

"The Evolution of the Universe, Life and Human Nature," new and unusual class to be held this fall

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Some of the world's foremost scientists will offer undergraduate students a grand overview of how they understand the workings of the universe in an unusual class to be offered at the University of California, San Diego this fall.

The course, "The Evolution of the Universe, Life and Human Nature," will feature more than 20 guest lecturers from a variety of scientific disciplines.

Among them will be Jonas Salk, discoverer of the polio vaccine; anthropologist Sherwood Washburn from UC Berkeley; Leslie Orgel of the Salk Institute; astrophysicist and Nobel Laureate Hannes Alfvén, astronomer Margaret Burbidge, chemist Stanley Miller, and neuroscientist Theodore Bullock, all of UCSD.

"We're trying to give the students the sense of the overall process of change in the universe as we conceive it scientifically," said Dr. Clifford Grobstein, professor of biology at UCSD who is the faculty member in charge of the course, and who will give one or more lectures.

Among the topics to be covered are: "The Origin and Evolution of the Universe," "The Origin of Elements within the Stars," "The Origin and Evolution of Our Solar System," "The Origin, Evolution and Dynamics of Our Earth," "The Origin of Life on Earth," "The Evolution of Mind and Brain," "The Makings of Mankind," "The Origin of Human Civilization," "The Dynamics and Evolution of Human Societies" and "Humanity at the Crossroads: At the Doorstep of Doomsday or the Threshold of a New Era?"

Although Grobstein is formally in charge, a former UCSD graduate student, Jorge Mancillas, proposed giving the course.

Mancillas, a native of Ensenada, B.C., is a researcher at Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation, who earned his Ph.D. in neurosciences from UCSD in 1983. He first thought of the idea for the course 10 years ago while still an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley.

"I was first introduced to the scientific method when I went to Berkeley, and it was a real discovery for me," Mancillas said. "I was exposed to all this knowledge in a wide variety of fields, and I felt there was a story there to be put together, a sort of overview of science.

"I felt there must be some sort of general unifying structure which fits all of science together," he continued. "I've been toying with the idea for a course like this since 1979. When I read Dr. Grobstein's book, 'The Strategy of Life,' I realized he had an interest in integrating scientific information into a unifying panorama of cosmic evolution, and approached him about organizing a course."

Grobstein gives Mancillas most of the credit for getting the course established.

"When he came to me I asked for a list of four to six names of scientists who might be interested in lecturing in such a course, and he came back to me with a list of 10 to 12," Grobstein said. "Practically everybody he approached agreed to speak."

The hardest part for Mancillas was finding the speakers.

"Once I talked to them, I found that many of them had a longstanding interest in the subject matter of the course and found the project very interesting," Mancillas said. "I really see myself as just being the catalyist who brought them together."

"I've got to credit Jorge," said Grobstein. "He persuaded me to do the course and he persuaded them also. I'm the sponsor, but he's the spark."

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