

What's the Meaning of Life?

New course helps Sacred Heart University students find the answers

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FAIRFIELD — Emily Latainer, 17, kicks off a sandal as she helps dissect a chapter in "The Odyssey" during a morning class at Sacred Heart University.

It's a book the freshman read once before in her small Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., high school before coming to SHU.

This time, Latainer and her classmates must compare the journey of Odysseus — the epic poem's hero — to their own journey as human beings.

They must decide what the tale suggests about being human, what makes the ancient Greek society just, and what gives Odysseus' life meaning and purpose.

They are big questions that Latainer and her classmates will grapple with again and again over the next four years.

This year's freshman class is the first to take a series of courses called "The Human Journey."

Part of the university's new core curriculum, the classes will be taken by all Sacred Heart undergraduates, starting with the Class of 2011.

The common core explores the meaning of life through several lenses: literature, history, social and natural sciences, and finally, philosophy and religion.

Each course will ask the same questions:

- What does it mean to be human?
- What does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose?
- What does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world?
- What does it mean to forge a more just society for the common good?

"It's not that we're telling them what the meaning of life is," said Michelle Loris, associate dean and chairwoman of Sacred Heart's core curriculum. "What we are



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Michelle Loris, chairwoman of the Sacred Heart University core curriculum committee, and freshmen Maryanna Kerr and Shannon Carvalho, discuss a chapter of "The Odyssey" in class.

doing is, in the Catholic intellectual tradition, getting students to wrestle with the big questions of meaning and value."

Sacred Heart wants "The Human Journey" to become its "signature," in the same way that Columbia University is known for courses on great books, St. Anselm College is known for "Portraits in Human Greatness" courses, and Providence College is known for courses in western civilization, Loris said.

The development of big-question courses is not uncommon among colleges today. A number of schools are getting away from the "pick-one-from-column-A" approach in favor of courses the university says are fundamental to the education of all students collecting a degree.

"I think you can probably call it a trend," said Ross Miller, a senior director of assessment for learning at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Miller said higher education has played around for some time with what model works really well. The "sample-a-little-of-everything" approach grew out of a 1970s desire to make all students well rounded, even as they learned a trade.

The advantage of required courses with singular themes, Miller said, is that it allows for people across the campus to have common conversations.

"It can be a very valuable part of building an intellectual culture on campus," he said. "The faculty will know what all the kids are reading. Seniors know what freshmen are reading. Different majors can sit down and have a way to talk together about something."

While "meaning of life" is a popular big-question focus, Miller said other colleges are tackling global warming, sustainability, or AIDS — topics that can be viewed from the vantage point of science, history, the humanities and even

the business world.

Loris said wrestling with big questions is necessary to becoming a fully educated and knowledgeable person.

"We want students who graduate from Sacred Heart to have a terrific foundation in arts and sciences and Catholic intellectual tradition, to be analytical and critical thinkers and to have an ethical frame with which to look at the world."

Sacred Heart's "The Human Journey" took six years to develop, she said. It was approved by the faculty more than a year ago, then the president, and finally board of trustees in October 2006.

Dominic Pinto, a computer science professor at Sacred Heart and president of the university's Academic Assembly, called the new common core a very good thing.

"We needed to bring the core into the 21st century, and I think we did," he said.

The common core is comprised of five courses. By their junior year, students must take four, including literature, history, a social or natural science course, and a capstone course that ties everything together.

Along with the courses, there are lectures and seminars given by a variety of professors and speakers.

Pinto said a single theme carried over so many courses need not grow stale, because it's bound to evolve. "Readings can change. Emphasis can change. It's a dynamic topic," he said.

This semester there are 20 sections of the literature class. Students are reading the same books. In addition to "The Odyssey," they are reading "Dante's Inferno," "Hamlet" and Immaculee Ilibagiza's "Left to Tell," a memoir of the Rwandan genocide.

Loris teaches one section of the class.

Holding "Left to Tell" up one day last week, Loris encouraged 17

freshmen to draw comparisons between the inhumanity Ilibagiza faced — hiding for 60 days in a bathroom from Hutu tribesman determined to kill her — with the struggles of Odysseus on a protracted journey home to his wife and son after the Trojan war.

"Both writers in their different ways ask us to think about what it means to be human," Loris said.

In both, gratuitous violence occurs when people are viewed as less than human.

Odysseus' humanity comes out when he forgoes a life of immortality to be with his wife, knowing that pain and suffering was part of the package.

Ilibagiza's humanity is best illustrated when she comes face to face with one of her torturers, and forgives him.

Kristian Rivera, 18, a pre-med student from New Jersey, said her views are already changing.

"If someone experienced something like that and was able to forgive... It opened my mind to being more forgiving," she said of reading "Left to Tell."

"I thought it would be like this — listening to everyone else's ideas, seeing different points of view," Maryanna Kerr, 18, of Plymouth, Mass., said of college.

Kristen Brault, 17, a freshman from Bristol, said its good to have courses that tackle the bigger questions in life. Her major is physical therapy.

"I think, in a way, it breaks it up a bit. Instead of focusing all on sciences, it will make me more well rounded," she said.

Mark Theroux, 17, a media studies major from Norwalk, said meaning-of-life questions are interesting to ponder, even though he doesn't expect to find answers.

"It's still fun to look into it, like all the great thinkers of history have," he said.

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