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## Freshman Classes Getting Hooked on the Classics

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Modern Campuses Return to Works of Dead White Males

 By *Jay Mathews*

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Six years ago, a faculty committee at Ursinus College near Philadelphia sat down to review its core curriculum. The usual results of such meetings, some critics of higher education say, are minor adjustments in a smorgasbord of courses that don't really have much to do with each other.

At Ursinus, with 1,500 students and a good reputation for medical sciences, something else happened. The committee thought it was time to make a radical move and decided to create a full course on the human experience that every freshman would be required to take.

Forcing all first-year students to read the same classic texts by Homer, Plato and Virgil used to be fairly common at U.S. colleges. But the academic rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s led to more student choice and less contact with dead white male writers of classic literature and philosophy. Many colleges adopted core programs that were very loose, except for a few stubborn enclaves, such as the St. John's colleges in Santa Fe, N.M., and Annapolis that make everybody read the same old books.

Ursinus President John Strassburger

said he was not sure how students



Ursinus College faculty and students perform a medieval cycle play, "Noah's Ark," as part of a new course, the Common Intellectual Experience, required of freshmen at the Collegeville, Pa., school. (By Bradley C. Bower For The Washington Post)

### Heavy Lifting

Works studied by students in Ursinus College's Common Intellectual Experience course, which all freshmen must take. The list fluctuates

would react to the new required course, the Common Intellectual Experience, or CIE. He and his faculty soon learned that even for 21st century undergraduates, the great works can be addictive.

"I discussed ideas from the 'Heart of Darkness' when talking about racism in a course about Hispanic literature and culture, and witnessed a heated argument about Simone de Beauvoir's take on feminism at a frat party," said junior Sally Brosnan. "I have walked in on my roommate reading the unassigned chapters of Nietzsche's '[On] the Genealogy of Morals,' instead of her usual Wednesday night reruns of 'Sex and the City.' At the end of the semester, several students kept their CIE books rather than selling them back to the bookstore for beer money."

somewhat from year to year.

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J. Scott Lee, executive director of the Association for Core Texts and Courses headquartered at Saint Mary's College of California in Moraga, estimated that about 65 undergraduate institutions require all freshmen to take the same classics or core courses. Even so, he said, that is more than did so in the 1970s.

Lee said that when the group of colleges that form his association had its first meeting in 1995, those in attendance were surprised at how many schools had begun to have such freshman year course rules. This was in part, he said, a reaction to "the core being too much like a shopping mall, and there was a deeper and more fundamental concern over the very nature of what education should be for undergraduates."

Most colleges still give freshmen plenty of choice, in part because they think students are more likely to apply themselves to subjects that interest them. "The difference between courses where students are forced to be there and where students have chosen to be there is like night and day," said Paul Armstrong, dean of the college at Brown University, which does not have core requirements.

Armstrong added, however, that his son Tim, who attends Reed College in Portland, Ore., enjoyed the Humanities 110 course required there for all freshmen.

Barry Latzer, a Graduate Center of the City University of New York political scientist and expert on core curricula, said several colleges seem to have common freshman course requirements but in reality don't. "Many of these

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courses seem to be seminars, small classes with term papers, the subject of which varied with the interests of the instructors, who were drawn from different departments," he said.

Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said one reason why most colleges do not have a common course for freshmen is because "it's much easier not to." The number of courses at all schools has grown rapidly, each with its advocates.

Faculty commitment to research also plays a role. "Professor Jones is researching Tibet, so he wants to teach a course on Tibet," Neal said. "But the reality is that faculty are there to teach students, and the question is, what do our students know when they graduate? Have they received a coherent and rigorous education, or have we simply given them a patchwork of classes and a curriculum where everything goes?"

Among the colleges that have freshmen take the same course are schools as big and famous as Columbia University, with 23,800 students in New York, and as small and little-known as Oglethorpe University, with 1,029 students in Atlanta. Colgate University has two required courses, and George Washington University for the first time this year will require all freshmen to take a writing course, even if they had top scores on entrance exams.

Some of the common freshman courses are not too strenuous, students say, but others are terrifying. John Schiappa, a former undergraduate at Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Va., said he has vivid memories of Rhetoric 101 and 102, required of all freshmen, as well as a required sophomore rhetoric course.

"It may seem elementary to teach college students the value of writing and speaking well and correctly," Schiappa said, "but the course pushes so far beyond that. HSC's rhetoric requirement is akin to the worst grammar class one has ever taken, multiplied by a factor of 10 and stretched across two years. . . . It was a catalyst for bonding through hardship."

The same feeling of togetherness is generated by Humanities 110 at Reed. "Every freshman student is reading the same thing at the same time," said Peter Steinberger, dean of the faculty, "so when it is Herodotus week, the campus is awash in copies of Herodotus. This creates an intellectual basis for freshmen to interact."

At Ursinus, the incoming class of 2009 read the epic poem "Gilgamesh" over the summer and discussed it during orientation week. The following Monday, Aug. 29, the freshmen gathered in the evening to watch faculty and students perform a medieval cycle play about Noah, since the story of the great flood figures in both "Gilgamesh" and another Common Intellectual Experience reading, the book of Genesis in the Bible.

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University professor and minister Peter J. Gomes recommending the Common Intellectual Experience for other schools, including his own. Gomes said he thought Harvard's faculty would resist the idea, but "why should all of the creative and liberating ideas for liberal education be left to the small residential liberal arts colleges?"

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