



Art Previews: Simon's Rock College students meet before heading into the Daniel Arts Center on campus.



Cutting Class

The early-college movement thrives at Simon's Rock.

BY SETH ROGOVOY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREGORY CHERIN

It's a rainy autumn day in the Berkshires, and inside the Daniel Arts Center, on the campus of Simon's Rock College, a dozen freshmen are settling in for their compulsory literature seminar. Students fire up their iBooks and other state-of-the-art laptops as they prepare for the day's discussion of *The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri.

Joan DelPlato, a professor of art history and women's studies, writes some suggested talking points, including "divine retribution" and "the geography of hell," on the board as the last few students take their seats and class begins. To get things going, she asks for a volunteer to begin the "thought chain," in which one student will quote and comment on a passage from Dante, followed by another who will paraphrase and acknowledge the previous student's thoughts while building on them with an "and" or "but" statement. One student notes how Dante's obsession with Jerusalem foreshadows today's turmoil in the Middle East, and another responds that, possessing the highest per capita murder rate in the nation, the city of New Orleans fell victim to biblical-style punishment with the floods wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

It's a scene typical of any college-level seminar, except that in this group, there are no high school graduates. The students are all sixteen years old and have all entered Simon's Rock College of Bard, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, directly after their sophomore year in high school.

"There are two kinds of people at Simon's Rock," explains Marianne Dologuin, a Simon's Rock junior and a native of the Philippines. "Those who hated high school, who are trying to find



Warm Relations: Alicia Stube (left) and Jessica Lewis discuss art history with Professor Joan DelPlato.

a place welcoming of differences, and the overachieving crowd, who are extremely motivated.” Dologuin puts herself in the latter category but says that when the two groups meet and mix at Simon’s Rock, “they balance each other well.”

Simon’s Rock was founded by Elizabeth Blodgett Hall in 1966 in the belief that for a significant proportion of teenagers, high school is the modern-day equivalent of Dante’s inferno. Early matriculation, by this calculation, represents a way out of hell—or, at the very least, a way station in purgatory or limbo, both of which are also discussed that day in DelPlato’s seminar.

Since its founding, the small college, which still has only 380 students, has become a leader in the early-college movement. “We have

nation’s foremost proponents of early-college education). But Simon’s Rock was the first freestanding institution founded for the express purpose of engaging high school-age students in a college setting.

“We really have a mission,” says Weinstein. “At most colleges, it’s not specific or unique. Here, it’s clear and constant.” Though Weinstein acknowledges that issues occasionally arise surrounding the maturity of some of the students, he says, “annoying behavior is annoying across the board,” no matter how old a student is. In any case, as a self-selected group consciously opting out of the highly social and often anti-intellectual environment found in many high schools, Simon’s Rock students tend to be more inclined to relate personally and directly to their teachers. “Our students



Personal Growth: Professor Dón Roeder (left) observes Rowan Reist and Katie McComis at work in the greenhouse.



Bookworms: Saiya Miller (left) and Alexandra Barrett enjoy a quiet corner of the library.

a culture that doesn’t like adolescents,” explains DelPlato, who came to Simon’s Rock fresh out of graduate school eighteen years ago. “This is a place that encourages and celebrates adolescence.”

It’s also a place that works hard to support incoming freshmen, helping them navigate the uncharted waters of dormitory life and the heightened expectations and demands of college-level learning. Teachers do more than teach here; they are active advisers and participants in their students’ intellectual and social lives.

“My colleagues at other schools are shocked by how much out-of-class interaction there is with students here,” says John Weinstein, in his fifth year at Simon’s Rock teaching theatre, Asian studies, and Chinese. Says Dologuin, a self-described “language geek” majoring in psychology and politics, “Teachers here, they really care. We talk about things. They understand where you’re coming from. We balance each others’ energies. They’re fun to be with. They’re the type of people I’d go to dinner with.”

Blodgett Hall wasn’t the first educational innovator to recognize that for many adolescents, four years of high school can be an intellectual straitjacket, or worse. As early as the 1930s, the University of Chicago established an early-college program admitting students at age sixteen. (One of the students was Leon Botstein, president of both Simon’s Rock and its parent school, Bard College, and one of the

perhaps have better relationships with their teachers than their classmates in high school do,” says Weinstein.

The curriculum at Simon’s Rock follows two complementary tracks: Students attend either for two years, acquiring an associate degree before transferring to another, more conventional college as juniors (many transfer to Bard, while other popular destinations include Barnard, Bennington, and Hampshire colleges and Brown University), or they choose to stay on and earn a bachelor’s degree from Simon’s Rock. The college offers a remarkably wide range of courses for such a small school, spanning the arts, sciences, and humanities; all emphasizing writing and thinking.

“This isn’t kindercollege; you get real academics here,” says DelPlato. She originally came to Simon’s Rock thinking it was a stepping-stone to her next stop in academia but



Group Focus: Professor John Weinstein observes students Caitlin Connolly (from left) Eunice Png, and Noah Appelbaum.

quickly became a true believer in the early-college model. “This place rehumanizes us,” she says. “This place asks us to go back to where you love to learn. We try out ideas without feeling like we’re locked into a way of thinking here.”

Harry Marker, a sixteen-year-old refugee from New York City’s Columbia Preparatory School, is a deep and thoughtful teenager, active in the Improv Club and the so-called Jew Crew on campus. One can easily imagine why he might have opted out of Manhattan’s conventional prep school scene in favor of early college. Marker credits his Simon’s Rock teachers with an unusual willingness to hand over the reins of their class to their students.

“The education at Columbia Prep was by rote,” he says. “It wasn’t

interactive. I saw that here, teachers weren’t leading but rather guiding. They were encouraging thought. Students are more engaged. Students, not teachers, are teaching the classes.”

DelPlato echoes and amplifies Marker’s impression of the teaching at Simon’s Rock. “I was a different person before I came here,” she says. “I didn’t really understand what it meant to teach. I knew what it was to lecture. At first, the focus was on me. At a certain point, I realized the focus is on the students. Teachers talk less here. If I just stop talking, wonderful things start happening.”

Seth Rogovoy is editor in chief of *Berkshire Living* magazine. He lives in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

HOT LINKS

Simon’s Rock College
• www.simons-rock.edu

Rural Campus: The rear window of the Fisher Science Center offers a lovely vista of the Berkshire Hills. The campus was once the site of a dairy farm.





How To:

Use College Methods in High School

Over the course of nearly forty years of educating high school-age students in a college setting, Simon's Rock College of Bard has developed various methods and techniques that have proven successful in engaging young minds and exercising their critical faculties. In general, according to Joan DelPlato, a Simon's Rock professor, younger college students do well with activities that are structured yet playful and can also be personalized. Here she offers several specific examples of teaching methods and classroom exercises honed over the years by Simon's Rock teachers in all disciplines:

1. Give students blank writing journals

to encourage them to think on paper and to give them the message that writing is an important tool for learning, the process of writing is valued, and one's personal responses to the course curriculum really matter.

2. Start every class session with five minutes of free writing

to focus students. The practice eases the transition from the world outside to the culture of the classroom and gets students warmed up for class discussion. Free writing is putting on paper whatever is on one's mind: private thoughts, writing for oneself that can't be done "incorrectly," writing that's not necessarily to be shared with the class. "There's only one rule for free writing: Keep the pen moving," says DelPlato. If students insist that they can't think of anything to write about, or if you see that they are stuck, ask them to write about being unable to write. Students can enter their "free writes" into a writing journal, which becomes a valuable repository of ideas that can be mined as the course develops.

3. Have students produce a "focused free write" (FFW). This is a free write with a subject the teacher chooses. The assigned topic can be as simple as "Comment on last night's reading [or writing] assignment," or it

can be much more pointed—for example, specifically related to the topic of the day's class discussion.

4. Have students share their FFWs in a "thought chain."

One student begins by reading his or her writing. In turn, each student acknowledges the previous speaker's point by paraphrasing it (beginning with the classic Simon's Rock phrase, "I hear you saying that . . ."), adding the word "and" or "but," and then reading his or her piece of writing. This is a good activity for getting students to hear each other and build on previous comments, fostering real group conversation. Students tend to listen much more carefully to each other's writing when they are required to synthesize it and compare it to their own thoughts. "When it works well," says DelPlato, "students are riveted to the writing of their peers."

5. Do a "text explosion." Students choose a few phrases or words from the text under consideration (or a step in the solving of an equation on the board) based on what interests or puzzles them. Then they take one of those areas in the text (or proof) and produce

an FFW on it. The text is read aloud from the beginning, and students interrupt, repeat the phrase they have selected, and insert their own piece of writing. "The effect is a constellation of responses to a flat text that is interpreted, in pieces, by the entire classroom of students in turn," says DelPlato. —S.R.

Summer Seminar

Last summer, the first Early College High School Teaching Seminar was held on the campus of Simon's Rock College of Bard, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, supported by a \$300,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The intensive, four-day workshop is implemented jointly by Simon's Rock and its sister institution, Bard High School Early College, in New York City (in partnership with Boston's Jobs for the Future and the University Park Campus School, associated with Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts). It allowed educators from all over the United States to immerse themselves in the approaches and techniques used at Simon's Rock over the past four decades. The seminar, which included observation of students and faculty, training and coaching, and curriculum development, will be offered again this year. Those interested in attending should write Christine Somerville, executive assistant to the provost at Simon's Rock, at csomerville@simons-rock.edu or call 413/528-7216.