

What sort of classes would OU faculty members
devise if money were no object?

Well, for one thing, they would bring in
the best guest lecturers in their fields
to stimulate interest and inspire students
to delve more deeply.

Dream Courses

BY BILL MOAKLEY

Photos by Robert Taylor

Having lived in New Orleans for some 20 years, University of Oklahoma professor Andy Horton has come to appreciate the spirit of Carnival. Not so much its exotic side, manifested in colorful floats, shiny beads and high-calorie foods, but more the energy that emanates from the celebration, which reminds Horton—and probably all other Carnival-goers—that they are, indeed, alive.

Little did Horton know that a \$20,000 check from the office of OU President David Boren would lead to a similar “spirit of Carnival” experience on the Norman campus.

Horton, director of OU’s Film and Video Studies Program, submitted to the President’s Office one of six proposals for the inaugural slate of Dream Courses, taught in spring 2005. Under the Dream Course initiative, OU faculty can submit proposals for one-time funding to enhance an undergraduate course. With the extra \$20,000, professors are asked to invite a number of experts of national or international stature in their fields to visit the Norman campus and interact with students. For Horton, the thrill that came from receiving the grant and teaching a class titled “Women Filmmakers Up Close” reminded him of that Crescent City spirit.

“It creates a new level of excitement,” Horton says about the Dream Course program. “It created for me a new level of Carnival. Without Carnival, life can be very dull. Carnival is

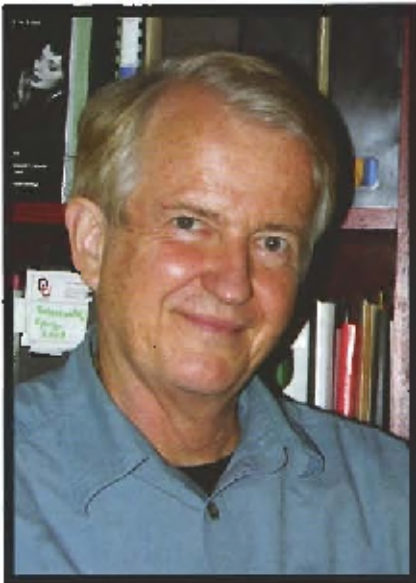
that spirit that means you’re enjoying life; this [Dream Course initiative] means you’re enjoying teaching, that someone cares enough to say, ‘Come up with the course that you haven’t been able to offer for financial reasons, and we’ll help you. Go for it.’

“To suddenly be told ‘there is this amount of money, apply, and if you get it, there it is,’ is inspiring. I’ve taught at maybe four different universities, and nobody’s ever done anything like that.”

Ironically, the idea for the Dream Course can be traced to Horton’s beloved New Orleans. Nick Hathaway, OU vice president for administrative and executive affairs, first batted the idea around after recalling experiences during his undergraduate days in which several courses were targeted for enhancement by inviting to campus numerous guest lecturers who were influential in their fields. Hathaway’s alma mater happens to be Tulane University, located in the Big Easy.

Hathaway, Boren and OU Senior Vice President and Provost Nancy Mergler discussed the possibilities for a similar program at OU. The president committed funds, and dreams became reality.

“The president didn’t have any preconceived notions of what kinds of disciplines [would apply],” Mergler explains. “He wanted to have visitors of influence and importance in policy making and strategic planning, leaders in their fields and creative



Andy Horton

artists who would enhance a particular course and would allow our students an opportunity to see and talk to the folks mentioned in the textbooks.”

In addition to Horton’s course on women in film, which he co-taught with assistant professor Betty Robbins, five other Dream Courses were scheduled for the spring semester. East Asian Studies



Betty Robbins

assistant professor Elyssa Faison offered “Remembering Wartime in Japan”; Department of Geography professor Fred Shelly taught “Dialogues in the Discipline of Geography: Informed Environmental Stewardship”; sociology faculty

members Craig St. John, Ann Beutel, Loretta Bass and Trina Hope worked on the series “Romanticizing the Family”; meteorology professors David Karoly and Fred Carr put together “Climate Change and Societal Impacts”; and School of Drama Director Tom Orr, drama professor Rena Cook and English professor James Yoch combined to create “Four Roads Through Shakespeare.”

Boren and Mergler reviewed proposals and chose the six classes to receive the



Elyssa Faison

first Dream Course funding. Eight more have been chosen for the 2005-06 academic year. “I’ve been excited to see the kinds of proposals that have come in and that we have selected,” Mergler says.

Lecturers coming to the Norman campus as part of the Dream Course program were as varied as the disciplines in which they are considered masters. Among Horton’s selections was OU alumna and leading Hollywood film editor Carol Littleton, whose work has included *E.T.*, *The Big Chill* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. Playwright Louise Broome worked with drama and English students focusing on Shakespeare. At the time, the OU drama department was producing Broome’s *Texarkana Waltz*. Sociology

classes hosted one of the country’s eminent scholars in the study of the family, Andrew Churlin, of Johns Hopkins University, who wrote the most widely used textbook on the subject. Meteorology students heard from Richard Sandor, CEO of the Chicago Climate Exchange, who *Time* magazine named in 2002 as one of its “Heroes for the Planet.”

Each Dream Course included at least three speakers throughout the semester, many of whom spent time in the classroom with undergraduate students, conducted seminars for graduate students and faculty and presented public seminars before leaving campus.

“The sociology department doesn’t have the money for this type of thing,” St. John says of the ability to attract three highly visible lecturers to campus in a single semester. “There’s a chance we could have maybe brought in one of them a year through some program, but we would never have been able to get them to come at one time.

“Also, the speakers themselves were somewhat enamored of participating in something in which other people also were participating. In a sense, it was easier to talk the second one into it after I told them I had the first one. You get the third person and tell them you already have the first two people, and they say ‘sure, I’ll do it.’ They’re part of a bigger program. They understood the value of a program like this for enhancing undergraduate education.”

Faison, who is part of the smaller East Asian Studies program in the School of International and Area Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, echoed St. John’s sentiments. She was able to attract such scholars as Gary Nash, director of the National Center for History in the Schools and professor emeritus of history at UCLA.

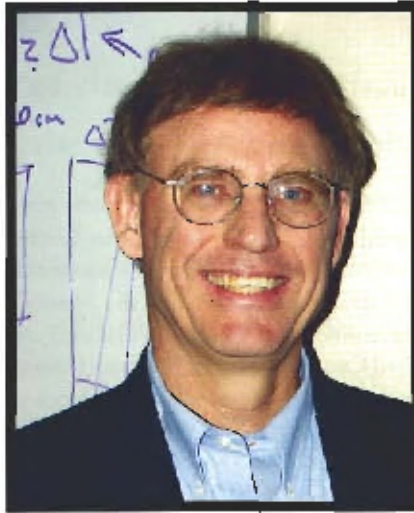
“I’ve been able to bring in people before, and their work is fabulous, but they don’t have the [same] national recognition as the people I was able to bring

in for this course,” Faison says.

Faison also underscored the value of such a program to junior faculty members such as herself.

“Junior faculty are usually not the ones who are department chairs or directors of programs, obviously,” she says. “We don’t have these opportunities that often, so this was a great opportunity for me.”

In addition to benefiting departments and faculty members directly, Carr says courses such as the one he and Karoly taught benefit the University as a whole by exposing its growing promi-



Fred Carr

“I’m not an expert in the impact of climate change or the economics of climate change, so another advantage is being able



David Karoly

then re-presenting it second- or third-hand. It’s more authoritative for the students to hear something first-hand.”

“The cross-pollination of ideas...opens up whole

nence to scholars and national leaders from across the country.

“One of the things I was pleased with was the glowing things each of our visitors said as they were leaving about OU and our growing program,” Carr explains. “It was gratifying to hear good things.”

Of course, the big return on the investment is student related and can be measured both in terms of intellectual development and professional motivation.

“I think it’s very, very important in any area of study to get students to critically assess or analyze the material they’ve been presented,” says Karoly, who oversaw the meteorology Dream Course. “Particularly for younger students, that can be difficult. The professor is always right. If they’re getting a range of different opinions, it’s easier to encourage the students to think about what they’ve heard and how much is consistent with other material they’ve seen or whether it’s different—and if it’s different, whether it’s better, worse or just different.

to bring in an expert. I would have been reading in a book or looking at things on the Web, trying to assess the material and



Rena Cook

There also is the inspiration that comes with hearing from those who are succeeding or have succeeded in careers to which students aspire. Such was the case in Cook’s Shakespeare course. Among her guests was Tina Packer, founder and director of Shakespeare and Company in Lennox, Massachusetts. A talented actress as well, Packer’s passion for her work was clear during her time working with OU students.

“For several students, it was life altering,” Cook says. “The work she did with them stuck with them, and I saw it in their work throughout the rest of the semester. That moment with Tina Packer changed them, opened up something for them.

“My view of my work also was altered and deepened, and what I’m able to offer students was deepened. In one instance, Tina Packer was able to observe something and pull something out of a student that I was never able to pull out. Once I saw it happen, I went, ‘oh, OK, now I see.’ I was able in subsequent classes to

help that student build on that.”

Cook’s class had the added component of mixing disciplines, bringing in students from the English department as well as the drama department.

“The cross-pollination of ideas and energy and ways of looking at something opens up whole new options,” Cook says. “Each discipline brings with it its own perspective, whether focusing on text or movement of costume. I think both the English and drama students were inspired by each other and built off of that. I think they all came away with different ways of looking at things.”

new options.”

Horton saw another student-related benefit: recruiting future students.

“Parents and prospective students have recently come in from Texas and elsewhere and said, ‘we’re so impressed you’re bringing people like Amy Madigan and Pam Koffler,’ Horton says. “They ask how we do it, and I say ‘there’s something called the Dream Courses.’ It’s great to be able to say that to prospective students.”

Then there is the invaluable experience of students interacting with people who could be termed their intellectual heroes.

“Educators, in a way, are interpreters many times,” Mergler points out. “While some of us write textbooks, some of us use textbooks written by other folks or talk about the giants in the field who are elsewhere. But for a student to have the opportunity to talk to someone who helped create a theory or policy or make a law at the federal level or have a film that was viewed around the world and have that kind of discussion, it helps them

imagine that they, too, can have that kind of impact on the world and that they should aspire to be that kind of leader.”

That motivational element provided by such dialogue reflects the real value of programs such as Dream Courses.

“To see someone who is doing some-

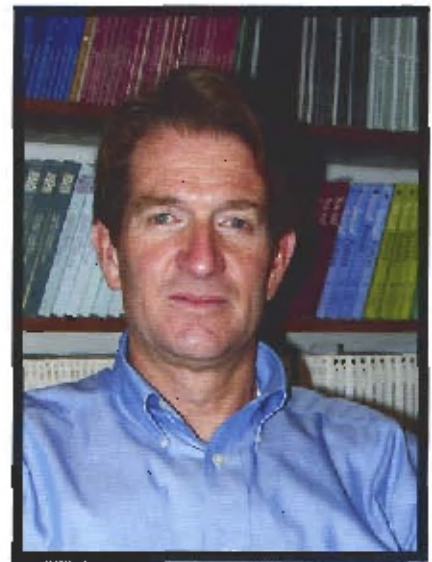


Jim Yoch

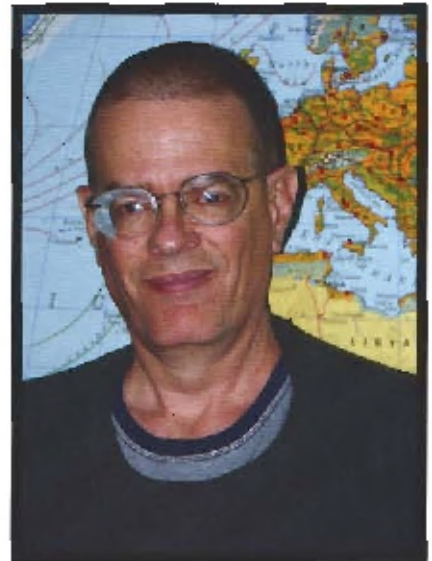
thing you aspire to do, or a version of what you aspire to do, and who is doing it successfully and can be articulate about it is one of the most important motivational factors for any of us who are apprentices or students,” Mergler says. “It solidifies your sense of why your field is important or why the kind of job you aspire to have is worth continuing to struggle toward.”

She knows the value of that motivation, the strength of seeing the human side of those we might believe are super-human, enriched with intellect and prowess we might believe unattainable. It was not a Dream Course she remembers, but a handshake on a spring afternoon so many school years ago when she received her psychology degree.

“I still remember at my graduation ceremony meeting B. F. Skinner,” Mergler recalled on a recent, sunny Oklahoma




Craig St. John



Fred Shelley

afternoon shortly before OU’s own commencement exercises. “Agree or disagree with him, he helped determine the field of psychology. To shake his hand was something to this day that I remember.

“I’m hoping that many of these visitors can have that kind of impact with our students.”

Oh, to dream. 

Bill Moakley, who is the communications director for the OU College of Education, writes freelance articles for Sooner Magazine.