community service and social advocacy. “The world’s going to be alright,” he commented at his lecture, “if the people I met today are going to be taking on the world’s problems.”

Democratically Speaking

A new interdisciplinary program set to launch in the fall will bring together some of Penn’s top minds to explore and illuminate the meaning of democracy in our world. The Penn Program on Democracy, Citizenship and Constitutionalism is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. “We call the members of constitutional democracies self-governing citizens,” observes Rogers Smith, the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science and program chair. “But what does that citizenship really mean, and what should it mean in people’s lives? That’s what the program will explore.”

The program consists of six main components structured around an annual theme: monthly faculty workshops with an end-of-year conference, annual edited volumes published by Penn Press, one postdoctoral fellowship, three graduate fellowships, a graduate student workshop and 10 undergraduate research grants. Dean Rebecca Bushnell says, “We expect that scholarship emanating from this program will shed much needed light on efforts to advance democracy, citizenship and constitutionalism around the world today.”

The first year’s theme is Citizenship, Borders and Human Needs. An inaugural lecture will kick off on September 20 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia with guest speaker Demetrios Papademetriou, director of the Migration Policy Institute. “Immigration has become a huge issue in many countries around the world for both sending and receiving nations,” remarks Smith. “Next year’s papers will explore the empirical trends and ask normative questions about who benefits and who is harmed by prevailing patterns and what the alternatives facing us are.”

Exceeding the Challenge

For years, it has been the custom of physics professor Eugene Mele to give students in his honors seminar a weekly “challenge problem.” One week in the fall of 2005, he assigned a problem in elementary mechanics that called for students to calculate the point on a sphere where a block of mass would lose contact as it slid down the surface. “I was convinced that this problem wouldn’t admit an exact solution,” he says, “and this would force the students to seek some sort of approximate solution.” Fortunately, freshman Tom Prior didn’t know that. “When I first saw Professor Mele’s challenge problem, I was like all freaking out and scratching my head,” Prior recalls. “I really didn’t even understand what was being asked.” He put it aside for later. Because he didn’t grasp the integral equations needed to work out the kind of approximation Mele was looking for, he tried something different. “It turns out that the method I used gives an exact solution,” he says. Mele thought the result was a mistake, but Prior convinced him to look more carefully. The approach was so surprising and unique that Mele and Prior published a paper about it in the March issue of the American Journal of Physics. Prior’s name appears first. “Professor Mele helped me out a lot when I messed stuff up during the publishing process,” he says. “Also his editing was great — most things sound a lot more cool when he says them than when I do.”

Eugene Mele and Tom Prior
Next PIKs

Penn President Amy Gutmann introduced the Penn Compact at her inauguration in 2004. In part, the Compact emphasizes research and teaching across academic disciplines and schools. She could hardly have fathomed then that by 2007 five new Penn Integrates Knowledge (PIK) professors would have already been recruited. PIK professors are chosen for their outstanding intellectual achievement across disciplines. Dean Rebecca Bushnell notes, “We are pleased to welcome faculty of such high achievement and promise, and look forward to the many ways they will enrich our academic community.”

Philippe Bourgois, a world-renowned medical anthropologist, holds a Richard Perry University Professorship and has appointments in the Department of Anthropology and in family practice in the medical school.

John Jackson Jr. is a leading scholar in cultural anthropology and a documentary filmmaker. He holds a Richard Perry University Professorship and has appointments in the Department of Anthropology and the Annenberg School for Communication.

Jonathan Moreno is a bioethicist and ethics commentator for ABCNews.com. He holds the David and Lyn Silfen University Professorship and has appointments in the Department of History and Sociology of Science and in medical ethics in Penn Medicine.

Christopher Murray researches the synthesis characterization and integration of nanostructured materials. He holds a Richard Perry University Professorship and has appointments in the Department of Chemistry and in materials science in Penn Engineering.

Adrian Raine, internationally renowned for integration of biological and social perspectives on the predication and explanation of violent behavior, holds a Richard Perry University Professorship. He has appointments in the Department of Criminology and in psychiatry in the medical school.

CUREJ Through Research

“My work is about discovery: an exploration of colors, patterns and language of paint,” wrote Trina Gordon, C’06, describing her research project, “In Her Wonderland.” “I am investigating how illusion functions in society.” Her research consists of four works of art. Gordon, a fine arts major, is one of the many students who submitted work to the College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal (CUREJ, pronounced courage). College dean Dennis DeTurck says, “Research is an important part of undergraduate education. CUREJ provides an outlet for our students to publish the results of the outstanding research they do under close supervision and in collaboration with professors who are experts in their fields.” CUREJ was first published online in the spring of 2006, and since its inception, recommendations for publication have come from nearly every department in the School of Arts and Sciences. Kent Peterman, director of academic affairs for the College, speaks highly of the undergraduate research journal. “By giving examples of the best work our undergraduates are doing, CUREJ helps students understand what forms research takes in the various disciplines across the arts and sciences.” There are currently 45 research papers on the site, and downloads from CUREJ are increasing. Penn’s ability to provide rich opportunities for undergraduate research and publication outlets like CUREJ remain one of the University’s most distinctive features. To visit CUREJ, go to http://repository.upenn.edu/curej/.