Honors’ Think Tank on Bioethics: Genetics and Society

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The Bioethics Think Tank met to consider issues concerning genetics, genetic technologies, and the ethical implications these scientific advancements raise. After learning about a range of topics from local experts and establishing a baseline understanding of both ethical theory and genetics the interdisciplinary group of students identified a project that would be meaningfully contribute to the community. The group agreed that people needed accurate information if they were going to make informed decisions about genetics now and in the future. These decisions may be personal, such as reproductive planning, or involve public policy decisions such as whether certain types of research should be funded. There are currently no courses available in the state of Utah that deal with both the ethical implications and the science of genetics.

To address this issue and help future generations deal with an increasingly complex subject the Bioethics Think Tank helped organize a new course, Genetics and Society that will be taught at the University of Utah in fall 2006 through the Honors Department. The students thought it necessary that people had an understanding of genetics and genetic technologies as well as the ethical considerations that these advancements raise. To that end Genetics and Society is an interdisciplinary course that will be taught by Dr. Bryan Benham of Philosophy and Dr. M. Wayne Davis of Biology. Class meetings will alternate between lecture and discussion to ensure students understand actively engage with the material. Topics include basic genetics, ethical theories, behavioral genetics, DNA fingerprinting, genetically modified organisms, biowarfare, and stem cells.

The Bioethics Think Tank applied for and was awarded an interdisciplinary grant to help continue the course and reach a broader range of students. In spring 2007 Genetics and Society will be offered by both the Department of Biology and the Department of Philosophy. With the continued support of the involved departments as well as student interest and enrollment Genetics and Society will become a permanent course offering at the University of Utah.