

Colleges find juicy titles swell enrollment

The Boston Globe

Many opt for courses like 'Economics of Sin'

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | September 8, 2009

Boston College German studies professor Michael Resler went searching for a way to boost flagging interest in his "German Literature of the High Middle Ages" class a few years ago, and settled on the idea of simply giving the course a sexier name. The resulting "Knights, Castles, and Dragons" nearly tripled enrollment.

Resler then replaced his class on "The Songs of Walter von der Vogelweide," a great German lyric poet, with "Passion, Politics, and Poetry in the Middle Ages." Again, enrollment swelled.

"I suppose the moral of the story is that we live in an age where everything has to be marketed in order to find a willing audience," Resler mused.

As schools compete for students and faculty come under pressure to boost enrollment in their classes, colleges from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to Wellesley are jazzing up course catalogs to entice a generation of students drawn to the dramatic. This year's offerings include crowd-pleasing topics like massacres, superheroes, and sin.

"The titles are much more playful than before, no doubt about it," said Bob Cluss, a biochemistry professor and dean of curriculum at Middlebury College. "I think it has to do with a younger generation of faculty who understand it's an opportunity to catch students' eyes."

Jessica Holmes, a 38-year-old economics professor at Middlebury, is part of the younger wave. This fall, she will teach Economics of Sin, a titillating title that has sparked sharp interest, with even faculty, staff, and community members looking to audit the class.

"In what other economics class will they have the opportunity to explore pornography, prostitution, crime and punishment, drugs and drug legalization, the sale of human organs, and gambling?" Holmes asked.

The trend toward more inventive, provocative course names reflects a broader movement of professors using more creative teaching methods to capture students' interest, Holmes and other academics say.

"As you can imagine, it is a lot easier to get students to debate the economic arguments for and against the legalization of prostitution than to discuss the latest employment estimates," Holmes said.

In that way, the catchy titles go beyond savvy marketing, a shorthand way to show students raised on text messaging and Facebook that the course has a contemporary edge. They also signal a shift away from stuffy lectures and abstruse textbooks to discussion-based, multimedia classes, and winkingly suggest the class might be entertaining.

"The title is just to be fun because the course is supposed to be," Alice Cheung, a biochemistry professor at UMass-Amherst, said of her forthcoming course, The Light Fantastic: Wonders of Biology Under the Microscope.

As a freshman seminar, the class is designed to be general, and Cheung said an overly scientific name might scare students off.

Cheung isn't the only UMass-Amherst professor to indulge in a bit of whimsy. Future economists, along with poets and paleontologists, are invited to the freshman seminar Dinosaur Tracks, Communes, Massacres & Poets, and a classics course is dubbed Achilles to Batman: Where are the Heroes?

Not to be outdone, Suffolk University offers freshmen an array of tantalizingly titled seminars, including the sprawling Sacred Hoops, Sneaker Pimps, and Hoop Dreams: Race, Gender, and Consumerism in 20th Century American Basketball.

The professor, Rich Miller, said the course has filled up quickly, and that several students told him it was the intriguing title that grabbed their attention.

"It creates a buzz," he said. "It gives it some street cred."

Miller, 40, said that while teaching English 101 is his "bread and butter," the seminar gives him a chance to experiment a bit. Students pick up on that, he said.

While the class takes a serious look at basketball's cultural influence, Miller said the trendy title has drawn a bit of good-natured derision from his scholarly colleagues.

"You definitely get a little razzing in the hallways," he said.

Yet many professors are following Miller's lead in hopes of coaxing more students into their classrooms. Students have a lot of options, faculty members say, and a little sparkle doesn't hurt.

"The dean's office monitors enrollment, and humanities tend to suffer," said Nicolas de Warren, philosophy professor at Wellesley College who is coteaching *The Stars and the Sages: Philosophy and the Cosmos*. "With such a rich offering of courses, there's a kind of competition, and titles that speak immediately to students can make a difference."

Naming courses is a delicate craft, de Warren and others say. Ideally, they are catchy but not campy, fun but not frivolous. They can't be overly long, to fit in the course catalog and student transcripts, but still have to convey the gist of the subject matter.

When it came time to name his philosophy seminar last year, Jeffrey Bernstein, an associate professor of philosophy at the College of the Holy Cross, went the highbrow route with *Iconoclasm and Theogony: A Tale of Two Transgressions*. Like Miller, he got some chuckles, but for the opposite reason. "They all said, 'Students are really going to flock to that one,' " he recalled with a laugh. Searching for a peppier, pithier tone, he chose *Images of Divinity: Limits*. This year, he went further, naming a similar course about concepts of divinity *Oh God 1: Concepts*.

"It's an invitation," he said. "And it will allow me to elaborate." ■