

Boldface Professors

By Karen W. Arenson

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Hollywood might be the ultimate place to celebrity hunt. But for the star-struck student, campuses have their own sightings: literary luminaries like Joyce Carol Oates and Billy Collins, public intellectuals like Cornel West, former public officials -- especially out-of-government Democrats -- like Madeleine K. Albright and Robert B. Reich.

For colleges, they are loss leaders. "There is a lot of skepticism about how valuable these people are," says Alan Brinkley, provost at Columbia, which in recent years has brought in two prominent economists: Joseph E. Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate and former chief economist at the World Bank, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, an adviser to the secretary general of the United Nations who was lured from Harvard.

"But they aren't just people who get paid a lot of money," Mr. Brinkley says. "They become a kind of core from which you can build a faculty, people whose presence on a campus can energize a field and make it more attractive to younger people. That is why universities bend over backward for them and sometimes do things they wouldn't do otherwise."

Institutions with big endowments attract star professors with generous salaries, sabbaticals and research leaves as well as by having around other professors they want to work with. John J. DeGioia, president of Georgetown, says the game is highly competitive. "There are only a few institutions that can play in that world," he says. "If Harvard wants to recruit a faculty member, they're going to get that faculty member." At Georgetown, professors typically teach two courses a semester, he says, but stars often do less.

For undergraduates, the important question is: Can they actually rub elbows with the prestige professors the universities advertise as faculty?

Some stars teach only occasionally, others mainly graduate students or small seminars. Their classes are heavily subscribed, and it helps to be tenacious or talented to get in. But in an informal survey of members of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, a social service and honor society with chapters at nearly 200 colleges, students say celebrity teachers are available to them -- whether it's discussing Fermat's Last Theorem over tea

with Andrew J. Wiles at Princeton, hanging out at Michael S. Dukakis's office at Northeastern University in Boston or playing tennis with the author David Foster Wallace at Pomona College. Oh, and they take classes with them, too.

"I love to brag about having had so-and-so as a professor," says Julia Baugher, a senior majoring in political science at Georgetown, which attracts a roster of well-known Washington officials. She is obsessed, she says, with taking classes with the likes of Donna Brazile, Al Gore's former campaign manager, and W. Anthony Lake, national security adviser under Bill Clinton.

Tom Kneafsey, a third-year journalism student at Northeastern, also appreciates the celebrity quotient. "Seeing a famous presidential candidate pick up litter on his way to teach a class here spreads a little pride around the campus," he says. "We know they could be other places. It's cool to have these professors around."

MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT, Georgetown

Curriculum Vitae: Secretary of state and ambassador to the United Nations under President Clinton; now a principal in the Albright Group, a global consulting company.

Teaches: One course a year, currently an undergraduate lecture called "American National Security Toolbox."

In Class: Ms. Albright typically arrives with seven newspapers under her arm and dives into discussions of what is happening in the world and how it is playing in the papers. Students write policy briefs on topics like Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The high point is an evening of role playing in a foreign policy discussion, held in a conference room at her consulting firm. Students wear suits and play cabinet officials and diplomats; Ms. Albright plays the president. "We all thought it would be silly," says Ruth L. Braunstein, who took the course last year and played United Nations ambassador for the exercise. "But she made it so realistic. It lasted six hours and no one wanted to go home." How was Ms. Albright as president? "She was stern," Ms. Braunstein says. "She kept us in our places. She was especially hard on the secretary of state."

Your Chances: Demand is strong; 142 students applied this semester and 50 were taken. Only juniors and seniors got in.

SIMON SCHAMA, Columbia

C.V.: Historian, art critic and host of the BBC series "History of Britain."

Teaches: This semester, one graduate seminar; last semester, one undergraduate class in narrative history.

In Class: Extensive writing is required, all on topics from the past. First-week assignment: one- to two-page description of a physical object or building. Third-week assignment: five pages on a day in the life of a particular individual, or a specific moment or hour. Other assignments might be to describe someone's appearance and effect on others, or a landscape or townscape. Students also study narrative voices (say, ironic voices like Tacitus, Gibbon and Gore Vidal), the evolution from poetic myth to historical narration (Homer and Hesiod to Herodotus) and "romantic immersion" (sometimes Carlyle and his relationship to Dickens). Final assignment: a 15- to 20-page historical narrative, which Professor Schama collects in a thick anthology. "It's a wonderful class!" he says, "at least for me."

Your Chances: Last semester 25 applicants submitted writing samples for 15 seats.

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH, New York University

C.V.: Performance artist and playwright, MacArthur Foundation "genius" award winner and actor featured on the NBC series "The West Wing."

Teaches: One semester a year. Last semester, she taught a graduate seminar and a freshmen seminar, "A Real Play of Identities."

In Class: Ms. Smith says she tried to get the entering freshmen to think about identity at a time when they were in new surroundings and thinking about remaking themselves. One question she posed in class: Who could you never be? When one student said she could never be a leader, Ms. Smith arranged for her to interview N.Y.U.'s president, John Sexton, and then "perform" him, in the same way Ms. Smith interviews people and uses their own words and mannerisms to interpret them on stage. Students also had to interview and portray each other. "It was difficult," Serena Chen, a student, says.

Your Chances: The 16 students last semester were chosen from more than twice that many applicants, based on essays they wrote on why they wanted to take the course. It was the only freshmen seminar requiring an essay.

BILLY COLLINS, Lehman College, City University of New York

C.V.: Former United States poet laureate, current poet laureate of New York State and winner of the National Poetry Series competition.

Teaches: One graduate seminar in creative writing this year. Until two years ago, Mr. Collins taught three courses a semester, including freshmen composition. He says he liked teaching composition to freshmen because it was so needed, but he found himself grading papers in motel rooms and on airplanes en route to poetry readings and lectures. "It was constant," he says. "It was almost like having a little dog trailing me." He estimates he has spent "at least nine years of my life correcting freshmen essays."

In Class: Mr. Collins mixes theory and practice. He talks about Harold Bloom's theory on the "anxiety of influence" and how writers seek to transcend those who precede them. Then he has students "springboard" off the work of others. Catherine Perry, who is taking her second class with Mr. Collins, says he requires a lot of reading and writing. "Some of his assignments are really stringent," she says. "But in class, he is so relaxed about everything. Everything he says is just a suggestion. He never says, 'Do this' or 'Do that.'"

Your Chances: For decades he was one of an army of professors teaching freshmen composition. You didn't ask for Billy Collins, you just got him. No longer. Ms. Perry says she "desperately clawed to get in" this semester. "He likes to cap his graduate classes at 12, and there were 17 enrolled. I just kept begging." She is auditing it.

MICHAEL S. DUKAKIS, Northeastern

C.V.: Democratic candidate for president, 1988; three-term Massachusetts governor; teacher since 1979 (when not running for office or in office).

Teaches: Two courses a semester, including the summer term. (The only extra he gets, says Richard M. Freeland, Northeastern's president, is a little more secretarial help.) Topics include the presidency, public management, health policy, state and local government and urban development.

In Class: A lot of case studies, followed by short policy memorandums. The midterm for "Public Policy Analysis" is a longer memorandum in which students are encouraged to talk to people in the field. "Often he was able to use his stature as a public figure to help students get answers and calls back," says Shannon Blakely, a third-year student. She says he also uses his pull to help students find internships, and he writes recommendations. His comment: "Teaching is hard. It is not just telling war stories. Guys like me ought to connect with these young kids."

Your Chances: Classes are booked more than a semester in advance. "Presidential Campaigns and Conventions," Mr. Dukakis's summer offering, has been full since fall. The university recently raised the cap to 40 students from 35, but he often takes 5 to 10 above the limit. Students sometimes spill into the aisles.

ROBERT B. REICH, Brandeis

C.V.: Labor secretary under President Clinton; ran for governor of Massachusetts in 2002.

Teaches: On leave this semester (while teaching at the University of California at Berkeley). He taught a graduate course last semester with 25 students as well as an undergraduate lecture course, "The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty," with 224 students, which was 24 over the cap.

In Class: While graduate students lead the discussion groups and Mr. Reich only lectures, he meets groups of students over breakfast every week to get to know them. Conversation ranges from current events to careers. Mr. Reich was voted best teacher at Brandeis in 2002 and students call him a captivating lecturer, though one complaint is that he dwells more on problems than solutions. Mr. Reich says he tries to familiarize students with the arguments on all sides. As for solutions, he says: "There are no magic bullets. I'm very careful not to use the class to promote my own particular views."

Your Chances: First come first served, with 30 to 40 students on a wait list.

STEVEN PINKER, Harvard

C.V.: Known for popularizing science, in the vein of Stephen Jay Gould, with his research on language; author of six books, including the best-selling "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature."

Teaches: An elective core science course, "The Human Mind," for undergraduates and a graduate seminar linked to it -- his first courses since moving to Harvard in July from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In Class: Known as the "rock professor" for his long hair and easy style, he uses cartoons, videos, music and poetry to enliven lectures. He closed his first class by quoting Hamlet and opened another with "If I Only Had a Brain" from "The Wizard of Oz." "He's incredibly charismatic," says Samantha Holmes, a sophomore. "But this is definitely a science course."

Your Chances: Good. Five hundred students tried to fit into a classroom for 300 on the first day, during the shopping period that allows students to sample classes before registering. Ultimately, 281 enrolled. Students in the course say classmates may have bolted because of too many demands for a core course, including two long papers, a midterm and a final.

Princeton's Star Power

If colleges could measure the star quality of their professors -- not just top scholars, but scholars whose names are recognized beyond academe -- the winner would probably be Princeton. Familiar names stretch across many departments: Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates in creative writing, Paul Krugman and Alan Blinder in economics, Andrew J. Wiles in mathematics, and K. Anthony Appiah, Cornel West and Peter Singer in philosophy and ethics. Princeton has the money and reputation that attracts such professors, and its nearness to New York City doesn't hurt. KAREN W. ARENSON

JOYCE CAROL OATES

C.V.: Author of more than 70 books, including "Them," which won the National Book Award, and "We Were the Mulvaneys," which was No.1 on the New York Times best-seller list.

Teaches: Two creative writing classes each semester. Ms. Oates, who has taught at Princeton since 1978, says she still finds teaching "thrilling, genuinely exciting and invigorating." She likens herself to "a trainer who works with individual athletes to draw out the very best work each individual is capable of." One former student is Jonathan Safran Foer, whose first novel, "Everything Is Illuminated," attracted wide attention in 2002.

In Class: Typical beginning assignments are a one-page character sketch with vivid writing and a single line of dialogue, a two-page "moment-of-being" (image, epiphany) and dialogues of varying lengths -- a process through which some students discover they are "playwrights in embryo," she says. Advanced students don't have formal assignments but turn in work regularly and receive detailed criticism. Professor Oates says that while she tries not to hurt feelings, "I do the young writers the honor of taking them very seriously since, to me, literature is a very serious enterprise, though it can also be funny."

"I think it's unethical to simply praise without offering constructive criticism," she adds.

Margaret W. Johnson, a junior taking her third class with the author, says that when she turned in her first short story, Professor Oates asked whether she understood how disorganized it was and remarked on the vague, pretentious writing. "I realized that she expected a different kind of writing from her students than what I was used to, and that she was not going to tolerate more experimental, more poetic endeavors," Ms. Johnson says. "She wanted us to do the basics, and tell a story with a plot, and not try to make it beautiful or literary." Ms. Johnson is still struggling to get it right but prefers to have Professor Oates tear apart her work for 90 minutes than to say, "O.K., this is very good, now let's move on" after 15 minutes. "When that happens," Ms. Johnson says, "I know I have a story that does not interest her at all." She also gives praise, Ms. Johnson says, "and when she does, it's really appreciated and means a lot."

Your Chances: Princeton's star-studded creative-writing program also includes Chang-rae Lee, Paul Muldoon, John McPhee and Edmund White. Students are admitted into the program based on writing samples. Classes are limited to 10 students.

CORNEL WEST

C.V.: Philosopher, author and former member of Harvard's African-American "dream team."

Teaches: Two courses a semester: this semester, a graduate seminar and an undergraduate course, "Public Intellectuals and Religious Traditions," with 150 students.

In Class: When Cornel West clashed over his role at Harvard with its president, Lawrence H. Summers, he was effusively courted by Princeton. Princeton won one of Harvard's most popular lecturers. Chase Skorburg, a senior who took the "Public Intellectuals" course, says

that Professor West rarely talked about himself, even though he is himself one of the day's leading public intellectuals. The people he did talk about were Socrates, Erasmus, Davis Hume and Edward Said. "He was very eloquent and very charismatic," Mr. Skorburg says.

Chances: A Princeton official will say only that there are always more applicants than seats for a Cornel West course. When Professor West arrived at Princeton in 2002, more than 100 students applied for 15 seats in his freshmen seminar.

TONI MORRISON

C.V.: Winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature, Pulitzer Prize for "Beloved" and National Book Critics Award for "Song of Solomon."

Teaches: Ms. Morrison stopped teaching traditional classes in the mid-1990's, when she created the Princeton Atelier, a program that brings artists to campus to collaborate on works with selected students in theater, dance, the visual arts and other areas. Guests have ranged from the choreographer Jacques d'Amboise to the opera director Peter Sellars.

In Class: Ms. Morrison arranges the collaborations but is not a regular participant in most of them. In one last spring that she did teach, four students worked with her to write verses about slavery and then collaborated with the composer Richard Danielpour and his charges to set them to music. The process paralleled Ms. Morrison's own collaboration with Mr. Danielpour on "Margaret Garner," an opera about a fugitive slave that is to have its premiere next year.

Felice T. Kuan, an Atelier student, says Ms. Morrison was all business. "I felt like she wanted to produce something at the end of the semester," Ms. Kuan says. "There was no messing around. If she didn't like a phrase, she would say so. She would make fun of us if we were self-indulgent, like when a student used her own name in her poem. Rather than being something negative, it took away our sensitivity about criticism. She handled us as if we were all artists already."

Another student, Tammy L. Brown, remembers "feeling that the music wasn't the best match for what I wrote." Ms. Morrison advised her that she, too, sometimes wanted control of a project beginning to end but had learned to surrender it to benefit from another perspective.

Your Chances: Students must apply, and sometimes audition or submit a portfolio. This semester, 64 students are involved in the Atelier.

Some Princeton students have griped that Ms. Morrison is beyond reach. As Kristen Albertsen, a student columnist for Princeton Alumni Weekly, put it in 2002: "We all learned early on freshman year that a course with Toni Morrison was about as likely as a fall

football bonfire to celebrate victories over Harvard and Yale -- possible in theory, but woefully rare in practice."