

FEATURES

REACHING FOR REASON

AUBRIE LEE/
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“Once you leave the Stanford bubble, there is real discrimination,” said Mala Chatterjee '14, co-founder of Stanford Students for Reason (SSR), a new student-led organization aimed at giving voice to uncommon viewpoints on campus about local and national issues.

“[Right now, students] won't even have any of the requisite skills to deal with discrimination or to try and combat it,” she said, explaining her belief that a one-sided, mostly liberal Stanford atmosphere shelters students from having to craft original, convincing arguments and stifles those who hold unpopular views.

According to Chatterjee, SSR seeks to help students develop the skills of argumentation necessary to effectively support their views in the face of opposition.

The club's first meeting took place on Jan. 23. Co-founders Chatterjee and Ian Ball '14 estimate that a group of 25 attended. After the success of this initial meeting, the club has met nearly every Monday night in the Nitery building to discuss topics ranging from childhood obesity to the sanctity of life. Each meeting begins with a topic and then functions as an open forum for participants to express their views. A student moderator keeps the conversation in check and leads each discussion.

Mayukh Sen '14, a member of SSR, described his future hopes for the club. “As the overall level of discourse increases, we want to invite students from groups,” Sen said.

The club also hopes to organize debates on various controversial topics and bring in professors to speak at meetings.

Ball first noticed a need for the club last year during the campus-wide debate over the return of ROTC. Ball said he found it difficult to express his position that ROTC should return.

“Many saw this as a personal attack and felt personally offended, and I think that impeded discourse [on] a topic which was important to discuss,” he said.

Daniel Noé '14, SSR web content manager, had a similar experience debating ROTC's return to campus in his freshman dorm.

“Things got particularly ugly when the huge ROTC debate hit the campus,” he wrote in an email to The Daily. “It became apparent to us that there was a problem with the way intellectual discourse was being handled on campus, and that's how the idea for the club came about.”

Chatterjee and Ball said they view the obstacles they faced in discussing ROTC as symptomatic of a larger issue with discourse at Stanford, ultimately relating to a perceived suppression of more conservative views on campus.

Chatterjee said she believes that students who do not hold the common liberal positions for certain topics keep quiet and do not share their opinions with others, a sentiment Ball agrees with, and finds particularly problematic.

“When people are not exposed to alternative viewpoints, they aren't able to rationally defend their position,” Ball said.

“[On issues such as minimum wage and gay marriage], a lot of people on campus have this gut reaction,” Ball said. “[Yet] they never have to defend themselves because whenever they hear the opposition they walk away and say that it is offensive.”

Ball and Chatterjee decided to channel their frustrations to change the way students approach controversial topics at Stanford through SSR. Both students have backgrounds in philosophy and debate to help them moderate SSR discussions.

“I got interested in philosophy really early on, when I was about 11 or 12, and I took my first philosophy course,” Chatterjee wrote in an email to The Daily.

“When I was younger, I'd basically just read philosophy on my own and try and find independent study or summer courses,” she added.

Ball was on his high school's parliamentary debate team, which helped him learn to form and scrutinize arguments.

With their skills and passion for the art of debate, the duo is trying to facilitate discovery through the exchange of opinions on topics discussed in club meetings.

“The idea was to try and create an environment where people can have controversial conversations and have different types of views and [not just] present the most popular position at Stanford so that people don't get offended or take things personally, but rather learn,” Chatterjee said.

The club also aims to influence the focus of discourse on campus by showing student interest groups how to critically analyze their chosen causes to better include and address non-mainstream viewpoints.

“A lot of these liberal causes seem to misdirect [student] attention,” Ball said.

The overarching goal of SSR is to raise topics that are usually avoided. The group hopes to serve as the figurative person who brings up both religion and politics at the dinner table of Stanford discourse — in the process making space for others to do the same.

“I think there are real battles [at Stanford] that we should deal with. It is not as if we live in this color blind, perfectly tolerant society” Ball said. “I think [intolerance] is present, but we are afraid to confront it.”

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By KATY STORCH

Much like a chef prepares an elaborate meal with diverse ingredients, Allison Carruth '04 M.A. '08 Ph.D., the new associate director of Stanford's Science, Technology and Society program (STS), has returned to campus to concoct a dish of her own. However, instead of a gourmet meal, this dish comes in the form of spicing up the major with a blend of STS courses and concentrations relating to the intersection between contemporary culture, biotechnology and food science.

The STS program, which provides students with an interdisciplinary approach to studying science, technology, engineering and other interrelated fields, recently underwent administrative changes, with the hiring of a new director, Fred Turner of the Communication Department, and Carruth, formerly an associate professor of English at the University of Oregon.

Since arriving on campus, Carruth has assisted in revamping the entire STS major after evaluating similar programs across the country and receiving input from students and faculty. The new curriculum will keep much of its initial focus, but will expand to include two new tracks: Environment and Sustainability and Life Science and Biotechnology. In addition, a more concentrated core will directly inform each of the six individual tracks within the major. The changes are set to take effect on Sept. 1, 2012.

Carruth comes to Stanford with a background in food studies, environmental humanities and post-industrial American literature and culture — experience that has allowed her to contribute to innovations in the new STS curriculum.

“Dr. Carruth brings an exceptional expertise to bear on the intersection of culture and technology,” Turner said. “[She has incorporated] a forward-looking desire to integrate new areas of scientific and tech-

nological activity into conversation with new approaches in the humanities and social sciences.”

As a result of her contributions to the program, STS students such as Maya Amoils '12, a peer advisor in the STS program, are able to further specialize their academic focus within the major.

“The concentration options seem exciting, cutting-edge and relevant to Stanford's broader ethos . . . and ensure that students graduate with more concentrated interests and expertise,” Amoils said.

Aside from polishing the STS curriculum, Carruth also teaches courses in the department, including a new course titled, “Wired Space, Green Space,” open to all class years and majors, and a senior colloquium titled, “Footh in the Information Age.”

Along the lines of her interest in food studies, Carruth's senior colloquium focuses on the culture and politics of food in the modern age, allowing students to incorporate ideas and material from the arts, anthropology and natural sciences into their studies. Among other class projects, Carruth splits the students into teams and assigns them a Bay Area start-up dealing with

ALLISON CARRUTH SPICING UP STS



Courtesy of Allison Carruth
Allison Carruth, associate director of Stanford's Science, Technology and Society (STS) program, has played a pivotal role in redesigning the department curriculum.

food and environmental issues to profile in order to understand food systems and practices in contemporary society.

“Dr. Carruth did not fall short of my expectations,” said Amoils, who took the colloquium this past fall quarter. “It was one of my favorite classes at Stanford.”

Carruth said she feels equally inspired by her interactions with the students taking her course and those who are under her guidance as STS majors.

According to Carruth, “The students are curious, ask really great questions and are very entrepreneurial” as they pursue their concentrations within the major.

Carruth said she believes that the honors students in the program are especially impressive as they carve out their own academic fields and push for an understanding of the ethical dilemmas and social potential faced by a technologically advanced society.

She cited one student who is carrying out studies on the California high-speed rail project, a topic Carruth argues bridges both quantitative and qualitative research methods in its focus on the infrastructure of the project and the technological obstacles that stand in its way.

Despite her varied intellectual interests,

Carruth suggests she was not raised in an “academic” family.

“My grandfather went as far as the seventh grade and then worked in an oil refinery all his life, but he was a self-taught student of history and science,” Carruth said.

As a child, Carruth was a voracious reader and recalls frequently reading books with her grandparents, an activity that instilled in her the value of education and hard work from a young age.

Raised in an extended family that includes factory workers, ranchers, entrepreneurs, educators and psychologists, Carruth's interest in the transformative powers and environmental consequences of the Industrial Age took hold early on.

She completed her master's and doctorate degrees at Stanford in English and American literature and wrote her dissertation on the history of industrial agriculture in America. Her work has recently been expanded into a book titled, “Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food.” According to Carruth, the book examines work by American writers and artists, arguing that industrial agriculture became a facilitator of American power, and that food became an inspiration for new kinds of art.

In the future, Carruth hopes to continue to publish work that inspires discussion and interest in others.

“Having a career where I get to be in a world-class research community environment, collaborating with great scholars [makes up] one big piece of the long-term goal,” she said.

The Stanford community, in other words, is a pivotal ingredient in the broader scope of her career as both an architect — or chef — of the STS program, and as a contributor to the greater “dish” of academia.

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