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1) Description of Grant Supported Activity

My intention was to focus my initial activity on researching how evidence is defined and utilized in different fields. However, I’ve spent the majority of my time so far researching, in general, the value our society places on making evidence-based decisions and how it has changed over time. I referenced a review of Susan Jacoby’s Age of American Unreason in my proposal, and upon reading it became fascinated by her arguments regarding the alleged decline of rational thought in the U.S. and how it has affected society.

An interesting aspect of her discussion recognizes the pride Americans place in viewing themselves as individuals and, perhaps, the negative impact that has on their view of so-called experts, regardless of the field. This led me to research the work of Harry Collins, a professor of social sciences, who studies the nature of expertise. I was introduced to him through a radio interview on NPR’s Science Friday and subsequently his interviews in American Scientist and Scientific American and his new book (with Robert Evans), Rethinking Expertise. To explore expertise more broadly across disciplines, I’ve looked at The Philosophy of Expertise, edited by Evan Selinger and Robert Crease, which includes several essays that I will use in the course.

Another resource I’ve explored is The Flight from Science and Reason, edited by Paul Gross, Norman Levitt and Martin Lewis, selections from which will be valuable because they cover disciplines outside science such as social sciences and history. I continue to evaluate reading materials for the course and conferring with my colleagues for additional suggestions.

2) Were you able to complete the project? Describe any difficulty you had.

Yes, for the most part. My emphasis has changed slightly to focus more on society’s views and usage of evidence in the decision making process and how people view value expertise. The biggest difficulty I am having so far is how to meaningfully discuss how evidence is evaluated in fields outside my area of (alleged!) expertise. However, I’ve received excellent support and suggestions from my colleagues and am confident that I’ll settle on a few substantive readings and perhaps invite some colleagues to join the class as guest participants.
3) Did, or will, the project result in a specific product -- a manuscript, composition, syllabus, etc? If so, please describe and indicate state of development.

As indicated in the title, the ultimate product of this work will be new courses. I will offer the first iteration through the Master of Liberal Studies program in the fall of 2009. Specifically, it will serve as one of the three credit Core Seminars: LBST-D 503 Science Seminar, and I will use the title, “The Nature of Evidence.” After seeing how things go this fall with the MLS Science Seminar, my intention is to tweak the syllabus and offer it as a critical thinking fundamental literacy elective for the campus-wide general education requirements.