Put on Your Thinking Cap. This is BIG.

Sometimes great ideas come from asking interesting questions and making connections with people who are completely different from you. Their life experiences, knowledge and wisdom, combined with your singular cache of experiences and talents, can spawn big ideas if all are willing and open to listening and participating.

Such an environment will take shape on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus next June at the “Big Learning Event: Powerful Conversations for the Future,” as it brings together some of the country’s brightest minds from disparate disciplines for conversation and listening. Consider it an idea lab. Or a mosh pit of minds, but with good manners.

Organizers of the Big Learning Event (BLE) hope to harness the collective ideas of speakers and spark cross-disciplinary conversations to address some of the most pressing issues of our time. For our speakers: What issues are on your minds? Why? For the university community: How might these issues affect how we work and adapt to change? Throughout the event, our intellectual titans will offer and reflect on their expertise while attendees can react and respond and pose questions and solutions, becoming contributors, not spectators.

These big questions require some big thinkers and BLE planners have arranged for the following speakers to lead the way:

Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi emigrated to the United States at the age of 22 and is known for his work in the study of happiness and creativity and the notion of flow. He believes that people are happiest when in a state of complete concentration.

Richard J. Davidson is a professor of psychology and psychiatry at UW–Madison whose work explores how to train the mind to be happy. A pioneer of mind-body medicine, his work with A-Team meditators (Tibetan Buddhist monks) examines the ability of the brain to change and develop throughout life.

Derrick Pitts might be America’s best-known astronomer. He is director of the Fels Planetarium in Philadelphia and is the go-to source for media outlets that need expert information on astronomy. A champion of science, much of his work is devoted to making science education part of global society.

Figuring out how we act and learn in organizations and groups is Meg Wheatley’s area of expertise. A writer and management consultant, she studies organizational behavior and also leads a global charitable foundation. “In these troubled, uncertain times, we don’t need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone’s intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise.”

Virus hunter Nathan Wolfe is the science expert behind many recent news stories on human health and virus transfer, such as swine flu, monkey pox, West Nile, SARS and Ebola. He works to forecast and contain new plagues before they kill millions. “Just imagine the lives that could have been saved if we’d been able to forecast a pandemic like HIV/AIDS.” He is a professor and director of the Global Viral Forecasting Initiative at Stanford University.
Social pioneer, artist and former professor of painting and art history Lily Yeh knows that art is powerful. In project after project, she shows how it can transform people, build communities and be a catalyst for economic development through fair trade programs. A self-described late bloomer, her art takes her around the world. Her organization, Barefoot Artists, is empowering communities and preserving indigenous art and culture here and abroad.

In addition to these conversation leaders, moderators will keep the conversations moving. Patrick Sims, UW–Madison Department of Theatre and Drama; and Kathy Cramer Walsh, UW–Madison Department of Political Science will lead sessions.

The BLE Idea

The idea for the BLE has been in the making for quite some time. The conversation around the water cooler started casually, with a small group tossing out provocative questions and issues affecting each of us personally and as a society. The ideas snowballed, and the next step became obvious. The organic brainstorming of the Big Learning Event represents what many of us are thinking — what is happening to the world around us?

Ideas and conversations addressing challenges are not unique to any one organization on the UW–Madison campus. At every level, within every department, we’re recognizing the old ways of doing things won’t serve us in the future. The human capital on campus is massive and we hope the BLE will serve as a community incubator for creative systems and solutions to emerge and unfold.

After benefiting from this learning environment, attendees can take best practices learned, new ideas discovered and forward ways of thinking back to their corners of campus. From grant writing to streamlining meeting productivity, attendees can approach big and small challenges with a renewed optimism and creativity.

Event goals

The goal of the Big Learning Event is to develop game-changing ideas for the future. The open but structured event will harness the collective ideas of speakers and attendees; inspire, engage and challenge participants; create a forum for authentic cross-disciplinary conversations; develop world-changing ideas and provocative possibilities with people from diverse fields of study and work; and enable transformative learning through intercultural dialogue.

Reasons to attend

► We all need a network of people to help us develop new ideas. These new ideas can emerge by making connections with people outside our usual groups.

► Small, incremental thinking has its place, but the BLE is designed to help us think big.

► BLE will engage faculty, staff, students and other participants in a vibrant, academically driven experience.

► BLE is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary opportunity for discussions and learning.

► BLE follows the tradition of the Wisconsin Idea. For more than 150 years, the university has been a leader in innovation and intellectual collaboration that has led to big ideas from which we have all benefited.

BLE can help you:

► Bring cutting-edge ideas to your department
► Identify new, multi-center grant opportunities
► Network with colleagues from other disciplines
► Nurture new partnerships and collaborations
► Develop strategic plans for the future
► Keep abreast of new ideas and innovations

Co-hosts of the Big Learning Event include:
Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, at the Waisman Center
Department of Medicine — Geriatrics and Gerontology
Office of Human Resource Development
Office of Quality Improvement
University Communications

For more information and to register, visit tinyurl.com/ble2011

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