

## **These Bunker Hill classes make late arrival mandatory 'Midnight Oil' courses make room for more**

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff

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On the first day of class at Bunker Hill Community College, the Psych 101 professor collected the usual student stats: names, e-mail addresses, reasons for enrolling. Then she threw out one more question: "What do we do if you fall asleep?"

The clock was ticking toward midnight. The normally bustling campus had come to a standstill. And Kathleen O'Neill worried about holding everyone's attention for the nearly three-hour class as the college embarked late Tuesday on a first-of-its-kind experiment to educate students in the dead of night.

Bunker Hill is rolling out its unusual schedule, dubbed "Burning the Midnight Oil," this semester in response to burgeoning enrollment, offering two popular introductory courses, in psychology and college writing, from 11:45 p.m. until 2:30 a.m. It has also pushed up the first class of the day by an hour, to 7 a.m. And last week, its 23 percent enrollment surge - to a record 10,000 students - prompted the school to quickly add 40 more classes in oversubscribed subjects such as Spanish, math, and accounting and scramble to hire faculty.

"We were clearly at a breaking point, and we had no classes left for anybody," said Mary Fifield, president of Bunker Hill, the state's largest community college. "We're just doing everything we can to accommodate the students coming in our doors. It's like a deluge."

Still, O'Neill, who had pitched the idea of late-night learning to college officials, couldn't believe that 19 students showed up for her class, leaving just a few empty chairs. They were a diverse group, ranging in age from 18 to 45 - aspiring nurses and engineers, stay-at-home mothers, information technology specialists, and a Boston police detective.

Many who sat beneath the fluorescent lights of O'Neill's classroom had little choice; they had registered too late and the daytime courses were full. Some, though, were drawn by the late hour because it fit their work and child-care schedules. Others were simply night owls.

"I thought they were crazy at first when they offered me this class," said Gregory Martin, a 21-year-old kitchen worker at a Roslindale rehabilitation center. "But I'm more of a night person, so I see this as an advantage. Otherwise I'd be home watching TV or playing video games."

If all goes well this semester, the college will add other midnight courses to its spring lineup, Fifield said. Community colleges around the nation, as well as the 14 others in Massachusetts, are keeping a close watch on Bunker Hill as their own enrollments swell.

The recession has prompted more traditional-age students to flock to the low-cost two-year schools, and more older learners are seeking retraining because they've been laid off or their jobs are at risk, said Norma Kent, a spokeswoman for the American Association of Community Colleges.

Bunker Hill is the first known college in the country to offer general education courses at the late hour. (**Clackamas Community College** in Oregon began offering “graveyard” welding classes from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. last spring.)

“This is one of the more unique ways community colleges are trying to serve a larger number of students,” Kent said. “State budgets are under stress at the same time colleges have a great number of students to serve, so it’s quite a conundrum.”

As her class convened, O’Neill laid out the ground rules, tailored to the midnight schedule. Office hours, which normally follow her classes, would now precede them. Cellphones, which she usually does not allow, could remain on throughout class because she figured no one would be calling this late unless it were an emergency. And, of course, students would not get into trouble for nodding off.

While some students requested to be awoken with a gentle tap on the head, one student shouted from the back row: “I’d prefer you flung something at me.”

With the late hour, O’Neill even reconsidered whether she should show video clips of psychological disorders.

“If I turn out the lights, I’m afraid we’d all pass out,” O’Neill said.

To keep students alert, the college provided free Colombian coffee and a variety of teas. The spread also included chocolate chip cookies, granola bars, and hard candies. Some students arrived with Mountain Dew and Dunkin’ Donuts coffee.

“I gotta make sure I don’t fall asleep on the first day,” said Rafael Sampaio, 20, who had downed three cups of coffee by 1 a.m., when O’Neill paused for a break.

Edwin Diaz, who double-fisted tea and coffee (with three packs of sugar), said he would readily switch all his daytime courses at Bunker Hill to midnight if the college offered more options at that hour. The 20-year-old, who works as an airport baggage handler from 3 to 11:30 a.m., said he would get more sleep if he didn’t have to go to school during the day.

Although a few students stifled yawns, not a single one dozed off. They took notes and jotted down their homework assignments. Fifteen of the 19 students gamely discussed Freudian theory, shared personal stories about obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression, and debated moral reasoning - the kind of lively late-night discussions one would imagine occurring in a dorm hallway.

John Maguire, a 41-year-old waiter who is going back to school for a business degree, said it was easy for him to stay awake because of the engaging dialogue with his new classmates.

“It’s like going to a bar, but with more intelligent conversation because no one’s drunk,” said Maguire, who normally works until midnight. “It’s usually 3 a.m. by the time I unwind anyway.”

On Sunday, though, Maguire will return to Bunker Hill for an introduction to business class that starts at 9 a.m. “That’s more of a nightmare to me than this.”

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