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## Company unveils line of free online courses from elite college faculty <sup>[1]</sup>

Submitted by [Steve Kolowich](#) <sup>[2]</sup> on January 27, 2012 - 3:00am

Robert Garland, a professor of classics at Colgate University, is not accustomed to discussing Greek religion with the lifeless lens of his MacBook's built-in video camera. But that was how Garland spent Wednesday afternoon: in his home study, recording lectures on his laptop in 20-minute chunks.

Garland, a novice to online teaching, says it is difficult to think of these solitary sessions as lectures. "I think of them more as chats," he says. To keep things interesting, he delivers some of them in the second person, as if instructing a time-traveling tourist in ancient Greece how to pray, how to please the gods, how to upset the gods, and so on. Garland's gear is lo-fi: just the laptop, which he owns, and a microphone mailed to him by Udemy, the company that roped him into this.

Udemy, a company that allows anyone to create and sell courses through its online platform, has announced a new area of its site, called The Faculty Project, devoted to courses by professors at a number of top institutions, such as Colgate, Duke University, Stanford University, Northwestern University, Vanderbilt University, the University of Virginia, Dartmouth College and Vassar College. While Udemy is a for-profit enterprise, the Faculty Project courses will be free.

The goal is to "elevate the brand," according to Gagan Biyani, Udemy's president and co-founder. The company says it has no immediate plans to monetize the Faculty Project, and would never do so without the input and permission of its faculty contributors.

The inaugural Faculty Project courses include many humanities electives normally reserved for small classrooms of undergraduates. Among them: "Elixir: A History of Water and Humans," "Select Classics in Russian Literature" and "The Cognitive Neuroscience of Mindfulness." Garland and the project's other professorial recruits are developing, pro bono, mini-lecture-based versions of courses they offer on their home campuses. Udemy says it does not require the professors to relinquish ownership of the courses.

There are no caps on course enrollment. "It could be 10 people, it could be 100, it could be 1,000," says Ben Ho, the Vassar College economics professor who is teaching the course on water and humans. But as far as interactivity, Udemy's Faculty Project is more akin to Yale Open Courses -- where users can watch lectures and consult syllabuses for free -- than to Udacity, the venture [launched this week](#) <sup>[3]</sup> by a team of former Stanford academics, which aspires to administer quizzes and grade its anticipated droves of students, which may number in the tens or hundreds of thousands.

"It's certainly not a 'course' in the sense that people will send me essays -- I hope," says Garland. But he did say he is open to corresponding with students who take his Greek religion course, so long as it does not interfere with his on-campus duties. Ho says he might try to set up and moderate discussion groups online for students of his water course. "This is more just informational lectures," he says, but "I will be answering questions and will encourage people to ask questions."

The volunteer professors are instructed only to teach "university-quality courses," says Biyani, the Udemy president. Beyond that, they are given very few guidelines, he says. Seeking outside affirmation by higher ed regulatory bodies and offering recognition to students that take the courses are not part of the company's short-term plans, Biyani says.

The main goal is to generate publicity and demonstrate that it is possible to deliver quality courses online with very little overhead. Absent the need to pay professors, integrate with a campuswide information infrastructure, or design courses with the sort of rigor that would be guaranteed to pass muster with outside auditors, Udemy says it is developing the Faculty Project courses at \$500 apiece.

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