**>>>** Coming up with a catchy title is part of the strategy. Classical historian David Halperin's book *How to Be Gay* was based on a class he taught at the University of Michigan. Wayne Koestenbaum, a distinguished English professor at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, has published several books based on ideas he has used for classes. One of them was called *Humiliation*.

"Thinking across disciplines and making counterintuitive leaps keep the mind alive," Koestenbaum says. "If a name for a class doesn't make me giggle, it's not good enough."

He must be giggling all the time these days. At Hampshire

College a recent class was called "Emptiness." At Oberlin "How to Win a Beauty Pageant" applied cultural studies methodology to aspects of feminism and politics. Occidental College offered a critical theory course on stupidity. The New School's website boldly advertises "Fasting and Spiritual Technology," which is about "the pleasure of no pleasure...expiation and purification, sacrifice and repentance." At Rutgers, meanwhile, "Politicizing Beyoncé" has been an attention-getter in the women and gender studies department—although it won't be taught next year, because its feisty professor was placed on temporary administrative leave after an offensive Twitter rant. Meanwhile, at Skidmore, "The Sociology of Miley Cyrus" studied "aspects of intersectional identities and media representation." Twerking, one would assume, was included

And if zombies are your thing, you can study them at any number of schools.

To understand how all this happened, some deconstructive and historical analysis is required, not to mention a touch of semiotics and communications theory. In the late 1960s the fields of women's studies and black studies broke academic ground by promoting the analysis of traditional sexual and racial structures in a white male-dominated society. Gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies followed, creating new and innovative

cross-disciplinary methods of aca-Yale's Most Popular demic analysis. Politics entered the classroom as well. Class Ever: Happiness

"Many professors think their work is as much about social jus-

tice and advocacy as teaching," says Samuel Abrams, who just taught a popular "Presidential Power" class at Sarah Lawrence. "But I created that class because of student ignorance

about what a president can and can't do." Unlike professors who bristle when told by department heads to come up with catchier names for classes, Abrams, 38,

obliges with enthusiasm. "College is a marketplace for ideas, so you have to be entrepreneurial with your courses," he says. "And in a world of digital domination, you have to be innovative to get attention." Also, given the popularity of so many quick-hit knowledge videos, including TED Talks and Ed X, showmanship sells.

Sometimes the sell is ridiculous. For instance, an online course offered by Harvard, "Power and Responsibility: Doing Philosophy with Superheroes," has a promotional video with cartoon graphics in which a lecturer in ethics and public policy strips off his glasses and button-down shirt to reveal a tight T-shirt with a big H over his less than fit torso. Meanwhile, a class in Brown's archaeology department, "Of Dice and Men: Games in Human Societies Past and Present," declares, in a bold play for enrollment, "Students will play games!"

Not all educators applaud the academic rush to fun and contemporary relevance. "It seems to me that higher education is going off the rails by offering so many classes with curb appeal," says Matthew Davis, a dean at the Santa Fe campus of the rigorous St. John's College. Andrew Delbanco, professor of American studies at Columbia, believes that certain writers never get old. "That's why there's value in a class that introduces great books rather than the latest superhero movie," he says. "To understand the present means engaging with the past."

Richard Saller, a professor and former dean BUBBLES 101 A course catalog—based on actual classes—for the modern mind.

THE AMAZING WORLD OF BUBBLES, California Institute of Technology

THE AMERICAN VACATION, Iowa State

THE ART OF WALKING Centre College

GETTING DRESSED. Princeton

INVENTED LANGUAGES: HISTORY OF SURFING, KLINGON AND BEYOND, University of Texas

GAGA FOR GAGA, University of Virginia

KANYE VERSUS EVERY-BODY!, Georgia State

THE JOY OF GARBAGE, Santa Clara University

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JUGGLING, Reed

TATTOOS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, Scripps College

UNDERWATER BASKET WEAVING, Reed

of Pennsylvania

AND PHILOSOPHY. University of California, Berkeley

THE TEXTUAL APPEAL OF TUPAC SHAKUR. University of Washington TREE CLIMBING,

of humanities at Stanford, worries that trendy courses about the present can trivialize not just education but how young people look at life. "Students have many opportunities to participate in digital culture," he says. "Our challenge as educators is to teach the value of deeper thinking."

It's worth noting that the debate about what constitutes a classical education has raged since, well, classical times. Plato laid out the correct way to educate philosopher-kings in *The Republic*. In the fifth century a philosopher named Martianus Minneus Felix Capella, in his opus De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, described a system of education based on teaching seven liberal arts; the principles of his system were embraced throughout the Middle Ages. During the identity politics debates of the 1990s, when students questioned the merits of reading mostly "dead white European males," New York magazine film critic David Denby returned to Columbia to do just that for *Great Books*, his account of retaking the university's famous required freshman lit classes. Today the much discussed "classical education movement" is reshaping curricula in primary, middle, and high schools around the country.

But Andrew Ross, a professor at NYU's department of Social and Cultural Analysis, finds innovation and even showmanship useful, perhaps even essential, in academia right now. The last class he created was a doozy: "Migration, Refugees & the Politics of Sanctuary," which was based on students' interest in immigration and their opposition to Trump policy. "Professors from all over the school were coming in to give lectures," says Ross of the sold-out class, which brought students historical and cross-cultural perspectives. "I told students they were getting the equivalent of an all-access pass to a rock festival."

Josie Danziger, an art history major at Bard College, felt that way about her recent spring semester seminar on photography and Instagram. "It's taught by Stephen Shore," she says, referring to the famous photographer, who just had a Museum of Modern Art retrospective. "When I tell people about the class, it's hard for them to roll their eyes once they hear who's teaching it." Those people include her father James Danziger, an important photography dealer. "If my daughter's going to take a gut, it might as well be with Stephen Shore," he says.

Holly Peterson, a Brown parent and alumna who hears about all kinds of oddball classes from her son, remembers telling her father, the late financier Peter Peterson (who studied at the notoriously inflexible University of Chicago), about a group independent study she took while a student of women's studies in the late 1980s. It focused on the behavior and sensitivities of men. "He almost fell off his chair," she says. "But I believe that when you allow choice and freedom in a college curriculum, only the kids who want to really learn something will be in the class, and they're going to work hard and do well."

Indeed, this seemed to be the case in the "How Will You Die?" seminar at NYU. After two hours or so, the students, some facing personal issues of mortality involving friends and family members, filed out, exhausted but inspired. One student, Mathania Toussaint, lingered. She said she plans to go to medical school, which is why her choice of religious studies as a major confuses her mother.

"Learning about ethics and religion in a class about death will help me understand my patients better," she said. The previous semester she had taken a class about monsters. Was that helpful for her academic future too? "I don't know, but it was helpful in helping me enjoy college," she said. «

CASES AGAINST COLLEGE

America's most prestigious schools have faced so many lawsuits and investigations recently that higher-ed law may soon be its own practice area. Thank goodness for those billion-dollar endowments. By Elizabeth Cantrell

MAY 2. 2014

The Department of Education releases a list of 55 colleges—including Dartmouth, Harvard, and Princeton—that are under investigation for their handling of sexual assault complaints. By June 2017 the list includes 240 schools.

JULY 15, 2015

A UC San Diego student wins his suit alleging that he was not awarded a fair trial in a sexual misconduct case. At the time, more than 40 accused students across the country had filed lawsuits against their colleges.

DECEMBER 6, 2016

A female Stanford University student sues, alleging that Stanford violated Title IX when it failed to protect her from a "known sexual predator on campus."

**AUGUST 2, 2017** 

A group called Students for Fair Admissions sues Harvard for discriminating against Asian-Americans and giving preferences to other racial minorities.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2017

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos calls for an overhaul of how colleges investigate sexual assault, saying Obama-era guidelines violate accused students' rights.

**NOVEMBER 21, 2017** 

On the heels of the student group lawsuit, the Justice Department begins investigating Harvard's admissions policies.

**DECEMBER 15. 2017** 

The congressional tax bill places a 1.4 percent excise tax on endowment earnings at certain schools. MIT,

Stanford, Dartmouth, Yale, and Princeton are among them.

JANUARY 25, 2018

The Justice Department announces it will support two conservative groups that sued UC Berkeley last year claiming that campus policies illegally restricted them from bringing in speakers like Ann Coulter.

**APRIL 5, 2018** 

In a letter to the dean, 51 students in Columbia's visual arts MFA program demand a tuition refund for the 2018 school year, claiming that facilities are crumbling, star faculty members are absent, and tuition is rising.

**APRIL 9, 2018** 

The Justice Department announces it will investigate whether colleges have violated antitrust laws by sharing information about early-decision applicants.

**APRIL 24, 2018** 

Hearings begin in a lawsuit brought against George Mason University by Transparent GMU, a student-led group, to disclose how donations from the Charles Koch Foundation were spent—and whether the tens of millions of dollars came with strings attached.

**APRIL 26, 2018** 

In response to a complaint from a doctoral student at USC, the Federal Office of Civil Rights opens an investigation into Yale for discrimination—against men. The student alleges that the university violates Title IX by offering single-gender programs and scholarships exclusively for women.

WHAT IF HARRY POTTER IS REAL?, Appalachian State University

WASTING TIME ON THE **INTERNET**, University

THE SIMPSONS

Cornell

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