“What Undergraduate Students Had to Say About Seminars at the “Dimensions of Goodness” Conference

“It was great to be a part of the Dimensions of Goodness conference last weekend, and I just realized why the conference name wasn't abbreviated on any of the relevant materials. The opportunity to engage in a conference like that as an undergrad is an opportunity to really participate in what the Academy was meant to be. I think too many college students approach college as four years of advanced high school, where they are taught more ideas that other people had first, or else four years of trade school, where they are taught how to perform a craft and little else. I don't know that those students have been presented with an alternative, the idea that these four years are the years to engage new and challenging ideas, to evaluate rather than memorize; this program provides that alternative.

At a place like ND, where we have generally brilliant faculty across the board, it can be intimidating for an undergrad to suggest new ideas or point out something that no one has yet pointed out - even in seminars designed to encourage discussion, when one professor presides, there's a sort of Emperor's New Clothes mentality that if an idea was so wrong, or so easy to see, that someone else would have pointed it out, or that after meeting one good objection an idea is defeated. Attending a conference and seeing the process of ideas being proposed, challenged, and refined reminds us that great ideas don't spring fully formed from the minds of demi-urges we call Professors; they come from practiced minds after much work, practice and work well within our grasp. The opportunity to discuss these ideas with other undergrads undergoing the same realization is a precious one indeed. All told, the opportunity to engage new, challenging ideas in the hand-on format of a conference does more for intellectual maturity and confidence than years of classes.”

Thomas Maranges
Theology Major
Class of 2012

“My experience of the seminar was quite enjoyable. Even more importantly, it allowed me to synthesize the ideas that were presented during the various talks of the conference. One of the biggest problems with modern university education is that for most students, learning is just memorizing what is presented in class. There is no context or encouragement to evaluate what is taught outside of class. This danger of not thinking can also happen when students attend a conference and merely absorb diverse thoughts. I thought this seminar was an excellent way to break out of that problem. By bringing together a diverse group of students who have the common foundation of seeking a coherent worldview, this seminar exceeded my expectations of what could realistically be accomplished given the limited amount of time. I also think it was very helpful to have a moderator who gave a summary of the thoughts presented that day at the conference, in addition to guiding the discussion.”

Raymond Le Grand
Mechanical Engineering Major
Class of 2011
“I recently attended a series of three seminars based around the Dimensions of Goodness conference. About twenty or so of my peers gathered and discussed topics related to the talks over dinner. Hearing the presentations was interesting and stimulating, but talking about them was exponentially better. It is difficult to label the benefits of a good, thought-provoking conversation, but I will try: 1.) Crystallize own thoughts. 2.) Learn about new perspectives and ideas 3.) Use reasoning to better approach truth 4.) Improve intellectual skills generally 5.) Make friends 6.) Have an enjoyable time. (Not listed in any particular order.) At these seminars, I was impressed by the vibrancy of the ideas being circulated and the intellects of the people circulating them. I plan to attend as many more such events as I possibly can.”

Daniel Kokotajlo
First Year of Studies
Class of 2014

“The dinner seminars were a great way to engage undergraduates in the dialogue surrounding the conference. It gave students a chance to meet and share thoughts with other students from different disciplines and years of study. I enjoyed the descriptions that Eric Bugyis provided of talks we may have missed during the day, and I felt that valuable things were said by students with a wide range of experience. When discussing science, for instance, it was great to hear an engineering student's actual experience of science in response to the theoretical suggestions of a Philosophy major. That level of interdisciplinary exchange is rare in a typical classroom setting. The events and participants were engaging, intelligent, and formative. I would recommend the events to fellow students and hope to see the initiative expand in years to come. Thank you.”

Lillian Civantos
Program of Liberal Studies Major
Class of 2011

“The evening undergraduate seminars hosted by NDIAS during the “Dimensions of Goodness” conference provided a great opportunity to reflect with fellow students on some of the deeper issues presented in the conference lectures. As a senior, the discussions were a nice chance to reflect on the role of my faith in the public square before entering the “real world”. The insightful comments of my peers refreshed many ideas from the philosophy and theology courses I took during my freshman and sophomore years at Notre Dame, and encouraged me to integrate them with my more recent learning. Through the NDIAS seminars, I was able to bring my education full circle.

Eric did a great job serving as the dynamic mediator of the discussions, and his summaries of the lectures were extremely helpful, particularly because I could not attend many of the lectures. The discussion flowed well and overall was very entertaining and thought-provoking. I liked that the discussions included a range of majors and class years, as I feel this contributed a lot of character to it. Also, thank you so much for providing dinner! My only suggestion is that a little more interaction with the speakers themselves might’ve been nice—I don't know if it would’ve been feasible for any of the speakers to come to the evening discussions, but it would’ve been fun to hear their responses to some of the comments. Overall, though, I thought the discussions were great—thank you for inviting me to participate!”

Ann Weber
History Major
Class of 2011
“I greatly appreciated the opportunity to take part in the undergraduate seminars at the NDIAS Dimensions of Goodness conference. As a physics major, I rarely have the opportunity to take part in cross-disciplinary academics at a high level. The seminars were full of interesting, thoughtful, engaged students who sincerely cared about the dialogue, and the conference provided a good common denominator to get the discussion going. The discussion helped me understand and consider the many facets of the issues surrounding ethics, religion, and science, without the pressure of lots of readings or the impending threat of being graded. I loved the freedom to simply participate, soak in the conversation, and enjoy a new experience without any strings attached.

I greatly look forward to more events of this sort, where new ideas can be explored freely with my peers. Additionally, Eric was a great facilitator who made things accessible (even to a physicist!), kept the conversation on track, and seemed to really care about our perspective. I would love to have his continued presence at future events like this.

So yes, more of these please! I hope that I don't have to wait until next year's conference, I would do this much more frequently!”

Nancy Paul
Physics Major
Class of 2012

“Given the nature of universities today, it is easy for students to lose sight of the big picture and difficult to understand that what they are doing by seeking an education is more than preparing to work a job after graduation. It is easy to forget just how one’s area of study is relevant to life in general, to one’s own life and to the lives of others, and when that happens something about universities has gone wrong. The conference seminars and activities that NDIAS provides have the potential to remind students of the relevance of their education, to provide them an opportunity to apply their narrow science to a more united forum of scholarship. A very positive affect of this year’s Dimensions of Goodness Conference was that it reminded several students that there are questions to which academics must turn, but answers to which demand a strong background not only in philosophy or science or economics, etc… but in all of them. Narrow specialization, it demonstrated, is not compatible with the education that our world requires of those who would take upon themselves the burden of scholarship.

This is an essential element to a quality education, and I hope that NDIAS can continue to foster it among undergraduates on a larger scale as it continues to grow. The success of this goal, however, depends not only on how NDIAS goes about conducting itself, but on whether and how undergraduates decide to participate in it. I hope that as the institution develops undergraduates of all fields will make the best of the opportunity that awaits them.”

Stephen Lechner
Philosophy Major
Class of 2011