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Subject: "This is the hardest class you will ever take," the kids were told. And the course filled up within minutes. | The Book Haven

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"This is the hardest class you will ever take," the kids were told. And the course filled up within minutes.

Cynthia Haven

Auden knew what he was doing.

Kids are lazy little buggers who opt for easy courses, right?

Wrong.

Some time ago I wrote about W.H. Auden's syllabus during his time at the University of Michigan in the 1940s, a copy of which had been sitting in my files for decades. I can't remember how I found it in the archives of the Rackham Graduate School, but occasionally I would run across it again, take it out, and stare at it, as at a marvel.

The reading list for his course, "Fate and the Individual in European Literature," included: The *Divine Comedy* in full, four works by Shakespeare, Pascal's Pensées, Horace's odes, Volpone, Racine, Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, Moby-Dick, The Brothers Karamazov, Faust, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Kafka, Rilke, T.S. Eliot. Also, nine operas. (Auden loved opera – and assigned three of Wagner's Teutonic masterpieces.) That's more than 6,000 pages total. For a single course.

At the University of Oklahoma, three brave men – Kyle Harper, a classicist and the university's provost; the historian Wilfred McClay; and David Anderson, a professor of English – decided to team-teach a year-long course, modifying Auden's syllabus a little – to include, for example, Milton.

The result, according to Mark Bauerlein writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

"This is the hardest class you will ever take."

When enrollment opened last semester, the unexpected happened. The course filled up within minutes. Harper had already warned his students, "This is the hardest class you will ever take." The syllabus was posted online in advance, so that students knew exactly what they were getting into. The course meets a general-education requirement at Oklahoma, but so do many other courses with half the workload. To accommodate the unexpected demand, the class was expanded from 22 to 30 students, the maximum number that the assigned classroom could hold.

I sat in on a class in October. McClay lectured on *Inferno*. The atmosphere was genial but focused. You can tell after five minutes whether a class has an *esprit de corps* — no sullen faces, no eyes drifting to windows and cellphones, even the bad jokes get a laugh. McClay slid from Augustine to Bonaventura to Jesus, Jonah, Exodus, and the prodigal son before taking up Paolo and Francesca, and then the suicides, sodomites, murderers, and frauds in Dante's torture zones.

After class, about half of the students and I headed over to the dining room at Dunham

The historian was game.

College, one of Oklahoma's graceful new residential colleges, for lunch. There, without the professors present, I asked the key question: Why did they sign up for Western-civ boot camp?

One fellow grumbled that he had to do three times as much work as he did in his other classes. The rest nodded. But you could hear in his words the self-respect that comes from doing more work than the norm, from climbing the highest hill while your peers dog it. Another student said that the page-count of the syllabus had flattered her, that it showed the professors respected her enough to demand

count of the syllabus had rattled her, that it showed the professors respected her enough to demand that she take on a heavy load of historic literature.

"This is what I came to college for," another said. One more chimed in, "This class is changing my life." The English prof was game, too.

They acknowledged, too, the distinctiveness of the works they read, one student calling them a "foundation" for things they study elsewhere. They admired the professors, to be sure, but the real draw was the material. When I asked what they would change about the course, they went straight to the books: add *The Iliad* and some of the Bible.

Read the whole thing [here](#).

A postscript of 4/14 from John Murphy of the University of Virginia: "On my way out the door of higher ed and toward opportunities, both teaching and otherwise, elsewhere, one of my thoughts – in line with the program described here – is one way to revive the humanities might be to make the whole enterprise an honors curriculum or honors college within larger institutions. That would allow for a recuperation of the rigorous and seriousness that has long been lost within college and university humanities courses and it would also raise the value of a humanities degree as a credential. The implicit message would be "real college for real students" and it would be mark of distinction to have taken the more difficult and selective course of study, even if you went on to pursue a "practical" career after that. It would be a sign to "practical" employers that a graduate had really hit the books during college and not taken the easy way out. Young people will work very, very, very hard at things that ultimately don't matter as much as curricular education – i.e. athletics. So maybe foregrounding the aspect of difficulty might tap some kind of competitive spirit. 'Auden College: No Pain, No Gain.'"

Tags: [Blaise Pascal](#), [Horace](#), [Jean Racine](#), [John Milton](#), [Kyle Harper](#), [Mark Bauerlein](#), [Richard Wagner](#), [W.H. Auden](#), [Wilfred McClay](#); [David Anderson](#), [William Shakespeare](#)

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