

## FOCUS

Who owns the cells from John Moore's spleen? Or those from Henrietta Lacks's cervix? Doctors used those cells to find cures for forms of leukemia and polio—without the patients' consent.

To **Priscilla Wald**, the question of ownership of genetic material raised by these famous cases is central to the debate over "what constitutes a biological human being and a legal person."

An associate professor of English and of women's studies, Wald happily treads in the realms of science and popular culture. She partnered with a computer scientist, a law professor, an information scientist, and a geneticist to teach The Genome Revolution and its Impact on Science, Health, and Society, one of the modules in Duke's pioneering program, First-Year Opportunity for Comprehensive, Unified Study, known as FOCUS. Her syllabus includes such films as "The Boys from Brazil" (about cloning) and "Gattaca" (genetic manipulation).

Advances in human genetics are "further destabilizing our already unstable ideas about who and what we are as human beings," Wald says. Complicating matters more are the language, images, and narratives used by popular culture to portray scientific hypotheses.

"In 'Gattaca,' characters know the probabilities of health complications and personality traits from birth," Wald says. "The film asks what having that information will do to a person's sense of self."

Wald learns along with her students by approaching problems from a variety of perspectives. "If I want to understand how a set of images affects the way people respond to scientific discoveries, being able to ask questions that are asked by students of literature, anthropology, history, sociology, political science, and art history will certainly deepen my insight," Wald says.

A quarter of Duke's first-year students enroll in one of a dozen FOCUS modules. Taught in small classes by some of Duke's most prestigious scholars, they live with other FOCUS students in East Campus residence halls. Their close interaction with one another and with faculty gives them a unique perspective on their first college semester.

FOCUS modules cost between \$25,000 and \$50,000 to develop. Seed funds enable faculty to develop a module's interrelated seminars. Enhancements, such as field trips or special speakers, add immeasurably to the impact of the FOCUS experience, but can

nearly double operating costs. Duke parents **Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Bass P'97** gave a \$5 million challenge gift to support the FOCUS Program and encourage the innovation that has been its hallmark.



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