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Faculty and undergrads get on the same page

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[摘要] 07 March 2007，Cosmology presents a singular challenge to those who would attempt to explain its mysteries and conundra to a general audience. For example, the author of the preceding authoritative-sounding sentence could not utter a coherent cosmological statement if the very fate of humankind were involved.

[关键词] Cosmology;psychology

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Those who somehow render the incomprehensible sublimity of creation sensible to the rest of us deserve, and receive, our respect and admiration. One such rare bird is a wizened little man with a Very Big Brain (he is the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge) who has managed to sell out two sizable campus venues well in advance of his March 13 appearance as this year's J. Robert Oppenheimer Lecturer in Physics.

It is the very occasional math prof who can fill Zellerbach Hall (in the flesh) and Wheeler Hall (virtually) on a weekday evening. Yet due to his enormous success as a popularizer of difficult cosmological concepts —

a success inescapably linked to his well-known physical handicaps and the resultant impression of a mighty mind trapped in a ruined vessel —

Hawking has a hold on the public imagination that transcends even his durable command of the material.

Hawking is coming to Berkeley largely because of the persistence of physics professor Marvin Cohen, who chairs the Oppenheimer lecture series (and who has said it took him four years to arrange next week's visit). The excitement generated by Hawking's commitment to visit the campus led to, among many things, an unnamed donor's offer to purchase a copy of A Briefer History of Time (Hawking's "more accessible" revision of his best

-selling A Brief History of Time) for every one of the 4,000 freshmen in the College of Letters and Science entering class.

Mark Richards, executive dean of L&S (and a physicist himself), was not only grateful for the donation but believed that an opportunity to create a program that would maximize the benefits of Hawking's visit had presented itself. With the support of his fellow L&S deans, Richards last September informed college faculty that a new program, On the Same Page, would be launching this academic year, with the Hawking book as the focus of their mutual endeavor.

"Each year," he told them, "the L&S deans will choose a book to assign to all new freshmen in the college, providing them with a shared intellectual experience. We will mail a free copy of the book to each of our freshmen, and also make a free copy available to interested L&S faculty. Then we will create contexts in which faculty and students can discuss the book. The program will culminate each year with a public presentation by the featured author."

And so it has played out this year, with the occasional hitch, but an overall sense of accomplishment. Before the fall semester, a number of faculty agreed to teach the book, or aspects of it, in one of three ways: as part of the syllabus for a scheduled undergraduate class, as the (broad) focus of a Freshman Seminar for the spring semester, or as the jumping

-off point for a 90-minute "informal discussion" in the residence halls during the final run-

up to Hawking's appearance. There were takers for each option; in some cases, a faculty member both taught a seminar and offered to hold a residence

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hall discussion. (One of the latter, astronomer Alex Filippenko, says he appreciates the simpler style that Hawking adopts in his Briefer History, the examples and illustrations in which "help the reader grasp the essentials of this abstract and highly mathematical field.")

The more than two dozen informal discussions about aspects of the book, which began late last month and will continue through this week, touch on a universe of themes, from the psychology of time to the possible chicken

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egg relationship of mathematics and cosmology. ("Is it enquiry about the physical universe that leads to the creation of new mathematics?" asked math professor Bjorn Poonen in his discussion

-session preview. "Or does mathematics come first, and only later turn out to be useful in describing the universe?")

The sessions are being conducted by such Berkeley luminaries as Charles Townes (a Nobelist in 1964 for his discovery of the maser), George Smoot (a Nobelist 42 years later for his work confirming certain theoretical aspects of the Big Bang), Roger Falcone (director of the Advanced Light Source at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory), and Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, a renowned physicist.

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scientists have been holding sessions as well, including psychologist (and vice provost for undergraduate education) Christina Maslach, classicist Michael Nagler (founder of the campus Peace and Conflict Studies program), historian Jon Gjerde, philosopher Janet Broughton (L&S dean of arts and humanities), and journalist and emeritus professor Timothy Ferris, no mean popularizer of abstruse cosmic concepts himself.

Despite the faculty commitment displayed, some discussions have been poorly attended —

and sometimes hard to find in the depths of the residence halls —

and more than one has been canceled for lack of student signups. But others have drawn full houses, and several of those yet to take place are closed to new registrants.

While acknowledging some first-year glitches, L&S dean Richards is full of enthusiasm for the program's future. The second go-

around, which will take place in the fall semester 2007, will build on lessons from the first and yield even broader participation by both students and faculty, he says. The book selected for next semester's program is Lincoln at Gettysburg, by acclaimed historian and public intellectual Garry Wills.

"Having the books mailed to students over the summer rather than distributed in the dorms (as happened last fall) will help a lot," predicts Richards, "as the incoming class will likely make more of an effort to read the book during the summer than over the winter break. Also, having the author appear on campus in September will make for a more obvious 'kickoff' for the year's events, with related activities during Welcome Week and the beginning of the fall semester, and more faculty and student contact with Wills. Finally, quite frankly, thou

Whatever constraints may have kept L&S freshmen from filling the seats at this or that Briefer History discussion section will be forgotten as the SRO crowds file into Zellerbach and Wheeler next Tuesday. There they will listen to the synthesized voice of a wheelchair

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bound thinker as he sits alone on a stage, listening with them to his thoughts and observations as they are pronounced by a machine articulating his previously prepared remarks. It will be a remarkable display of the regard in which a diverse intellectual community holds the work of an equally remarkable mind.

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