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Tough Love

By ABBY ELLIN

No matter what the subject, there's always one class whose reputation precedes it. Either the professor generates fear (say, John Houseman in "The Paper Chase"), the topic is grueling (organic chemistry, anyone?) or a stultifying combination of the two. Of course, one person's nightmare can be another's easy A, but some classes instill universal dread. They seem to have one thing in common: an uncompromising teacher who takes his mission seriously and expects mountains of work. Failing is easy, but it's possible to do well. The best students devote enormous energy to the class, taking impeccable notes and reviewing material every day. And in the long run, they are thankful.

Applied Marketing Management, Georgetown University

Course Description: M.B.A. elective. Nicknamed Homacide, after its professor, Kenneth E. Homa. Students who take it are Homaphiles; students who avoid it are Homaphobes. Emphasizes the data and analytical structures underlying marketing decisions, and ways to improve decision-making by infusing analytical methods and pragmatic realism.

What the Professor Says: "My courses tend to reflect the pace and content that is typical in blue-chip business environments -- lots of work, short deadlines," Professor Homa says. "My deal with students is that there won't be any busy work, that they will do a lot of work, but everything they do in my classes will help them land the best possible job and, most important, succeed at that job when they get it."

What Students Say: "You fear the coursework and you fear taking the class and Professor Homa," says Brent McGoldrick, a second-year M.B.A. "But you almost fear not taking it. In essence, Ken Homa guarantees that when you go into the real world you'll be more prepared than any other marketing M.B.A. out there. He says people tend to remember half of what they hear in a class, so he speaks twice as fast, figuring that will even out and you'll remember what he wants you to. I spent 10 to 15 hours a week on the last class I took with him. It's an elective, but that adds to the horror, because you choose it."

Mathematical Foundations of Computer Science I and II, University of Pennsylvania.

Course Description: Requirement, computer science and engineering program. Covers set theory (integers, prime and rational numbers), algorithms (Euclidean, RSA encryption), theorems (Euler, Fermat, Chinese remainder), induction proofs (well-ordered sets, weak and strong induction), combinatorics (permutations, combinations, combinatorial proofs of the binomial theorem, Pascal's identity).

What the Professor Says: "Mathematics is like puzzle solving -- you've got to twist it and shake it and try things," says Prof. Max Mintz. "I want students to discover what doesn't work as well as what does work. When they get the bachelor's degree the fun is just beginning. I don't think students are scared of me -- most of them know that the gruff exterior hides a pretty decent person. Some students don't fare well. As many as 20 percent have failed the course in a semester. I don't think it's a killer course unless one aims to get killed by not doing one's homework in a diligent way."

What Students Say: "He doesn't let the students get away with anything, and he unilaterally tries to fight grade inflation in academia," says Max Cantor, a fifth-year senior in international relations and computer science, concurrently doing a master's in computer science. "A B- is a respectable grade for Dr. Mintz. People either absolutely love him or hate him. He has a thing for making really obscure physics and computer-science jokes. He smiles and looks all proud of himself; half the class is cracking up not at the joke but at the fact that he said it. We all keep a page of Mintz quotes. We compare them at the end of the year."

Introduction to Psychology I: Psychobiology and Cognition, Emory University

Course Description: Requirement, psychology majors. Covers organization and operation of the nervous system as it pertains to behavior and its cognitive underpinnings. Topics include the development of sexual identity, perception, learning, memory and emotions.

What the Professor Says: "I don't give official assignments or papers to turn in, but I encourage students to look over their notes every day," says Prof. David A. Edwards. "There's no required reading. I give two exams and an optional comprehensive. I don't curve grades but I will substitute the comprehensive grade for the lowest of their first two exam scores. Each exam has about 25 questions in multiple-choice format. Each could have as many as nine choices. There may be between three and seven correct answers. The students' job is to circle all the correct answers. If they have one of the wrong ones circled, the question is wrong. Or, if they don't have all of the right ones circled, it's wrong. Partial credit is not given; it's either right or wrong."

What Students Say: "Before I took this class I was anxious," says Samantha White, a sophomore in neuro and behavioral biology. "People said, 'He insists you know everything so you have to spend a week and a half studying for the test.' I knew it was going to be a whole lot of information and it was. But I really prepared. I went to all the classes and took notes on just about every single thing that came out of his mouth. He has these infamous tests but he tells you how to study for them. Other than that, you just memorize your notes."

Elementary Greek Readings I and II, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Tex.

Course Description: Requirement, biblical studies. Covers readings in Koine Greek of the Gospel of John (in the second semester, the Galatian epistle), with an emphasis on Greek syntax, grammar, exegesis and some textual criticism.

What the Professor Says: "The most difficult thing is the challenge of integrating the whole Koine Greek system -- that is, Greek of the New Testament, which comes from three different dialects of Greek," says the instructor, Jan Hailey. "Greek is a difficult course because it's like English: it gets more complex the more proficient you become. One of the things that makes Greek so difficult for English speakers is that the word spelling changes with the way the word is used. There are patterns to it but you have to learn those patterns because you can't depend on word order. You depend on the spelling. The average grade is a B. I really don't think they're afraid of me, I think they're afraid of the subject. I'm a grandmother; how tough can you be?"

What Students Say: "As a sophomore you spent the whole year learning ancient Koine Greek," says Grant Mankin, a junior majoring in Christian ministry. "This is harder than learning a new language because it's basically a dead language. This year all we do is translate straight from the New Testament, from Greek to English. It's pretty brutal. With the Bible, even just reading it in English, you have to search and delve into the Scripture to find the hidden meanings or use of an analogy. So delving into the Greek you have to use context that way. We study anywhere from 20 to 25 hours a week, and that still doesn't guarantee you an A on the test. We have a quiz every day, a test every two weeks and a final. If I get a B I will have a party."

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