

SAMPLE

# IN SEARCH OF GREAT PROFESSORS

THEY'RE OUT THERE, WAITING TO TEACH YOU AND CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOREVER.

BY DINA FINE MARON

THERE ARE FEW BETTER FIXES FOR INSOMNIA than listening to a professor read her PowerPoint to you, slide by slide. And that can be a good thing, especially if you've been up all night playing Rock Band. But discovering a teacher who wakes you up instead of putting you to sleep is one of the most rewarding college experiences you can have. A great professor can get you excited about a whole new subject, influence which major you choose, and maybe even change your life. As we discovered in an informal search for some of America's top profs, what sets these faculty stars apart are their abilities to excite and inspire their students, and to break down the wall that too often separates the classroom from the real world.

## WATCH OUT FOR FLYING VEGETABLES

At a large research university like UCLA, it's easy to get lost in a crowd, or even a classroom, says **Bob Goldberg**, a professor of molecular, cell, and developmental biology. That's why most Thursdays you will find him at the Faculty Center or the Napa Valley Grille treating a new batch of students to dinner. For his 50-person lecture class on genetic engineering in medicine, law, and agriculture, he says the key is to let students know you notice

them and keep them actively engaged at all times. For him, teaching is a lot like his chosen field of study. "It is really about experimentation," says Goldberg, 65. He is constantly trying new things to get students involved: asking them to swab their cheeks for DNA analysis, tossing them heads of lettuce and asking, "Is this lettuce in its original form? What about this one?!" His goal is to instill not just mastery of the material, but also an ability to "stand on your own two feet and make informed decisions." Despite the class size, he wants all his students to know each other and feel comfortable participating in discussions. "I sat in a lot of boring high-school and college classes, and I was determined I wouldn't let that happen to students I taught," he says. He's not trying to make more scientists, though; he wants to teach students "why science is relevant to their lives" and "make informed Congress members, writers, and citizens." Eden Maloney, class of 2012, was intimidated when Goldberg called her up to the front of the class to summarize a previous lecture (a Goldberg classroom staple), but, she says, "I learned not only critical analysis but also how to think clearly under pressure. Those skills are invaluable and go far beyond

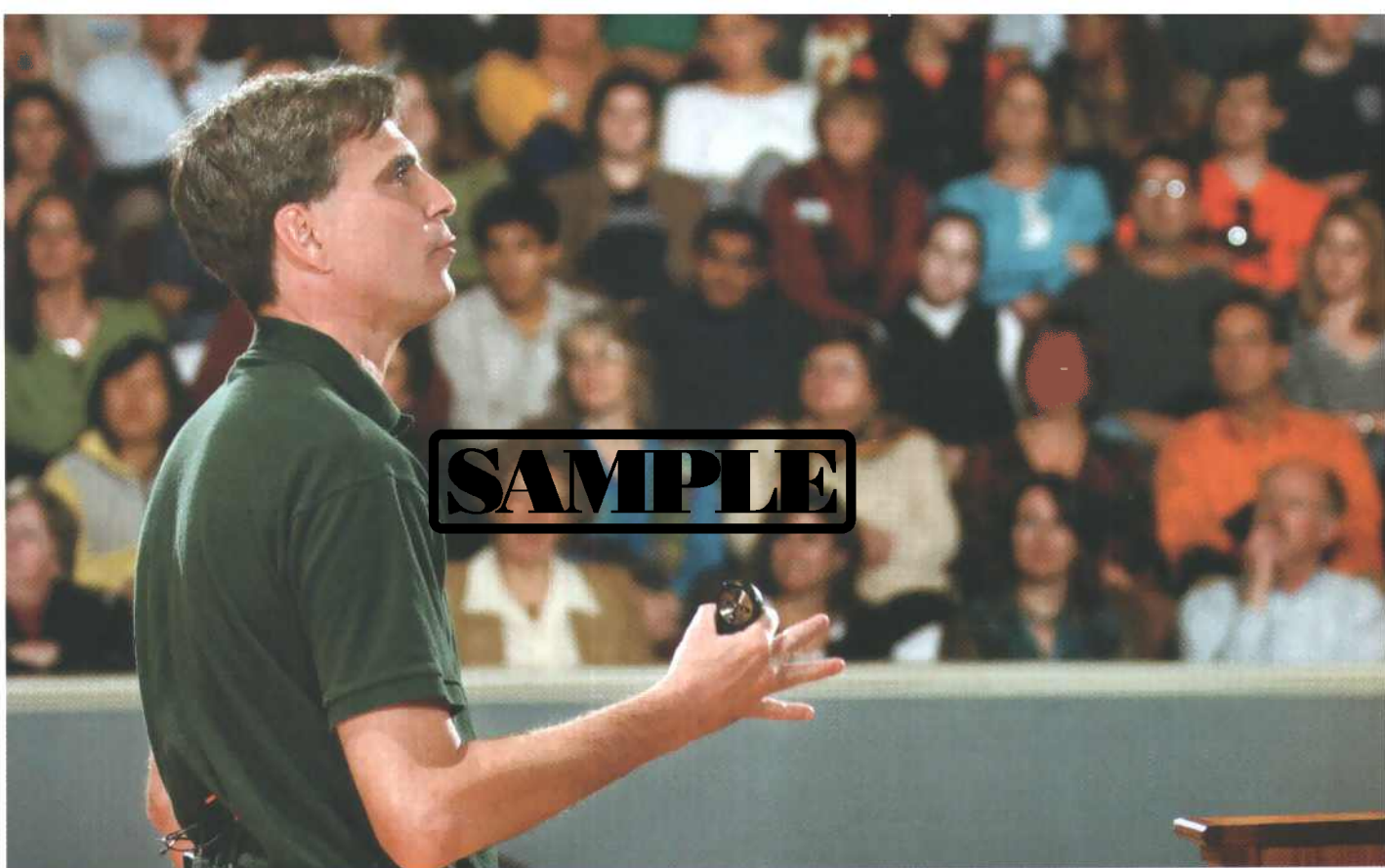
the classroom." Besides, where else can you learn to dodge flying vegetables?

## REALITY IS A HARD MARKER

Students are often surprised the first time they get an assignment back from Prof. **Emma Rasiel**—there may be a lot of red. Tough love is a tool for Rasiel, 44, a professor of economics at Duke University. "Students have been told for 15 or 16 years that they can get partial credit, but in the real world people don't get partial credit," she says of her grading practices. If you don't have the right answer, you will get a zero. Though she's strict in her grading, students flock to her class. "Anyone you talk to will recommend Professor Rasiel," says Helin Gai, '09. "Her classes are a great mixture of theory and practice." When it comes to the world of economics, Rasiel knows what she's talking about: before getting her Ph.D. from Duke's business school she was executive director of the London office of Goldman Sachs. In her classroom she merges the two worlds, often inviting eight to 10 guest lecturers to her Global Capital Markets class to highlight how economic theory shakes out in practice. She brings more Wall Streeters to campus to judge economic competitions she sets up for Dukies. Though she's left Wall Street, Rasiel still keeps its long hours—mentoring students, running Sunday review sessions, and offering formal career advice through the school's career center—sometimes totaling 90 hours a week. In 2001, when she was still a Ph.D. student, her Asset Pricing class boasted 30 students—now it has 130. While she attributes some of the uptick to an increased interest in the subject matter, her students say that she really makes the class. She's involved with her students' success right down to the little details; she even reminded James Melnick, '09, to tie his shoes as he was going into an interview. Later, he says, "I signed up for an independent study with her without even reading the course description."

## SHAKESPEARE MEETS BUFFY

At Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., Prof. **William Flesch**, a specialist in Milton and the Romantic poets, also teaches



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Shakespeare, film noir, and adolescent literature (which, yes, does include *Harry Potter*.) His goal in the classroom: to get students to argue with him. “If you agree with everything I’m saying, I’ve failed,” he says. He takes that philosophy to heart, baiting his students to get them to debate among themselves and asking them to design their papers in the same manner: “Break down an argument made by me or a TA in class and convince me why it’s wrong,” he prompts. In his lectures, Flesch, 52, tries to bring the discussion directly to the students on another level: connecting classic texts to pop culture. He draws comparisons between conflict in Shakespeare and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or a line from a poem and a conversation that occurred in an episode of *Lost*. “There is great literature, but one of the things that makes it great is what makes for good television shows and fairy tales . . . It’s all a matter of craft and understanding human beings,” he says. That kind of approach has endeared him to some students, who have followed his classes so closely that they have termed themselves “Flesch Heads” or joke they “major in Flesch.” Julian Olidort, ’11, says he “wears the title [of Flesch Head] with pride.” He has already taken four classes with Flesch in the three semesters he has

been at Brandeis. Olidort is not alone. Julia Tejblum, ’08, came to Brandeis hating English courses. But after one Flesch class she was hooked. Six Flesch classes later (with a smattering of other English courses in there to complete the major), she graduated with highest honors in the school’s English program and will be starting her Oxford coursework toward a Ph.D. in English literature this fall. Though Flesch remains close with some former students, he hasn’t let his popularity alter his approach—he’s just glad people are invested in his subject. It’s hard to argue with that.

#### HOT-BUTTON HISTORY

The students in **Kathleen Canning’s** senior seminar at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, are often grateful that they have a week between sessions to reflect—and, sometimes, to cool off. What gets Canning’s students riled up aren’t the usual hot-button issues like race relations or abortion, though. It’s history, specifically the politics of the Weimar Republic and World War II and how they are studied and understood today. Armed with primary texts, period artwork, and a heavy dose of enthusiasm, Canning presents a vivid picture of Germany at the end of World War I, then helps her students care about those

**AN UNFORGETTABLE PROFESSOR RANDY PAUSCH** CAPPED HIS ACADEMIC CAREER WITH A LECTURE THAT BECAME A BOOK AND INSPIRED MILLIONS.

long-ago people, places, and events. “She teaches us how mistakes from the past can be relevant today,” explains Jordan Friedland, ’09. Every week Canning lectures for an hour, then steps back to allow discussion. “It’s key to listen, to let the students grab the material, work with it, and get as far as they can,” she says. After two decades at U-M, she’s learned that can be pretty far. Discussion of topics like “what qualifies as a war crime” can get emotional, but her students rarely complain. Instead, they ask difficult questions like, “Was the rape of a German woman by a Russian soldier different from the rape of a Jewish woman in Auschwitz?” In a class of history buffs (some with personal ties to the Holocaust), Canning helps students find their voice, knowing full well that those voices are likely to be raised. Rigorous debate is a good thing, Canning says, but when things get too hot she intervenes. She summarizes what was said, reframes the question, and then steers the discussion back to more neutral ground with a skill that continually amazes her students. Fittingly, it seems, this professor is also a diplomat.