Examining the Nature of Offensive Material

by Mark A. Rhoda, Adjunct Associate Professor of Dramatic Arts

That's obscene!
That's pornographic!
Deviant!
I'm offended!

How often have we uttered these words in moments of outrage, or mock-outrage, at things we find "offensive"?

How often have we uttered them without understanding *what it is* that offends, or without questioning *who has determined* what is offensive, and *how* and *why?*

This year's Sixth Annual Women Studies Colloquium will take on these questions. Hosted by the cross-disciplinary study area in Women, Gender, and Sexuality, the colloquium will take place March 23-24 in Cole Cinema One, Campus Center, on the SMCM campus. All events are free and open to the public.

"While our topic is admittedly a controversial one," says Jennifer Cognard-Black, assistant professor of English at SMCM and co-chair of this year's colloquium, "that's the very point.

"We chose to focus on the politics of sexual representation, with particular consideration of censorship, deviance, pornography, and other cultural representations of sexuality, because we engage these issues every day—on the Web, through politics, in journalistic and print media, in the arts—but often without questioning or examining *how* we construct discourses of offense that help determine, or overlay, our views on gender and sexuality, or *why* we construct them in particular ways."

For more information about colloquium events, contact Jennifer Cognard-Black or Mark A. Rhoda, co-chairs of the colloquium committee, at 240-895-4233 (e-mail jcognard@smcm.edu) or 240-895-4231 (e-mail marhoda@smcm.edu), respectively. More information is available at the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Web site, as well as at www.smcm.edu/wgsx/colloquium/index.htm. All colloquium events take place in Cole Cinema One of the Campus Center on the SMCM campus and are free and open to the public.

New Teaching Ideas

Better Eating through Chemistry

by Pamela Mertz, Assistant Professor of Chemistry

Photo by Barbara Woodel

"I set up the projects early in the course by guiding the students to good sources of nutrition information and teach them how to evaluate nutritional studies reported in magazines and newspapers."

What are trans fats and why should I avoid them in processed foods? Why is my doctor concerned about my high density lipoprotein (HDL) and low density lipoprotein (LDL) levels? Which is better healthwise, the Atkins Diet or the Mediterranean Diet? What happens to our bodies when we take supplements such as steroids, creatine, and amino acids? These are the kinds of questions my students address when they take my "Contemporary Chemistry" class, a general education course designed for non-science majors.

The chemistry faculty at St. Mary's teach Contemporary Chemistry according to their interests. Some focus on the environment and examine such topics as global warming, nuclear power, acid rain, and the ozone layer. As a biochemist, my interests lie more in biological molecules. Because nutrition is concerned with biochemical molecules that are needed and used by the body, I teach the course as the Chemistry of Nutrition.

When I was developing the course, I faced a number of challenges. For example, most existing biochemistry textbooks are designed for juniors and seniors who have had at least two years of chemistry, including two courses in organic chemistry. While we have students at St. Mary's who want to pursue careers in medicine or a molecular science, most of the students who take Contemporary Chemistry are not science majors. The nutrition book I use, unfortunately, is weak on chemistry. Therefore I must resort to special handouts on such topics as bonding, functional groups, electronegativity, polarity, and representations of chemical structures. We practice these topics during class exercises, often in small groups.

For example, I give them an in-class exercise on chirality. Many molecules have a property analogous to a left-handed or right-handed glove. Two structures can look very similar from a structural standpoint but differ in orientation about a central atom and, in fact, are mirror images of each other. Students find chirality difficult, so I have them build three-dimensional structures from simple atoms, connecting them with bonds. And I point out the relevance of chirality to everyday life.

The relevance lies in the drug ibuprofen. Many molecules can exist in pairs where one structure is biologically active and the other is not. When you take ibuprofen, about half the molecules in the pill will do the job of alleviating a headache while the other half are biologically inert, even though they are packaged with the active form. But usually the active/inert split only occurs when molecules are synthesized in a laboratory by scientists. Biological molecules found in nature, by contrast, often are found exclusively in the biologically active chiral form and not in the other.

We spend most of the Chemistry of Nutrition course studying the major classes of nutritional molecules and ions: carbohydrates, fats/oils, proteins, vitamins, and minerals, with an emphasis on chemical structure and function. For example, during the fats/oils unit, we look at chemical differences between trans fatty acids, saturated fatty acids, and unsaturated fatty acids and discuss which are healthier. Many of the students have heard about the health benefits of omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids, and they learn that both are types of unsaturated fatty acids. We examine "good" cholesterol (HDL) and "bad" cholesterol (LDL) in terms of structure and function. In addition, students learn to recognize the chemical backbone of cholesterol-four fused carbon rings in other molecules such as steroids and vitamin D. I have them draw structures of triglycerides, the storage form of fat, starting with simple precursor molecules.

Particularly exciting are the group projects that come at the end of the course. I have the students write essays looking at two sides of a controversial issue and present their views to their classmates. I set up the projects early in the course by guiding the students to good sources of nutrition information and teach them how to evaluate nutritional studies reported in magazines and newspapers. Students have written about anabolic steroids, caffeine, alcohol, various popular diets, the fat substitute Olestra, artificial sweeteners vs. sucrose, and organic foods vs. genetically modified foods.

I never know what to expect from the projects. I have had students bring in chocolate chip cookies, some made with sucrose, some with sucralose, and ask their peers to do a taste test. One group brought in food that was representative of the Mediterranean diet. Another made a scare movie about steroid use, set to music.

Students have told me that they appreciate seeing chemistry made relevant. One student described the course as very difficult but surprisingly interesting. Best of all, I hear reports that many are now paying attention to food labels and nutrition studies and are educating family and friends about what they have learned.