



KRISTIN WOBBE | FEEDING THEIR MINDS

In her laboratory, Kris Wobbe, interim head of WPI's Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, works to protect crops from viral infections and transform common vegetables into drug-making factories. Still, she hadn't thought seriously about food problems until she began teaching a new first-year seminar in September.

"Food production is central to so many global problems," she says. "When you look at the big picture, you see how, for instance, both energy availability and global health are impacted by food."

The Feed the World seminar grew out of the work of a commission appointed by President Dennis Berkey in 2005 to look into the First Year Experience at WPI. Wobbe signed on to work on the commission, then gladly volunteered to teach one of two Great Problems Seminars (the other is Power the World) introduced on a test basis this year to inject some of the excitement of the WPI projects into the first year.

She and teaching partner Rob Traver, principal of the Massachusetts Academy of Mathematics and Science at WPI, constructed the two-term seminar from the ground up, conveying enough content to award students credits in chemistry and the humanities and helping them develop skills (teamwork, data analysis, writing, presenting) to prepare them for their major projects.

"We wanted to give them a sense that their education could be put toward solving big problems," she says.

Through a series of individual and team projects, students delved into nutrition, economics, globalization, behavior (a hands-on study of food waste in a residence hall), agriculture issues (with a visit from a local farmer), and human expression.

Wobbe, too, has learned a great deal. "It's been a lot of fun to step out of my own box," she says. As plans begin for as many as four Great Problems Seminars next year, she is eager to continue. "It's one of the most rewarding things I've done at WPI."



“We wanted to give them a sense that their education could be put toward solving big problems.”