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ADVICE

Why, Post-Pandemic, Your Campus Needs More ‘Super Courses’

The case for seizing the moment and offering more courses on big social, economic, and health issues.

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This article is excerpted from a new Chronicle special report, “The Future of Teaching: How the Classroom Is Being Transformed,” [available in the Chronicle Store](#).

One of the biggest lessons of a year defined by upheaval on social, health, and economic grounds is that students are hungry for courses that tackle big issues. Responding to that demand is not just savvy for your institution’s finances and marketing, it’s good for your students and faculty members, too.

Fortunately there is a sound body of scholarship to build upon here. For more than 30 years, a new breed of college courses — what we call “super courses” — has been transforming what it means to go to class. Born out of research on deep learning and motivation, this bubbling revolution has gained new energy in the past year in the wake of the pandemic and the social-justice protests, and now promises to shape the

future of teaching and learning. As one colleague put it, “The challenges of teaching online exposed the weaknesses of the old way and forced us to look for alternatives.”

So what is a “super course”? Let’s start with a few examples:

- In a course at the University of Virginia, undergraduates work with young inmates in a maximum-security prison to contemplate the big questions that propelled Tolstoy, Turgenev, and other Russian writers.
- At Harvard University, physics students learn about how the universe works, not through lectures, but from their peers in a class in which even reading is a social event.
- At a university in Southwest China, students use the building of personal-exercise equipment to explore a wide range of topics including kinesiology, sports studies, electrical and mechanical engineering, materials science, and marketing.

In our research — for a new book, *Super Courses: The Future of Teaching and Learning* — we visited classrooms across the United States, China, and Singapore, and explored super courses in Europe and Africa.

We found that most students coming out of super courses become highly motivated and self-directed learners who explore the rich implications and applications of what they encounter. Rather than think in terms of high grades, they focus on concepts that light up their skies and transform how they think, act, and feel. Super-course alums typically appreciate the insights they are gaining, the adaptive expertise they can muster, the ambiguities they encounter in life, and the conversations they can join. They understand how all knowledge is connected, not pigeonholed into separate disciplines. Curiosity, fascination, and a love of learning drive their studies.

How does this new breed of courses achieve such long-sought goals?

It's not just a matter of technology. While academe has often pinned its hopes on our machines, software, and apps to transform our classrooms, the rich insights of the learning sciences ultimately turned the trick. New technologies sometimes make it easier to build good learning conditions, but powerful research-based environments make the crucial difference.

In our research, we've found a baker's dozen of elements that define the nature of a super course. As your institution considers how to proceed pedagogically in the fall semester and beyond, these are the things you should be encouraging faculty members to build into their courses. A rich and generous combination of these ingredients is what makes a super course work. Sprinkling one or two of them over a standard syllabus would no more do the job than would dusting a liver sandwich with brown sugar turn it into a cherry pie.

Essential Ingredients of Super Courses

- **They center not on topics but on big, fascinating, important, and often beautiful questions and problems that spark intrinsic interest.** What causes wars? How have societies dealt with pandemics before? How can I become more creative? Why do businesses fail or succeed? What causes change in human history? Why are there so many different species of plants and animals? How can I understand myself? What is my purpose in life? How do you calculate the area under a curve? Why are some people (and societies) rich and others poor? Can human life survive given the changes in the environment? How does the physical universe work? What caused that disaster or windfall? The best of these pedagogical masterpieces bring multiple disciplines together to deal with the questions and problems.
- **They frame their inquiries with words, images, sounds, and experiences that speak to learners — not just to professors.** When faculty members are interested in some narrow question, it usually stems from something else they once studied, which was itself a quest from an earlier interest, an intellectual journey that may

go back to the day they first asked their parents, "Why?" But the narrowness of the question in a classroom, while intriguing to the instructor, can leave students standing on the surface wondering why anyone in their right mind would be so far underground. By contrast, super courses raise questions that appeal to both emotion and intellect, and often use the arts to do so.

- **They encourage productive failure.** These pedagogical innovations let students try, fail, receive feedback, and try again before anyone makes a judgment — i.e., grades their work. In short, the course gives students the same kind of environment that professors expect when doing research.
- **They promote collaboration.** Super courses allow, encourage, and help students work together. The courses use problem- or project-based approaches to tackle questions in steps within small heterogeneous groups while each student has the opportunity to display his or her own thinking. Those working groups can, and often do, work in both small- and large-sized courses.
- **They encourage imagination.** Students in a super course are encouraged to speculate even before they learn, inventing ways to solve problems.
- **They don't shy away from intellectual debate.** A faculty member teaching a super course finds out what kind of paradigms, already held by the students, need to be questioned or abandoned, and then offers repeated, explicit, yet friendly challenges to those mental models (for instance, by putting learners in situations where their existing paradigms do not work).
- **They don't abandon a struggling student.** A super course gives learners emotional, physical, and intellectual assistance when they need it.
- **They encourage students to make decisions.** A super course explicitly tries to allow students to make meaningful choices and gives them a sense of control over their own learning.
- **They give students a say in setting course rules.** While putting off any grading judgments for as long as possible, an instructor spends class time letting students help frame and accept the standards that will be used. They learn to evaluate their own performance in the class and make an argument about the quality of

their thinking and work. What does it mean to think like a good historian, chemist, artist, mathematician, or whatever?

- **They explicitly encourage students to believe that intelligence can expand.** “Super profs” act as if their job is to foster each undergraduate’s educational growth, rather than to divide the sheep from the goats.
- **They value diversity.** A professor teaching a super course recognizes the rich mix of backgrounds that students will bring to the questions and problems, and integrates that diversity into the course.
- **They give students a chance to learn by doing.** In a super course, students also help one another learn deeply, and they do so before they have fully mastered the material. It lets them discover the basic information while they engage in that process. As they solve problems, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, speculate, and invent theories, information moves into their long-term memories. They become physically, emotionally, and mentally involved in the process.
- **They invest students with a goal that is larger than the class.** It may even be bigger than the discipline. In the process of pursuing that objective, students learn. We call that educational circumstance a “passion-driven adventure.”

It’s easy to see why a super course would appeal to students arriving or returning to your campus in the fall. We’ve had a year of big questions, and not enough clear or satisfactory answers. Many students are hungry for exactly the sort of deep intellectual experience that a super course can provide.

Likewise, faculty members are yearning for the kind of teaching experience that doesn’t involve learning how to record lectures for Zoom (a useful skill, no doubt). In the past, teaching often meant standing in front of students and delivering oral explanations of what we wanted them to learn. More and more faculty members are recognizing that the delivery of content — ideas, information, and procedures — is only one part of the educational process.

Ultimately, now is the time to encourage the development of more super courses. Now is the time to help students tackle big questions and challenges that they find intrinsically interesting, important, and beautiful. In the process, they learn to think critically — that is, to reason from evidence and concepts, examine the quality of their own thinking, make crucial decisions, and defend them rationally and articulately — and certainly all of society benefits from that.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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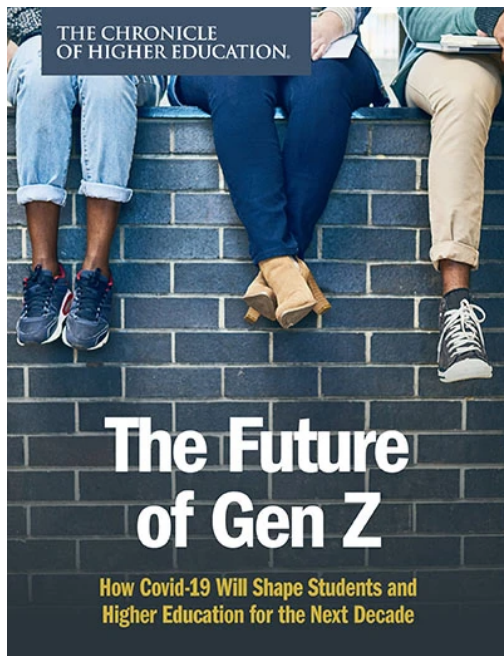
Ken Bain

Ken Bain is president of the Best Teachers Institute, a historian, and a learning researcher. His latest book is *Super Courses: The Future of Teaching and Learning*, published this year by Princeton University Press. He is best known for his 2004 book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*. He is on Twitter [@KenBain1](#).

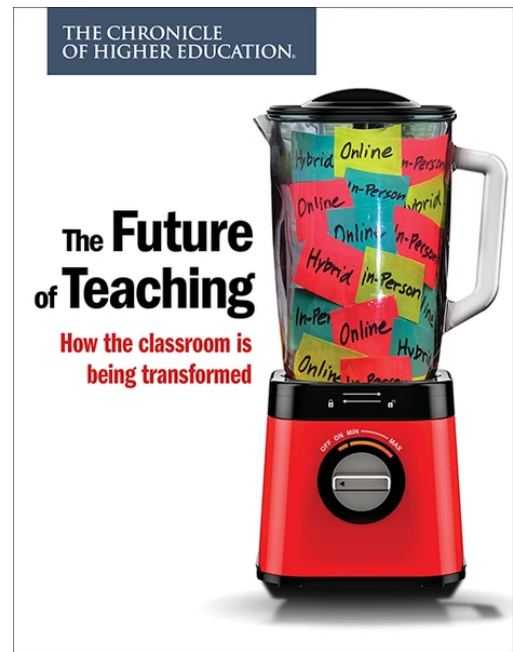
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Marsha Marshall Bain is coordinator for the Best Teachers Institute, a writer, and a researcher. She contributed significantly to *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004) and *What the Best College Students Do* (2012), before joining the super-course project with Princeton University Press.

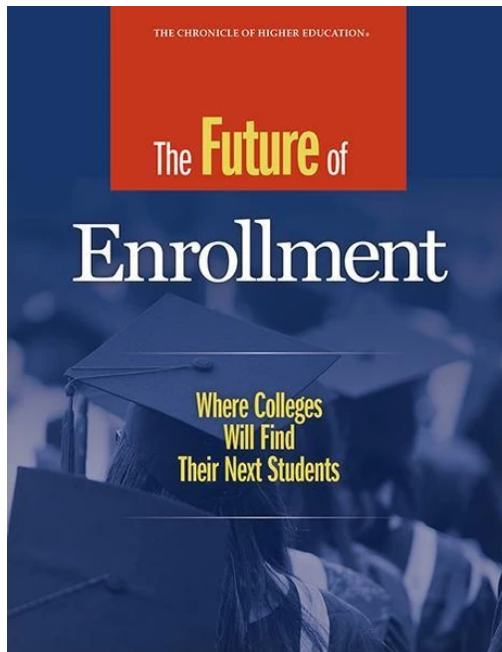
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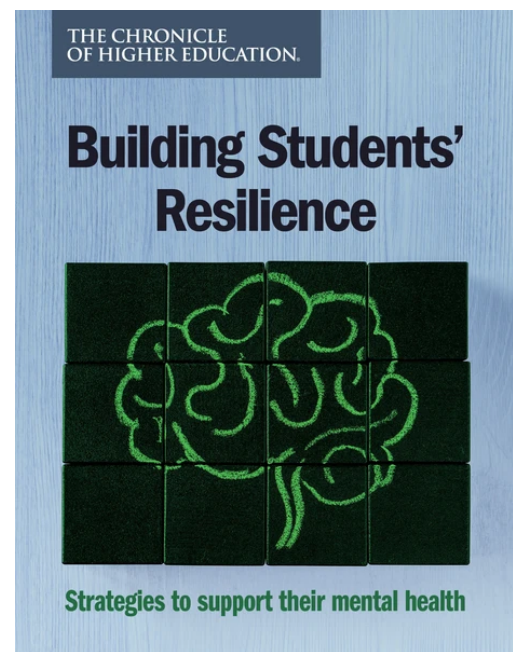
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