



Innovative Courses

By Lora Shinn

As a freshman, I enrolled in a course called Virtual College at The Evergreen State College. This was 1995, when computers took a couple minutes to connect to a website—if we were lucky. ■ Friends needled me over the name, saying things like, “Do you just pretend to attend class? Do you attend lectures on a computer?” It sounded too fanciful to be taken seriously. In our seminars, we discussed virtual

reality, hyperlinks and artificial intelligence—along with ridiculous ideas, like the American population shopping online.

How times have changed.

Today, novel courses pulse through the halls of academia, unusual classes designed to whet the appetites of both incoming freshmen and jaded seniors. Whole degrees are offered in what might at first glance seem to offer a narrow career track, or a professional gamble: a major in fermentation, for example.

At Oregon State University, Far Side Entomology teaches about bugs, using the works of cartoonist Gary Larson; Duke University offers Soccer Politics. The Soul of Harry Potter at Augustana College considers J.K. Rowling’s work; Philosophy and Star Trek at Georgetown University won-

ders whether Data is a person.

“Just because something is about popular culture doesn’t mean you dumb it down or that it’s frivolous,” says Rob Weiner, who teaches a James Bond–focused class called Icons of Popular Culture, an upper-level honors seminar at Texas Tech University. “I use popular culture to teach critical thinking about the world we live in, what it means to be citizens of the world.”

Any subject matter can be used to encourage critical thinking, if done well, Weiner notes. “I had one student a few years ago tell me how much they learned about critical thinking from my Zombie Culture class that could be applied to real world situations in terms of being able to problem-solve,” he says.

Just warming a seat won’t earn a pass in

Weiner’s class. Students write papers and presentations, analyze films. They read novels and a selection of scholarly articles.

In some cases, course titles might sound fanciful—perhaps to attract student enrollment—but the underlying concepts are fairly straightforward. At Arizona State University, *Laughing to Music* is an intro to music and comedy from comic operas to musicals; and *Signs of Aliens* is a deep exploration around what “aliens” represent in literature, movies and even bumper stickers, perhaps telling us more about our own culture than about life on Mars.

Critical thinking ability is an integral characteristic for a well-rounded employee, says Stephanie Welder, a Philadelphia consultant with Access College and Career Consultants. “These classes tend to be more activity- or discussion-based, and students really have to think about material and what it means,” she says. “It’s an opportunity for intellectual growth.”

And corporate managers want smart, rational job applicants who can box outside the think, as it were. Business majors might well try on a few of these nonconforming sessions to become the workers employers are seeking: individuals who stretch themselves, are creative problem solvers and “can look at the big picture and pick out salient details. That takes critical thinking,” Welder says.

In marketing, for example, the narrative sells the product, service or person. Someone who took Michele Ramsey’s *The Rhetoric of American Horror Film* at Penn State Berks in Reading, Pennsylvania, would learn how films invite us to side with one character or another, or view someone sympathetically. “As a marketer, you can use that information to frame messages for your audience,” Ramsey says.

Michelle Stansbury studied cyborgs at Duke University, along with *The Search for Utopia*; *Myths & Mysteries of Memory*; and *Communication, Improv, and Business*. Now she runs her own PR firm, but looks back fondly on her eclectic transcript.

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"The cyborg class was about how technology is changing who we are as individuals, and as a community," Stansbury recalls. In session, students talked about wearable tech and the Internet in our homes. Today, one look at your Fitbit or Nest thermostat tells you that's no longer sci-fi.

Other classes have slightly tamer names, but present material in provocative new ways. In *Life in the Age of Dinosaurs*, at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, professors use chickens—descendants of dinosaurs—to help students learn how prehistoric dino tracks transformed into fossils.

Some classes at UAF go beyond the traditional four walls, as well. The Hawai'i Field Course includes a week-long trip to learn from the active Kilauea and Mauna Loa volcanoes about plate tectonics, erosion, and development of the ocean basins. These kinds of experiential classes stick with students.

"For about a month after our class trip to Hawai'i, students were still asking questions, wanting to learn how to cut and polish the rocks they collected and look at them under microscopes," says geophysics professor Jeffrey Freymueller.

Courses like these can encourage interest in a previously overlooked topic, says consultant Welder. Perhaps a student thinks she hates history—until she watches great flicks for *Civil War in Film*.

Often, unusual classes allow professors to explore a new focus, or share their particular passions with the greater campus in short sessions. At the University of Washington, one-credit seminar courses include *Diversity in Comics: Superheroines*, which considers the transformation of Captain Marvel.

Some courses are novel but perfectly appropriate to the university's locale, such as *Culture and History of Surfing* at San Diego State University.

Some lucky students snap up courses only available for a limited or one-shot time. Massachusetts Institute of Technol-

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COURTESY: OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY



Co-teacher Margaret Mellinger helps engage Oregon State University freshmen in the Finding Bigfoot class.

ogy has offered Kitchen Chemistry; American Pro Wrestling; American Soap Operas; and Lego Robotics in past years. MIT's noncredit Street-Fighting Math—focused on educated guessing and opportunistic problem solving—was offered online at EdX, and is still available free in archived form.

Unusual courses aren't always taught by professors. In the University of California, Berkeley's DeCal Program, students lead more than 150 pass-fail classes for credit (between 0.5 and 2 units), sponsored by faculty. Upcoming sessions include Magic: The Art and Theory of Deception; Game of Thrones: Alliances, Power and Strategy; and House of Cards: Government, Media, and Politics.

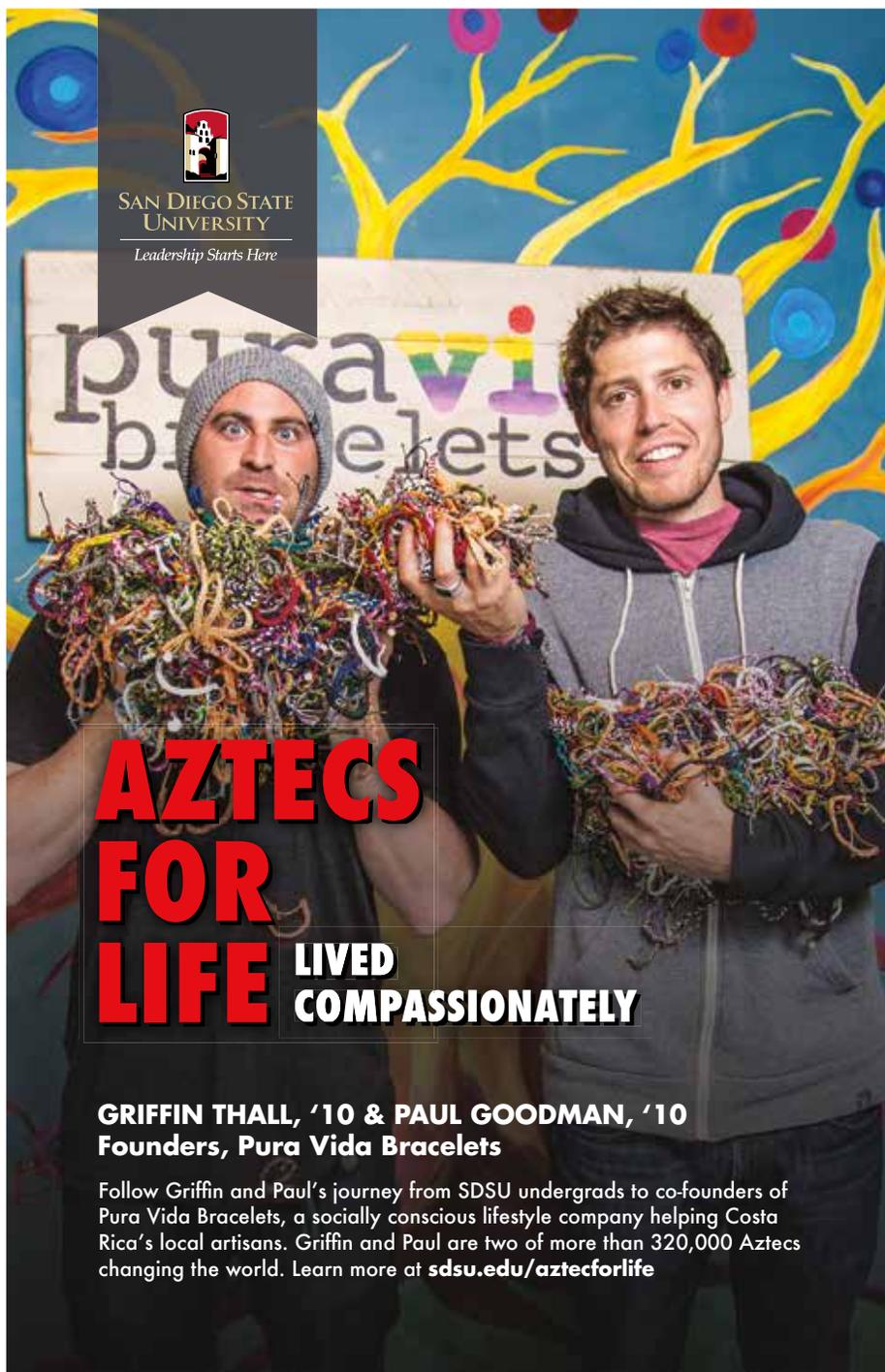
Other college subjects explore the touchy topics some might not want to deal with head-on—yet are integral aspects of many modern careers.

The University of Washington's Swearing and Taboo Language covers how the brain processes profanity, cross-cultural differences in taboo language, and censorship and obscenity laws.

Those who admire a Cirque du Soleil show might enroll at University of Nevada Las Vegas, which combines



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straightforward engineering with technical theater. Internships often take place along the Las Vegas Strip, and the degree leads to careers in theme parks, cruise ships and Broadway touring productions.

"They start in Vegas, spread their wings and off they go," says Joe Aldridge, who directs the UNLV B.S. in Entertainment Engineering and Design. Literally, the students take flight at times. At one commencement, a graduate was hoisted by cable and flew in for the diplomas.

Other unusual majors include citrus at Florida State University and fermentation science at Oregon State University.

Novel first-year seminars and courses "help students transition from high school to college work in a smaller class setting, where writing, reading and critical thinking are developed," says educational consultant Kiersten Murphy.

For example, at Oregon State University, this year's U-Engage specialized 2-credit elective frosh classes include Finding Bigfoot, a 50-minute, twice-weekly course on the mythical beast. Topics include what the legendary creatures represent in Pacific Northwest culture, and how various disciplines approach Bigfoot existence. Storytelling, pop culture, anthropology, journalism and science all come into play.

Some may deride such unusual college pursuits with a joke about "Underwater Basket Weaving," the archetypal urban legend of a frivolous class.

But it turns out that Underwater Basket Weaving was a real course, at a real college. The noncredit class was student-taught through the Paideia program at Reed College in Portland, a weeklong learning-teaching session where any Reed faculty, staff or alumni can teach on any topic. In this case, some materials need to be kept wet to be workable, ergo kept underwater (no snorkel required). So, not frivolous in the least—it's learning for the sake of knowledge. ▲

Lora Shinn is based in Los Angeles.

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