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Now Funny People Can Get Respect (and Course Credit at U.S.C.)

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BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — Crammed into a booth at the Nate 'n Al Delicatessen — the professionally funny call it “the commissary” — Barnett Kellman, David Isaacs and Jack Epps Jr., from the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts, were trying to explain over a plate of pickles why those who create screen comedy deserve academic respect.



Barnett Kellman, Jack Epps, Jr. and David Isaacs, the three principals of Comedy@SCA
“These are serious people, you don’t treat them — ” began Mr. Kellman. “As a joke,” finished Mr. Epps.

“Excuse me, you don’t belong with that group,” a nearby wiseguy piped up at one point.

“Why not?” asked Mr. Epps.

“You have hair.”

Beginning next year, a new initiative at U.S.C. will offer university courses for those who would write, direct, edit and produce funnier stuff than the guy in the next booth.

Organized by Mr. Kellman, Mr. Isaacs and Mr. Epps, the curriculum will not amount to a full-blown college major. But its founders describe it as perhaps the most extensive effort by an American university to examine and foster the manufacture of humor.

The initiative will be introduced at the three-day “Comedy@SCA” festival, which begins on Friday evening with a discussion between Steve Carell and the film director Peter Segal (“Get Smart”). That session and others with the likes of Ivan Reitman (“No Strings Attached”), Paul Feig (“Bridesmaids”) and James Bobin (“The Muppets”) are already full, though the event was promoted only among the university’s students and alumni.

In August, faculty members and visiting Hollywood professionals will join students in exploring what Mr. Kellman — who, among other things, directed dozens of “Murphy Brown” episodes — describes as eternal questions: “Is comedy ineffable? Is there no way to communicate it to others?”

Mr. Isaacs, who has been a writer, producer or consultant on shows like “Cheers” and “Mad Men,” said he was inclined to “teach others the way I learned it, that comedy comes out of the characters.”

Mr. Epps, the one with hair, has contributed to a long string of films, including “The Secret of My Success” and “Top Gun.” The first to occupy U.S.C.’s Victoria and Jack Oakie Endowed Chair in Comedy, he said the new initiative would offer courses for graduate students and undergraduates, including those who are not enrolled in the cinematic arts school.

Mr. Kellman said he would eventually like to see the initiative overcome academic “snobbery” to examine comedy in the context of medicine, the neurosciences or anthropology. “It seems to me, a research university has an obligation to raise these questions,” he said.

And to elevate that patter from the other booth.