

Instructor Spotlight: David Brenders

Our world supplies limitless ways to be fooled or to fool ourselves, ways not reserved for the merely foolish. In the Focal Point course, “Wonders, Cons, & Scandals,” we explore the ways that the human needs for hope, meaning, wonder, and control get waylaid by frauds and self-deceptions of all types. We follow the paths of con men, psychics, faith healers, UFO abductees, witch hunters, Ponzi schemers, “alternative” health practitioners, and other odd characters who have something to tell us about human nature and the limits of reason in the face of our own cognitive biases or the need to be special or part of a special group.

Along the way, we meet Victor “the Count” Lustig who sold the Eiffel Tower to a group of Parisian scrap metal dealers; a faith healer who sells ketchup-sized packets of “miracle spring water” to miraculously cancel credit card debts; homeopaths who can transmit the healing power of their nostrils over the internet; and those who are convinced that the Apollo moon landing was a hoax. We also explore subsidiary mysteries such as

why alien beings invariably prefer rural backwaters to MIT or Caltech for their appearances, why spirits or astral beings choose such bad writers to author their testaments, or why psychic powers that transcend time and space are so easily blocked by the presence of a magician.

In so doing, we also explore the rhetorical, psychological, philosophical, sociological, and scientific principles which might expose these flights of folly for what they are and discover better ways of analyzing claims and assessing what evidence would indeed be necessary to establish such claims. Most students’

eyes glaze over when presented with concepts such as statistical regression, selection bias, motivated reasoning, or the rhetorical fallacy *argumentum ad ignorantiam*; however, when asked to analyze ESP or the “Sports Illustrated curse” they tend to get careless and learn to incorporate these ideas into their own thinking. At best, they not only *learn* these concepts,

but begin to claim them as their own and use them. In this case, sophists are the best teachers of the limits of everyday logic, psychics are the exemplary professors of intuitive psychology, and pseudo-scientists and quacks are the perfect foils for understanding actual scientific reasoning.

I always look forward to teaching this course. As human folly is perennial, there is always something interesting and relevant to explore. I love to watch as students make logic and science their own, durable tools to separate fact from fantasy, science from superstition. Students tell me that the course opens their eyes and changes their worldview. While as a person I may blush with false modesty, as a teacher, it doesn’t get better than this.

— David Brenders

Associate Professor

College of Communication



(left) LAS Dean and Chicago Quarter founder Chuck Suchar chats with Assoc. Dean Mark Pohlad and Bro. Mark Elder, both Discover Chicago instructors, at the second annual Chicago Quarter teaching team recognition reception at Cortelyou Commons on Jan. 31.

From the Director

It was a pleasure seeing many of you at our Chicago Quarter “Recognition Reception” on Jan. 31. We honored faculty, staff, and students who had been nominated by members of their teaching team. The honorees were:

- Instructor: Leah Neubauer, “Diverse Faces of AIDS” (Discover Chicago)
- Staff Professional: Quang Luu, “Crime & Chaos, Culture & Cosmos in Chicago” (Discover Chicago taught by Jim Halstead)
- Student Mentor: Chad Morgan, “Diverse Faces of AIDS” (Discover Chicago), who was nominated by members of both this year’s and last year’s teaching teams.

It was also a treat meeting with some of you at our first-ever Faculty Chat for Focal Point Seminar instructors on Feb. 14. Some good ideas were shared and we had a range of faculty from veterans to those whose classes were newly approved. We’ll try this again in the Spring, on Friday, May 9, at 10:30 a.m.

As most of you know, this coming fall we will reinstate the policy of assigning Staff Professionals to all Explore Chicago classes (they have always been in the Discover classes). This restores the original Explore Chicago model, connecting all Chicago Quarter students with a staff member, someone who knows the university well and can be a contact person during the coming years. The other reason is that we are beefing up the role of the Staff Professional in all Chicago Quarter classes. This person will now have much more agency in planning and presenting the Common Hour. The Student Mentor will still have responsibility in that area, but we’re looking to eventually have them do more peer mentorship than teaching. With your help, the Staff Professional will now evaluate the mentor as part of the student’s LSP 321 grade.

If you know some excellent staff members who might be interested, encourage them ASAP to attend one of these information sessions. After attending one of them they will be given the link to apply.

- Monday, Feb. 24, 10:00-11:00AM
Lincoln Park Student Center 325
- Friday, Feb. 28, 9:30-10:30AM
Loop Campus, Lewis 1403

Their application deadline (again, after they’ve attended an info session) is March 14. If you’d like a full description, please email me at dlong@depaul.edu.

— Doug Long

Important Dates!

- Receipts for Winter Quarter reimbursement are due within 60 days of the date of purchase or by Tuesday, March 18
- Friday, May 9: Focal Point Seminar Faculty Chat, 10:30 a.m. – noon, location TBA
- Friday, May 30: Chicago Quarter Best Practices, 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., Cortelyou Commons

For comprehensive information about teaching the Focal Point Seminar, click here: [Focal Point Handbook 2014](#)



From the Chicago Quarter Recognition Reception: Above, honorees Quang Lee (Staff Professional) and Chad Morgan (Student Mentor), along with Phil Meyers (upper right), Toni Fitzpatrick, Sarah Miller (below), and Eugene Sampson, Matthew Sebastian & Nick Marotta (right)

