New class encourages students to think outside the box

AT A GLANCE

CAS 4970 Mind-Bending: Religion, Law, and Science meets Tuesdays 12:30 – 2:30 in Nielsen Hall, Room 270

Professors:
Tom Boyd, Religious Studies
Joseph Thai, Law
Douglas Mock, Biology

Next guest lecturer: September 25

James P. Carse will present a lecture entitled “Why Are there Many Religions but No Such Thing as Religion?”

With aid from a university program, three OU professors of law, religious studies and biology have organized a new class in an attempt to bend the minds of their students.

Professors Joseph Thai, Tom Boyd and Douglas Mock applied for Dream Course funding last year for a course entitled “Mind-Bending: Religion, Law, and Science.”

President Boren initiated the Dream Course program in 2004-2005 to grant courses extra funding to bring in guest lecturers who are experts in the field of the course, according to the Provost’s memo on Dream Courses for the 2012-2013 academic year.

Thai, Boyd and Mock found themselves drawn together last year in a capstone seminar, Thai said.

“We seemed to stir up enough controversy at the seminar that we thought it was worthwhile to carry on the conversation and broaden it,” Thai said.

Thai got the idea for the class from a similar course he had seen as a student at Harvard, he said.

“The basic idea really is to get students to think outside of the box,” Thai said. “That’s really the function of the university -- to get them to think across boxes and to think more deeply and broadly just about basic questions.”
The professors want students to appreciate that no discipline has the right answer to a question, Thai said.

“Except maybe science,” Mock said.

The main selling point for the class is that there will be no tests, no exam and no reading assignments — only reading suggestions, Mock said.

“The basic idea is they come in here with an open mind,” Thai said. “They should listen, and they should think and engage.”

Each of the professors will give three lectures during the semester and argue with each other in relation to the class discussion, Boyd said. Each class consists of an hour of what Thai called a “provocateur’s lecture,” in which the speaker says something intentionally controversial or thought-provoking, followed by an hour of discussion.

“I like that it’s a safe place where we can have very blunt, very open conversations about things that people are usually too afraid to talk about,” anthropology senior Shaista Fenwick said.

One hundred thirty-four students are currently enrolled in the class, but other professors and even a few alumni also have been attending. One hundred sixty-six seats in the class still officially remain unfilled, according to oZONE.

The professors also are bringing in guest speakers throughout the semester. The guest lecturers will be presenting topics like “Thinking About Thinking” by Alan Dershowitz from Harvard’s College of Law and “Nonsense on Stilts” by Massimo Pigliucci from City University of New York’s philosophy department.

“Regardless of the field of study you are in and regardless of what way you began to try to think things through, you’re going to employ your imagination to do it,” said Boyd during the lecture Tuesday, and included examples of imagination in science, law and religion.

“Nothing is off-limits,” Boyd said of the class’s content, so to choose the content for each lecture, Thai said the professors “pick big subjects that each of [them] can hit in [their]
own different ways.”

And for Page Grossman, journalism and art history senior, that idea fills a purpose.

“I always need one class that’s not just structured and very much just about teaching,” Grossman said. “It’s more about conversation and thinking about the world around me.”