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# Sites Of Salvation; Classics And Small Liberal Arts Colleges

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KEYWORDS: endangered Classics, small liberal arts colleges (SLACs), state of SCS

AS IN PREVIOUS SCS/APA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS publications, my text is only lightly edited, and footnotes are at a minimum.

The Society is financially better off in the fiscal year 2021 than we anticipated. Thanks to the excellent stewardship of our financial trustees and the finance committee, along with the superlative direction and grant-writing skills of Helen Cullyer, our Executive Director, we ended up on more solid ground than we expected after year one of the pandemic. Our first-ever fully virtual meeting was a huge success with very few glitches. We looked forward to an in-person meeting in 2022 in San Francisco; Helen sent out a survey for the membership to weigh on the meeting mode, and you voted for a hybrid model which, while being the most expensive of the options, is the most equitable in terms of access. So, working with our colleagues and members in AIA, we planned for a hybrid meeting. But COVID was not finished with us yet, and the omicron variant threw a spanner into the works: we had to switch to an all-virtual meeting. We all owe a huge thank-you not only to Helen but also to her staff, Cherane Ali, the Director of Meetings and Events, and Erik Shell, the Communications and Services Coordinator. The transition from hybrid to virtual within ten days of the event would have been impossible without the hard work and persistence of these folks. Please send them your thanks in the chat! Furthermore, it is with both great sadness and great pride that we will bid farewell to Erik, who will start a new position in Chicago at the end of this meeting. Erik joined the staff of SCS in 2016 and it has been a great joy to work with him. We wish Erik all the best.

In some ways, the disruption to the planning of the 2022 annual meeting has, at least for me, caused more sadness and melancholy. Plans for a virtual meeting in 2021 were concretized early in 2020, partly because we had never done this before and partly because there was no path out of the pandemic at the time. There was excitement about trying something new and having it succeed beyond expectations. Then came the vaccines early in 2021, and we were all hopeful that we could have an in-person meeting in 2022. That hope persisted even as the rate of vaccinations plateaued, and the vaccines became the victims of politics and disinformation. Although most people living in the United States did get vaccinated, the rate was not high enough to stop variants—first delta and now omicron—from getting established. So the leadership had to adjust and adapt as members changed their registrations. I want to acknowledge that, in addition to the economic costs of having to cancel flight arrangements and hotel rooms, there has also been a psychological cost. Even the most introverted of us still need human contact. We want the networking, catching up with old friends, and the spur-of-the-moment greeting/meeting in an elevator or at the registration desk. Hopefully the 2023 meeting can bring these aspects back.

The year 2021 saw Classics in the news: there were articles in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Times Higher Education*, and others. The pandemic has put even greater stress on vulnerable Classics programs around the country, as administrations use it as an excuse to eliminate not just Classics but other Humanities programs, especially language-based ones. This is a great segue to the topic of my presidential address: “Classics and Small Liberal Arts Colleges (SLACs): Sites of Salvation?”

Being both a participant in and an observer of these very public debates on the discipline and the challenges we face, I felt called upon to reflect on my place in the field. I began my career as a Classics professor at Luther College, a small liberal arts college in Decorah, Iowa. It was the height of economic hard times as a result of the oil embargo; there were very few Classics jobs to be had. I counted myself extremely lucky to have landed a position, even though it was only a one-year visiting leave replacement. I was nervous about the job for two reasons: (1) I was fresh out of a pressure cooker graduate program at the University of Michigan which, in hindsight, left me wholly unprepared to teach at a SLAC; (2) later on the same day that Luther offered me the position and I accepted, I found out I was pregnant with my first child. What I found at Luther was a culture of caring and a nurturing, empathetic group of Classicists committed both to the field and to the humanity of their colleagues. My year at Luther had a profound impact on my formation as a professor, even as I moved away from the nurturing environment of a SLAC.

My next positions, first at Howard University and then at University of California, Irvine, brought back the stress and anxiety of graduate school, albeit for different reasons. However, these positions did affirm what and where I wanted to be: an educator of undergraduates at a small liberal arts college. So, at this juncture I began my thirty-two-year tenure at Hamilton College. When I struggled with the constraints of a very traditional Classics program and curriculum, Hamilton gave me (and my colleagues at the time) the intellectual freedom to expand, both in terms of the course offerings and my own intellectual growth and interests.

The struggle to keep Classics static yet relevant has been with us for a while. I was struck by this fact as I was reading *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar*, Barbara McManus's biography of Grace Macurdy. Reading about the struggle of Vassar's Classics department to make its curriculum more appealing to its students at the turn of the twentieth century was eerily prescient of the struggles we all face now. Vassar's issue then was "competing" with the English department rather than recalcitrant deans and higher administrators.

Still this moment feels intrinsically different as Classics grapples with its white supremacist, patriarchal, and colonizing history. The shifting demographics of the United States and the "arc of the moral universe" demand that we strive to make our curricula and our classrooms more diverse. This means change. Change underscores the implausibility of keeping Classics static yet relevant. This movement is not only occurring in the United States, but also globally.

I would argue that SLACs have been the leaders in recognizing the need for change and implementing those changes in innovative ways. Unfortunately, as cutting-edge and transformative as this work has been, it has only been highlighted (at least by the media) if undertaken by PhD-granting institutions, whether here in the US or abroad.

Let us travel back a bit in time, to the pre-pandemic era, which now seems eons ago. Very early in 2020, the Classics faculty at Oxford University announced their proposal to remove the study of Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid* from the "Mods" syllabus. According to *The Oxford Student*, "This proposal forms part of a series of reforms aimed to modernise the first stage of the Classics degree, known as Moderations (Mods), which take place during the Hilary term of the second year for all students taking Classics courses across the university."<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Student* goes on to explain that there has

<sup>1</sup> Yaamir Badhe, "Classics Faculty Proposes Removal of Homer and Virgil from Mods Syllabus," *The Oxford Student*, February 17th, 2020, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2020/02/17/94749/>.

been a crescendo of criticism about the Mods course in recent years, due to attainment gaps caused by gender and to access to previous study of Latin and/or Greek. The proposal was tantamount to the sky falling among some Classicists; but Classics is still at Oxford, the last I heard.

In the middle of 2021, the Classics department at Princeton University decided to reevaluate and reenvision their undergraduate concentration. There was input from all the relevant constituencies, and once again angst and anxiety among outsiders ran high. Indeed, the Princeton department had to issue these remarks as part of their “Statement to Community—Undergraduate Concentration,” posted June 1, 2021:<sup>2</sup>

1. Princeton Classics remains profoundly committed to the teaching of ancient languages. The Department is proud of its commitment to language instruction at all levels from beginners to advanced literature courses. ... Expanded offerings [in Akkadian and modern Greek] reflect the understanding that knowledge of ancient and modern languages remains central to what we do as a department and a discipline.
2. Our conversations with undergraduates have revealed that a minimum language requirement acts primarily as a deterrent to potential concentrators, and is not effective as a means of inducing students to embark on the study of Ancient Greek or Latin. We believe that an approach based on inclusion and persuasion will be more effective in encouraging language study than one based on compulsion. We ... see our changes as a means of growing the field (including the study of languages) by removing barriers to entry.
3. We see it as a strength that Classics is an interdisciplinary field that includes not just the study of Ancient Greek and Roman language and literature, but these cultures’ history, material culture, interaction with other ancient societies, resonance in later ages, and continued vitality today. ... The Department’s commitment to rigorous study of the classical world in all its facets remains, and is only strengthened by this wider field of inquiry.

While the fact that the Princeton department needed to justify their internal revisions to their undergraduate curriculum is disconcerting, their statement and revised requirements for an undergraduate major provide a roadmap for an inclusive approach to the study of the ancient world nationally and globally.

I have just one criticism: these changes are not new! Princeton did not come up with it “first”; nor did Oxford, for that matter. Who did? In the United States, it was small liberal arts colleges—a quintessentially American institu-

<sup>2</sup>“Statement to Community—Undergraduate Concentration,” Princeton Classics, June 1st, 2021, <https://classics.princeton.edu/department/news/statement-community-undergraduate-concentration>.

tion of higher education—which developed their programs along these lines as much as a decade or more ago. These changes were often enacted without fanfare or angst or anxiety but rather out of the stark realization that Classics must evolve or die. As a professor at a SLAC which instituted similar changes over twenty-five years ago, I harbored some resentment that our institutions received no accolades for our innovations, but it gave birth to this topic for my presidential address. Dan Curley, my colleague at Skidmore College, put it more elegantly in his reply to my request for information: “Thanks for your ... recognition of the work that SLACs have been doing for some time. The omission of that work is, for me and I am sure for others, a frustrating part of the national narrative.”

On November 2, 2021, I put out a query to the Liberal Arts Chairs list about what changes they have made to their undergraduate curricula and when. I was overwhelmed by the responses I received between November 2 and December 20—over forty pages of emails! Nearly all thanked me for including them; all were eager to share the changes they have made. I am going to highlight some of responses—I am only sorry I cannot do them all—and will organize them by institution with the respondent in parentheses.

Generally, the innovations fall into two broad categories. One is to make Classics classrooms more inclusive and meet students where they are. The target here is the language classroom and making the study of the ancient European languages as accessible as possible. The other category is the acknowledgement of the biased history and establishment of Classics as a field, stressing that our study of the ancient world is skewed due to an epistemological framework of white supremacy and patriarchy. I was struck by the dedication of the faculty who responded, not just to the evolution of our field but also to more inclusive modes of pedagogy. I want to give a special shout-out, though, to those professors who are the single Classicist at their institutions, and who often put together flourishing programs in isolation. You are seen; you are valued; you are greatly appreciated.

I would like now to present some of the responses I received; I hope this will not make for too tedious reading and I encourage you to note similarities and parallels. Let us start with the program at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, WA (Owen Ewald):

I am a one-person Classics program housed in a Languages department with French, Spanish, Chinese, and Linguistics at Seattle Pacific University, which is affiliated with the Consortium of Christian Colleges and Universities.

(1) My program created a non-language major track in the early 1990s, about a decade before I was hired. Even though only about one-quarter of the majors have followed this track, every student major helps the department argue for continuance.

(2) About a decade ago, I shifted the focus of Greek instruction from classical Greek to New Testament Greek to encourage graduate students in our seminary to enroll, and that move has increased the number of students in first-year Greek from an average of eight to an average of fourteen. Not every program will even consider such a shift of focus, but it made sense for my institutional context.

(3) Inspired by Professor Yurie Hong's contribution to a 2019 SCS panel on inclusive syllabi, I shifted the focus of my literature in translation surveys away from an exclusive focus on Greco-Roman literature to premodern world literature and its reception. My first-year-level literature survey course now includes the Malian *Sundiata* epic, the South Asian *Bhagavad Gita*, and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* as well as *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Aeneid*. My third-year-level mythology course includes retellings of the South Asian *Mahabharata* and of the Guatemalan creation epic *Popol Vuh* (*The Book of the Community*), as well as three tragedies each from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN (Christopher Bungard):

Here at Butler, we created two tracks some years back, and this was motivated by the realization that we had one track that simultaneously asked students to do too much and too little language.

For those who wanted to go on to graduate school in Classics, our old system did not actually require Greek and Latin, and it only really required one advanced language class. As such, we created an ancient languages track that required students to take both languages and more upper-level language courses.

At the same time, the language requirement required students with no previous experience to take five semesters of language. This essentially necessitated that we get people started in the languages in the fall of their sophomore year, too late for many students who discovered Classics later in their career. For these students, we created the Ancient Mediterranean Cultures track. This track requires students to take at least two language courses of whatever ancient language, a survey of Greek literature/history and a survey of Roman literature/history, and then upper-level courses which could be in languages or in translation.

With our move into [the History and Anthropology department], we will be exploring ways that we can weave Classics into ... shared courses as well. This seems an elegant solution to the limited resources that many Classics courses have, and it potentially gets students from outside of Classics greater exposure, perhaps sparking an interest in our discipline that these students may never have realized was a latent one.

Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA (Megan Drinkwater):

I am happy to share a big [change] (or at least it feels like a big one) I made five years or so ago: I switched to team-based learning in Intermediate Latin. I also chose to use the same text each year once Bret Mulligan's *Life of Hannibal*

became available. It is pretty tough, but the commentary is a great tool (especially for teaching students to use a commentary!), it is free, and the message of cultural relativism and respect for Rome's North African nemesis is hugely relevant. This may be especially so for my student body: this semester I have seventeen students in the class and nine of them are African Americans. This is pretty typical for the makeup of Latin classes at Agnes Scott and is one of the many, many reasons I pray we will never lose Latin ... we may finally have lost Greek, which is a whole different tragedy, but I digress.

It is such a pivotal point for our discipline, I think, and what it offers today's students, especially those who might not otherwise have access to the ancient Mediterranean and its languages. I would love to see us all work together (i.e., on shared upper-level language courses) rather than retreat into the age-old posture of defending our own territory on our own campuses.

Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY (Daniel Curley):

At Skidmore our focus has been on boosting the languages through a variety of efforts in different stages of implementation.

Our priority is to make our lower-level Latin and Greek courses "cancel-proof": we want to keep enrollments robust enough so that the courses themselves are not converted to independent studies—which do not count in our teaching loads—by our administration. The issue is less with the first part of the respective sequences, elementary Latin or Greek, than with the second part, intermediate [Latin or Greek]. The elementary languages always enroll well: twenty plus strong or more in each. Attrition leading into the intermediate [language courses] is steep, with enrollments sometimes dropping into single digits, and inviting the aforementioned conversion [into independent studies], if not cancellation. The institution's all-college language requirement is only one course, the result of some egregious watering down back in the aughties, which means that our students are generally not incentivized to continue past the elementary level, if that is where they start.

Our solution, when fully implemented, will probably be to offer one consolidated course two times a year. We might call it Introductory Latin or Introductory Greek (vel sim.), and we would accept students at both levels, whether [they] would have started out at [the] elementary [level] or ... would have come in at [the] intermediate. In other words, we hope to combine both levels into one class. Students looking to fulfill their all-college language requirement would take it once. Students looking to major or minor would take it twice. Hopefully this would leverage the robust enrollments at the elementary level toward boosting the less robust ones at the intermediate level, especially if the structure allows students to start in whichever semester they wish. That said, we recognize that combining intermediate and advanced classes is much more the norm, and in the end this might be a more attractive option. ...

One last effort, if it can gotten off the ground, will hopefully keep the elementary-level students interested enough to take the course again at the intermediate-level. For my Latin classes, I am trying to develop a role-immersion adventure game (kind of like *Reacting to the Past* games, but language learning based) that runs an entire year, reinforces grammar, brings ancient Rome to life, and gives the students a satisfying mystery to solve. When completed, I think it could support a complete language curriculum, since one of the engines of the game is writing Latin letters to various other characters—meaning that, students would put the grammar they have recently used to good use. If this tack works in Latin, it might work in Greek as well.

Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA (Jeremy Lefkowitz):

- In 2012, we introduced a “Classical Studies” major and minor, both of which have **no language requirement**. Any of our classes in Greek, Latin, Ancient History, or Classical Studies count toward the Classical Studies tracks.
- Also in 2012, we modified our Greek and Latin major requirements, so that first-year/elementary Greek and Latin credits could be applied to the major and minor, and we also lowered the total credits needed for a major in Greek or Latin from eleven to eight; previously the first-year courses had not counted toward the major or minor, based on the assumption (perhaps a safe assumption for earlier in the twentieth century) that students who were going to major in Latin or Greek would have already begun to study the languages before college.
- In 2019, we introduced courses in Sanskrit language and the culture and literature of ancient India. A brief anecdote about how this came about: there was clearly some student interest, but initially the department and admin were reluctant to hire someone to teach Sanskrit. So I offered to teach “Introduction to Sanskrit” myself, with zero knowledge of Sanskrit. ... I signed up for an intensive online summer course at Oxford, preparing to muddle through, but when fifteen students enrolled for “Introduction to Sanskrit” over the summer, the department and admin allowed me to hire someone actually qualified to do it!

Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA (Ulrike Krotscheck)

In terms of attracting students to Classical Studies, we are fortunate to have a curriculum that is, by design, interdisciplinary. This means that [we] are usually team teaching with at least one colleague from another discipline. For example, when I co-teach a class with a [member of the] geology faculty, those students who chose the class because they are primarily interested in geology are also exposed to Classics. This has the potential to draw students in who did not know that they would find the ancient world interesting. Same with the sciences, creative writing, and all sorts of other disciplines that are, in theory,

quite far away from Classics. I think this counteracts possible silo-ism of a “pure” Classics curriculum and attracts students who had no idea they would find the material interesting.

I realize that interdisciplinary team teaching might not seem logistically feasible at many SLACs, but where departments are expected to be innovative, and especially where enrollments are declining, even one interdisciplinary class, or extra credit workshop, or lecture series might pay dividends.

One drawback to our system is that we rarely have the capacity to offer intermediate or upper division languages—so [one of us] takes those students on as extra, uncompensated [course] load. We have had a small handful of students reach upper-level language skills. ... In addition, we are in negotiations with regional colleges to begin to “share” language class enrollments across different colleges.

Finally, this approach does not produce a ton of students well enough prepared to pursue advanced degrees in Classics ... but some graduates have gone on to exciting careers in teaching, the law, program management, and a number of other careers, Classics having informed their educational trajectory.

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC (T. H. M. Gellar-Goad):

In the 2018–2019 academic year, the theme of the Proculloquium Classicum series was “Classics beyond Europe,” featuring speakers such as Sasha-Mae Eccleston, Shelley Haley, and Patrice Rankine. ...

Building on the success of that series, [we] founded in 2019–2020 the department’s provocatively and aspirationally titled “Classics beyond Whiteness” series. ... The process ... of partnering with other units on campus to carry it out raised the profile of the department just as the university was beginning to take racial justice and white supremacy seriously.

In summer 2020, alums ... sent a letter to the department encouraging the faculty to adopt additional efforts for racial equity. One of their key recommendations was to ensure that no student comes through the department without encountering critical race theory. In response to this item, the department decided unanimously to make the Classics Beyond Whiteness course (which studies race in the ancient world, Classics and white supremacy, and non-white reception, all through the lens of intersectional feminism and critical race theory) required of all department majors and minors, whether focused on language or on culture.

Finally, let us end on a high note:

College of Charleston, Charleston, SC (James Newhard), which describes itself not as a SLAC but as a “public comprehensive institution”:

Classics at Charleston is going through the roof. It has been that way for over a decade. ... Our civilization courses are full, and we are increasingly turning

students away from a lack of capacity. What have we done? Much of what people have suggested doing. We have been doing a lot of things under the radar, oftentimes ahead of the curve. In a comprehensive undergraduate institution in the South, [we] think that perhaps we have not been noticed. ... We have two major tracks—one that is heavily focused on ancient Greek/Latin, a second which requires no ancient languages. We have a third major jointly managed between us and education that leads to high school certification in Latin. We offer minors in Latin, Greek, and classical civilization. ... In 2016–17, we reformatted the classical civilization major. ...

[In a nutshell, have we] retooled the major? Check. Engaged with K–12 educators? Check. Increased the number of courses or course content focusing on “modern applications” / race / ethnicity / inclusion? Check. Focused on the transition between high school and college coursework in Latin? Check. Increased our focus and support for several career tracks, not just the ivory tower? Check. Reengaged with alumni? Check. Increased marketing/contacts with prospective/incoming/current students? Check. Diluted the rigor of the languages or other forms of exploring the ancient world by recognizing that not everyone goes to grad school? Nope. The result of our work is that our numbers are steadily increasing. Latin is up, classical civilization is up, the number of majors and minors is up. Greek is starting to show increased retention and signs of positive movement.

I will let the College of Charleston sum up my address, with some slight revisions:

In all of the dire news about the field, there are places where things are moving positively. Small liberal arts colleges and public comprehensive institutions have been some of those places for years. Often the national dialogue has been voiced from places that are not such institutions. It is time to get some diverse perspectives on the platform. Refashioning the discipline of Classics for the twenty-first century has been a life’s challenge/mission for me and many like us, and we have been doing just that at various SLACs around the country.