

Big History and Liberal Education

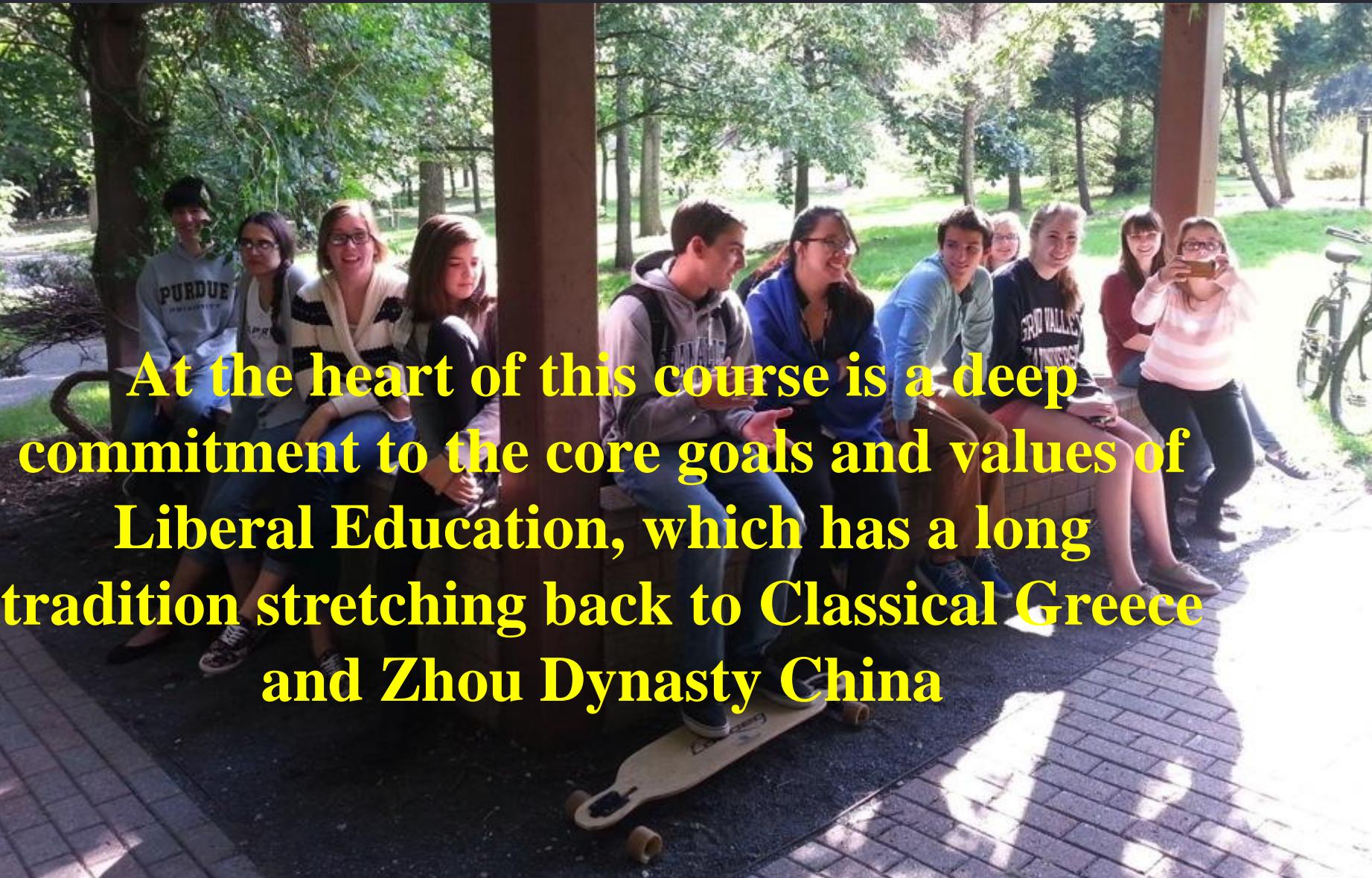


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Big History and Global Education
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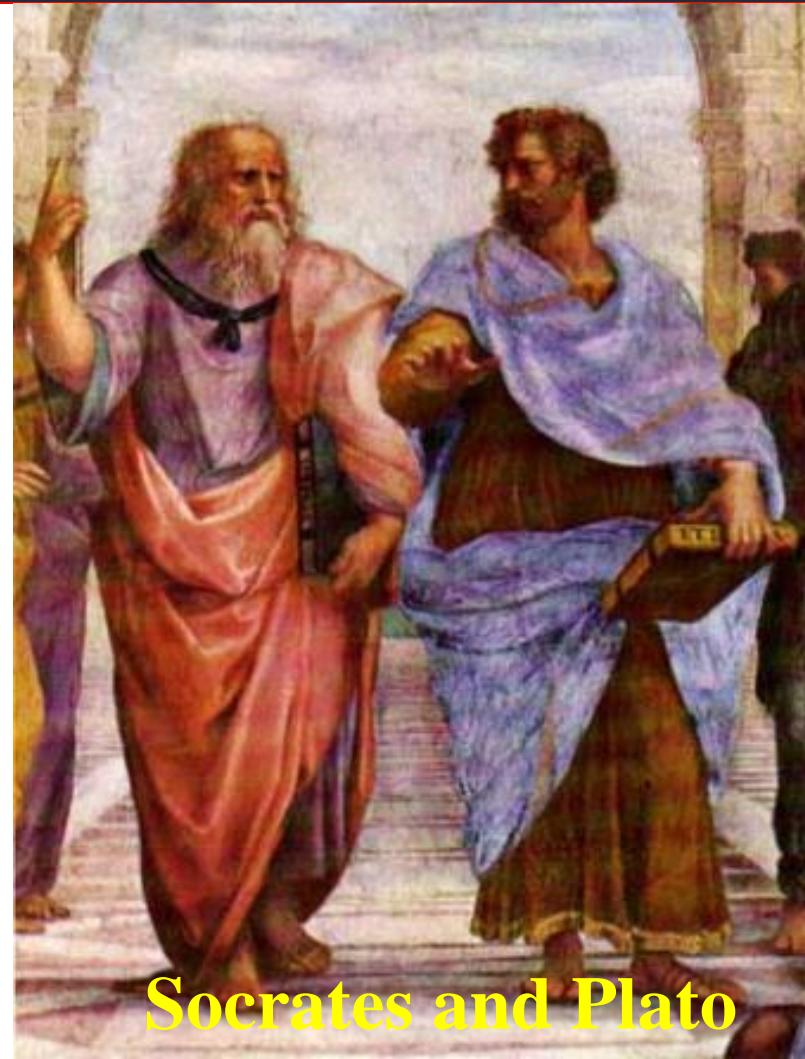
- **Big History university courses offer the ideal liberal education experience for students!**
- BH helps develop core values, knowledge and skills of liberal education
- Also helps students consider difficult questions such as:
 - why are they at university?
 - what do they hope to take from this experience?
 - how do they plan to live their lives?
 - what is the meaning or purpose of human existence, particularly their own?
- **Because of this, big history should be taught at all universities that are genuinely committed to liberal education**

- I have taught Big History for more than 20 years
- Today I teach it as a two semester course for first year students in the Honors College at GVSU in Michigan (2014/15 class below)



- **Sought universal definitions of a range of topics – love, truth, justice**
- Used dialectic method to proceeded from less accurate to more accurate definitions
- Aim was to discover truth with a view to the ‘good life’: in order to act well, one must know what the ‘good life’ is
- Their interest in education was both ethical and intellectual - to persuade every man that their job was to seek virtue and wisdom
- **Knowledge and virtue are the same – the wise man who knows what is right will also do what is right**

Socrates and Plato: Intellectual and Ethical Cultivation



Socrates and Plato

Confucius: Education and *Junzu*

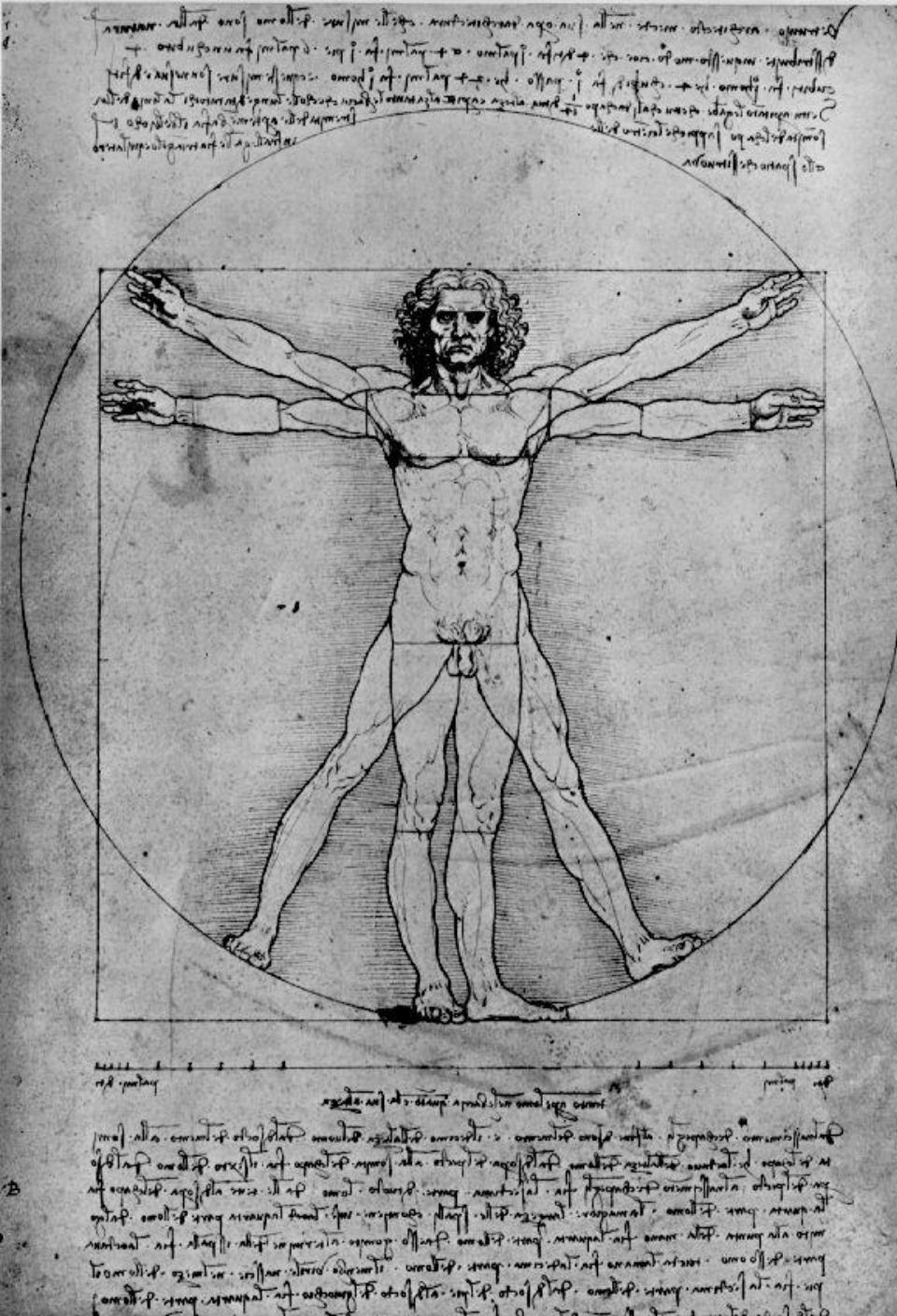


- Confucian thought also intellectual, moral and ethical
- In turbulent Late Zhou Period Confucius attempted to build an ethical framework into the political hierarchy
- Best way to achieve good government was to fill official positions with individuals who were broadly educated, conscientious and ethical
- Focused on producing *junzu* – superior individuals who could be created through a comprehensive liberal education

European Renaissance

Uomo Universale

- Educational goal of humanists was to cultivate the mind for individual happiness and to play an effective role in society
- Ideal human was broadly educated, versatile, accomplished and socially assured – the *uomo universale*
- *Uomo universale* skilled in all aspects of human behavior – intellectual, ethical and physical



* 150. The Proportions of the Human Figure after Vitruvius. Pen and ink. About 1485. Milan. Ambrosiana.

- Tsar Peter the first Russian ruler to promote a broad secular education
- Numerous technical schools were opened (e.g. School of Navigation and Math founded in Moscow in 1701)
- Curricular focus was on science and economics, but also political science

Peter the Great and Secular Education in Russia



Soviet Commitment to Liberal Education



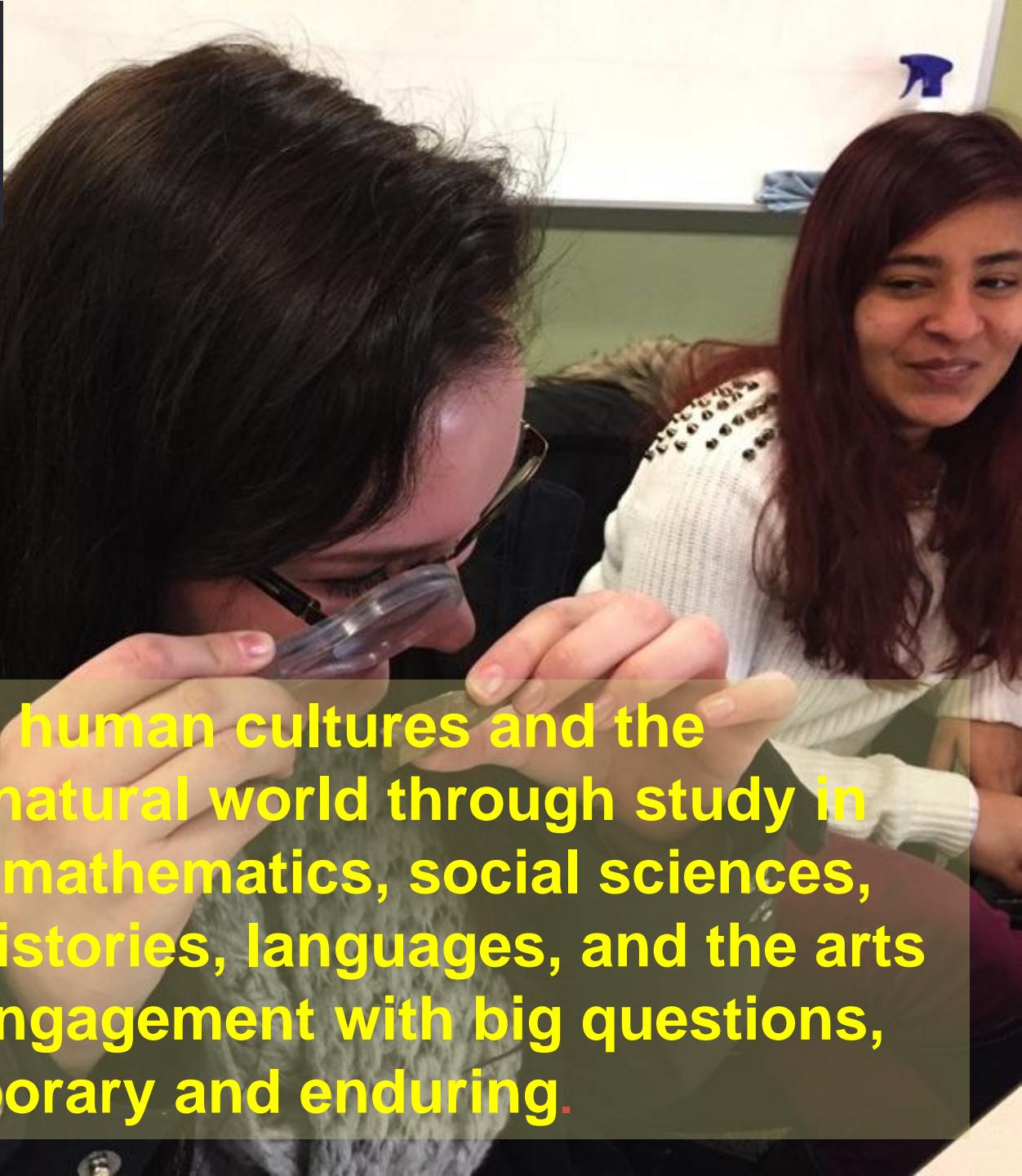
- **Bolshevik Education Policy, Oct 1917:**
“...A universal and classless provision of both ‘enlightenment’ and training for life in all its fullness and variety, for all ages from infancy to manhood; disregarding all outdated methods; based exclusively on the latest science in every branch, and freed from every kind of mysticism; devoted to the end of fitting everyone for life in the service of the community; the whole system to be gratuitous, secular and universally obligatory.”
- **Superb comprehensive education system put in place in the Soviet Union combined technical and scientific training with the highest ideals of a liberal education, including literature and music**

LEAP: ‘Beginning in school and continuing across college, students need to prepare for the challenges of the twenty-first-century by acquiring a broad knowledge base and a specific set of skills’.



- In 2005 the definition of this great tradition in a document titled *Liberal Education and America’s Promise*
- Identifies four core LEAP goals
- Student evaluations demonstrate how well Big History is helping achieve those goals

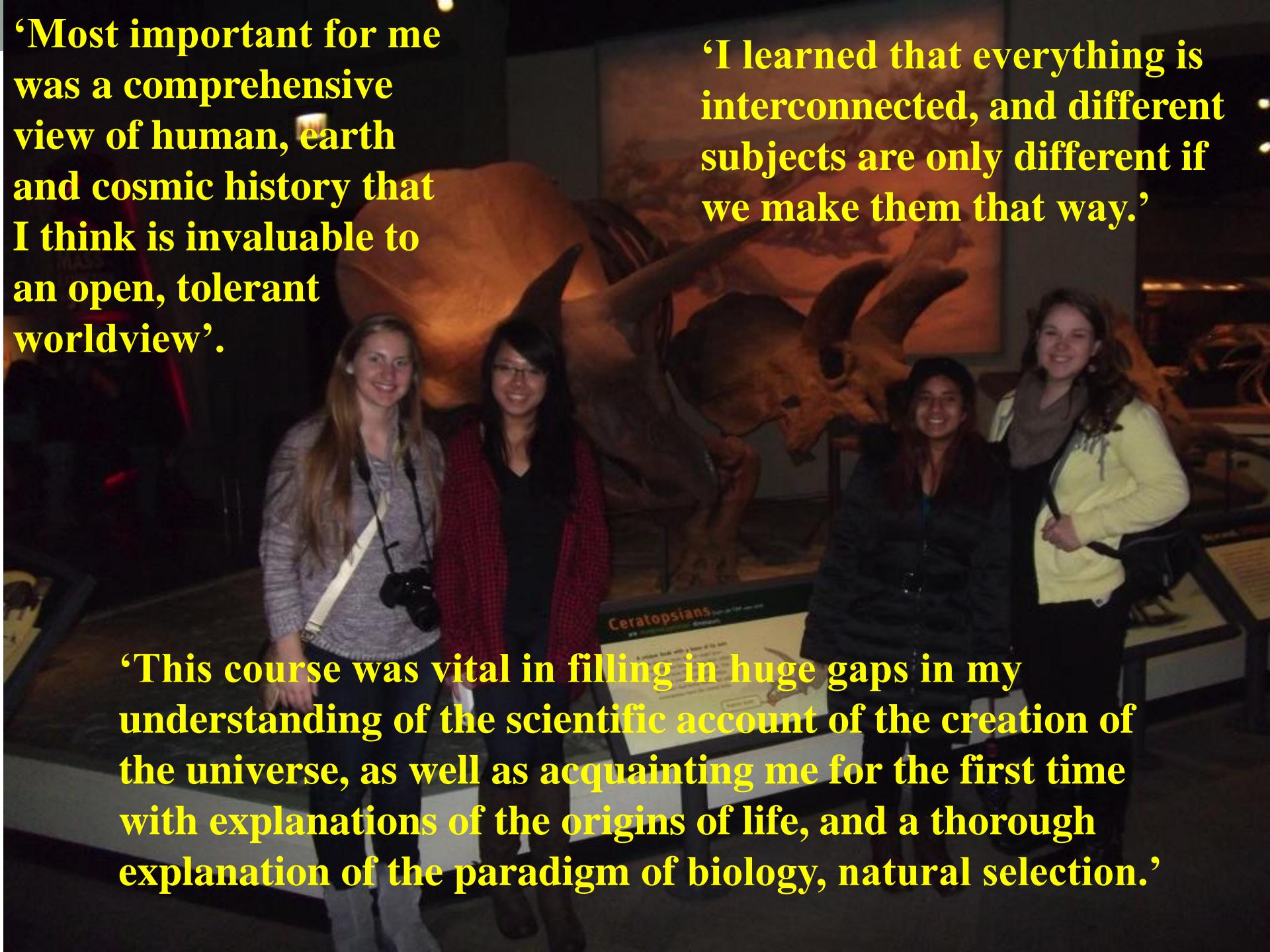
1. Knowledge of the World



- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world through study in sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.

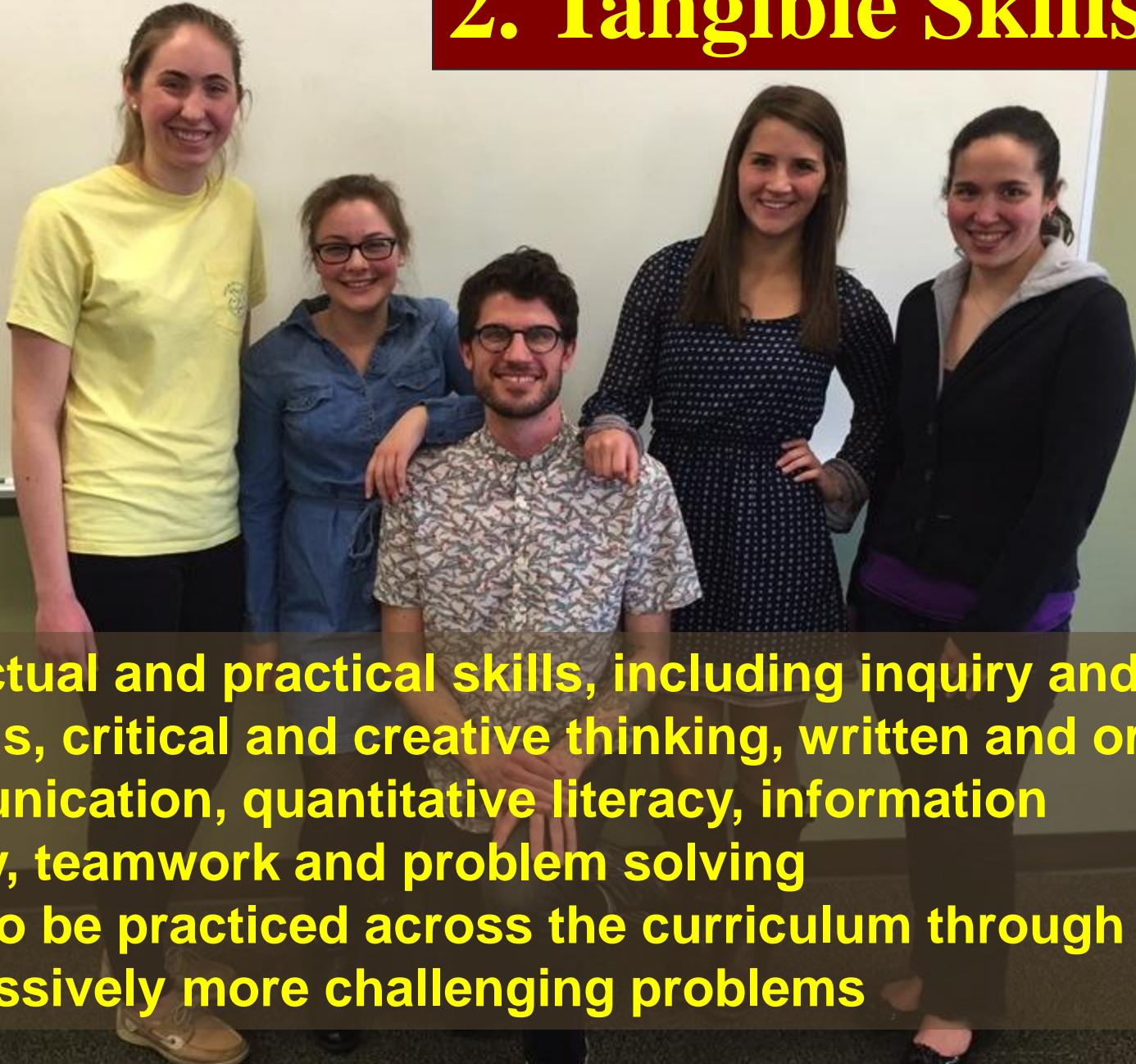
‘Most important for me was a comprehensive view of human, earth and cosmic history that I think is invaluable to an open, tolerant worldview’.

‘I learned that everything is interconnected, and different subjects are only different if we make them that way.’

A photograph of four young women standing in front of a large mural of a Ceratopsian dinosaur. The mural is orange and brown, showing the head and neck of the dinosaur. The women are smiling and dressed in casual clothing. One woman on the left is holding a camera. A small sign in front of the mural reads "Ceratopsians".

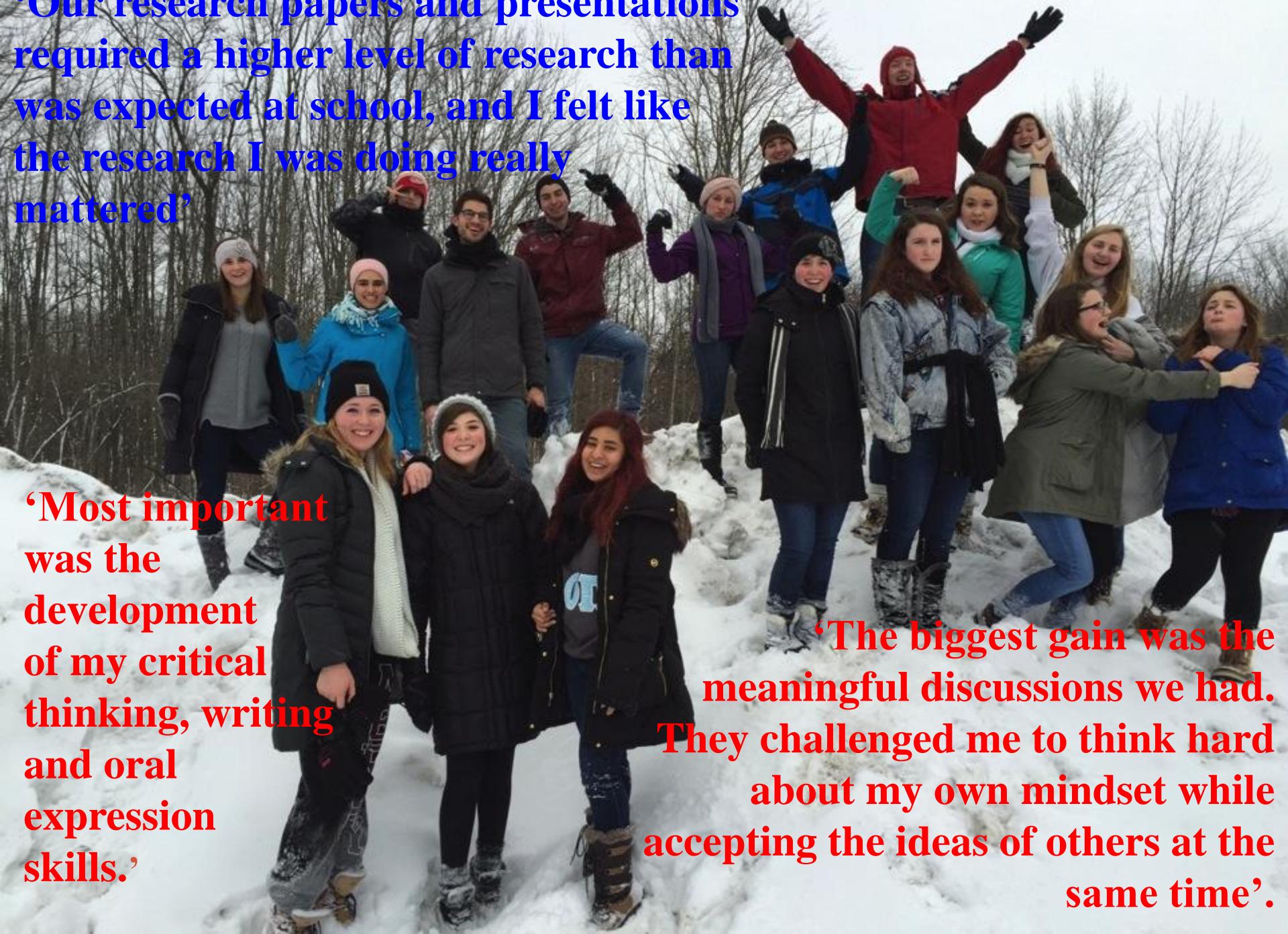
‘This course was vital in filling in huge gaps in my understanding of the scientific account of the creation of the universe, as well as acquainting me for the first time with explanations of the origins of life, and a thorough explanation of the paradigm of biology, natural selection.’

2. Tangible Skills



- Intellectual and practical skills, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving
- Skills to be practiced across the curriculum through progressively more challenging problems

'Our research papers and presentations required a higher level of research than was expected at school, and I felt like the research I was doing really mattered'



'Most important was the development of my critical thinking, writing and oral expression skills.'

'The biggest gain was the meaningful discussions we had. They challenged me to think hard about my own mindset while accepting the ideas of others at the same time'.

3. Personal Responsibility



- Personal and social responsibility, including civic engagement, local and global; intercultural knowledge and competence; ethical reasoning and action; and foundations and skills for lifelong learning
- Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.

'The course helped me develop a perspective on the challenges facing the modern world, as well as build up a knowledge base to better understand so many subjects including sustainability and the environment.'



'I have a deeper understanding of the world around me, and the part that my generation and I play in global society.'

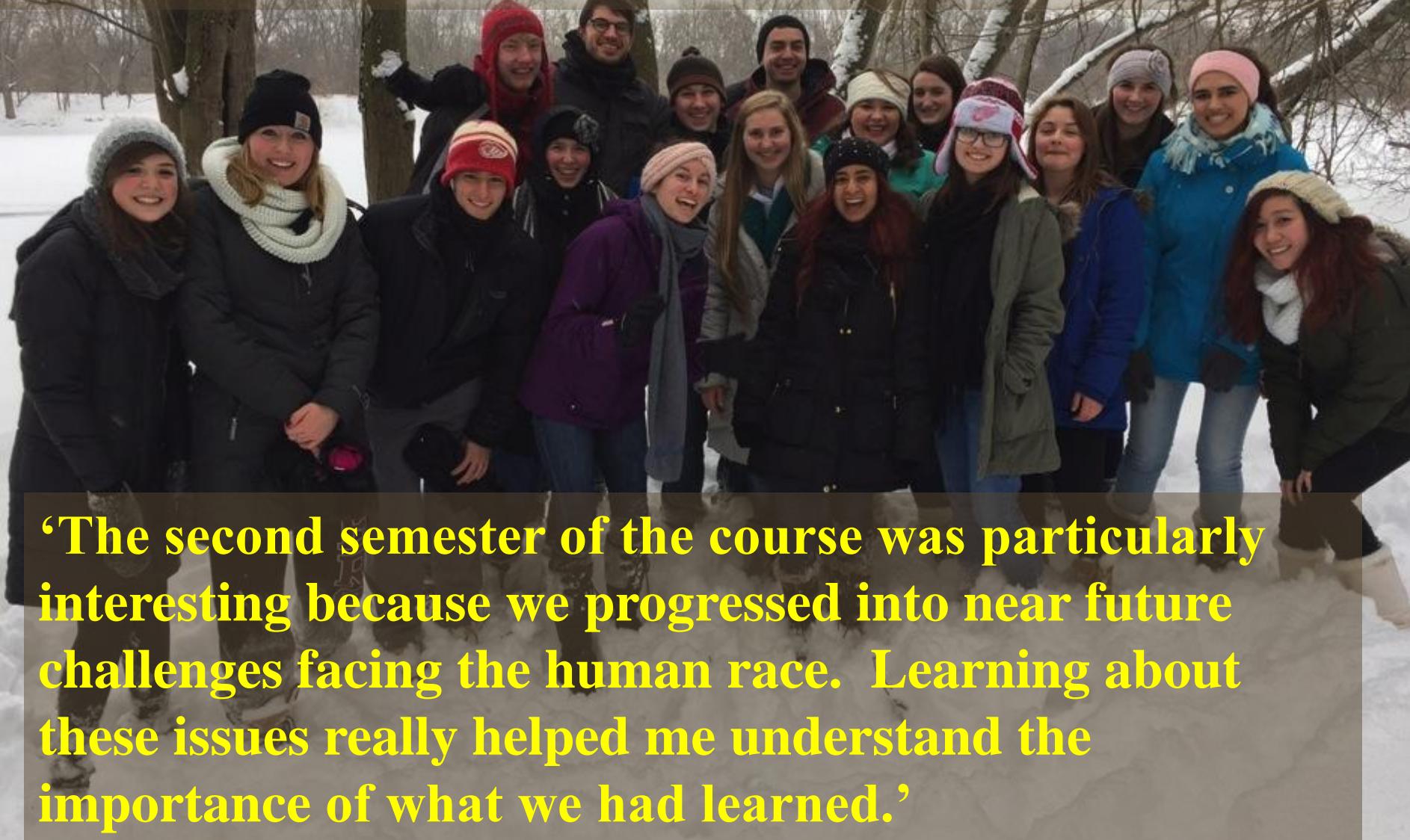
'Big history stresses critical thinking about current issues as well as historical perspectives.'

4. Applied Learning



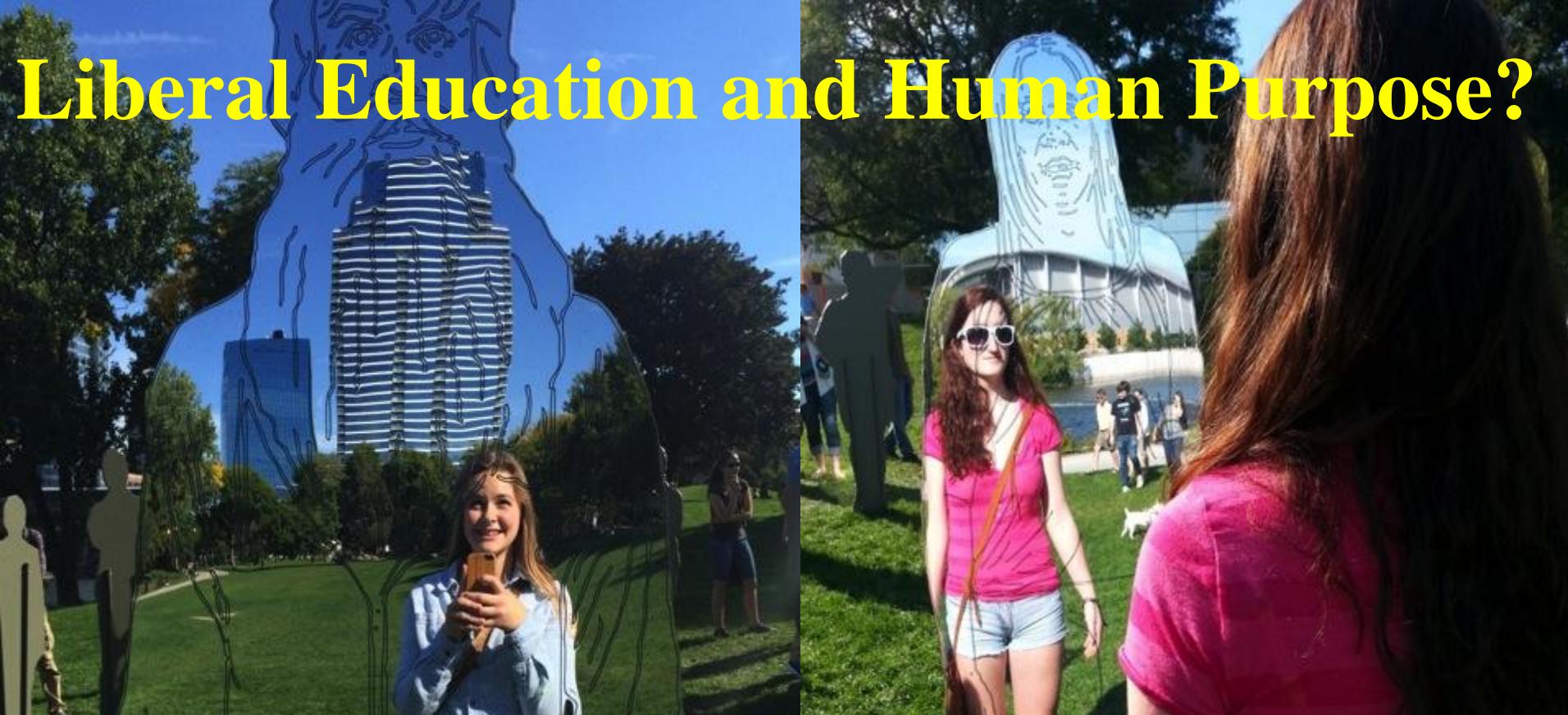
- Integrative and applied learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- Demonstrated through application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

‘This course has heavily influenced me and taught me to seek a bigger perspective on the world, other people and the important issues.’



‘The second semester of the course was particularly interesting because we progressed into near future challenges facing the human race. Learning about these issues really helped me understand the importance of what we had learned.’

Liberal Education and Human Purpose?



- In addition to these LEAP skills, we all want to help our students consider the BIG questions:
- Why are they at university in the first place?
- What do they hope to take from this experience?
- How do they plan to spend their lives?
- What is the meaning and purpose of human existence, including their own?

‘This course has given me a greater understanding of my place in the world and a feeling that I can really make a difference’



‘We are the future and big history methods and perspectives need to become ingrained in education so that our future can be as bright as possible’

‘With this knowledge I understand more about the world and now have the cognitive and conceptual skills to make the world a better place through the decisions I make both individually and collectively with others’





‘Thanks to this course I have developed a sense of greater possibilities and potential in my life than anything I had ever imagined before’!

Conclusion

- After teaching Big History for 20+ years I am convinced it offers the quintessential liberal education experience for students of all ages
- It is the best course for meeting the LEAP goals and for engaging students at all levels of their consciousness
- By the end of the course students are better equipped to understand the world around them, and the responsible role that they must play in global society
- They have acquired multiple lenses through which to view the world, and a real sense of the potential to lead a more deeply meaningful life in so many ways



Frankly, can an
educator ever ask for
more than this?

Thank You!

