

Report of the Director of the Classics Advisory Service

The past year has seen the usual array of requests for program reviews of Classics programs. However, there has been an unusual number of threats to classics programs and departments, a trend that shows no sign of abating, and it is to this issue I would like to address my report this year.

Because of recent difficulties in the American economy, institutions of higher learning have suffered serious financial difficulties that have affected Classics programs in various ways. The easiest way for colleges to deal with budget cuts is not to replace faculty who retire or who leave for some other reason, or to replace tenure lines with visiting appointments or adjuncts, aggravating at many institutions what James O'Donnell has aptly called "adjunctivitis." In the long run, this means a greater gap between those who have the security of tenure, along with access to research leaves, travel support, etc., and the swelling number of classicists who do not. Classics is a key fault line in the battle for the soul of academia, which often shapes up in times of financial troubles as a battle between the ideals of a liberal education versus the vocational benefits of college education. Often Classics will be viewed as "non-essential" or old fashioned. The current renewed emphasis on foreign language study, for example, has often been articulated with a strong presentist bias, privileging "critical" languages like Arabic and Chinese, which are viewed as crucial for preparing students to participate in the world economy, at the expense of well-established language programs that focus on literature and culture (Classics, but also German, Russian, and many others). Colleges and universities anxious to cut administrative costs increasingly seek to combine departments and programs to save money on chair stipends, support staff, office equipment, etc., often without much sensitivity to the curricular and professional consequences of such changes.

What is the best response? Righteous indignation can only get us so far. It is annoying to find it suddenly necessary to defend, once again, the role of Classics in a liberal education and the role of a liberal education in the modern university. However, it is also important to respond in a way that is meaningful to those who are responsible for making difficult decisions about the future of the university. Here are some thoughts on these issues from my own experiences and from the tales of woe I have heard lately. I offer them as a way of starting a conversation about these issues with the intent of girding ourselves for future battles.

1. Viability

Classics will rarely win the numbers game. It has been estimated that there is one tenured professor of Classics for every six Classics majors in the country [N.B. this is an unverified statistic from Frank Donahue's *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*]. Most Classics departments have a similar profile: a respectable number of majors per faculty member, a respectable number of Latin language students, a smaller number of Greek language students, in both cases thinning to smaller numbers (less than 10) in advanced courses in either language. At the same time, most departments field larger classical humanities courses (where all reading is in English) that cover both literature and material culture. These popular "bread and butter" courses usually are what make our departments viable. From the standpoint of bean-counters, it is easy to view our curriculum as something that is superfluous: there are other languages that students can take, whether they are more useful or not; and they can study literature and culture in translation in English and History departments. Classics is nice, in this scenario, but hardly essential. While it is always important to assert that Classics is relatively cheap (and we are, generally), it is more persuasive to argue our case on the basis of two other key criteria: quality and centrality.

2. Quality

Classics as a field and as a department has been around a long time at most universities; often, Classics is the oldest department at the institution. Although this is sometimes considered an aspersion, it is not difficult to argue that a field like Classics, with its well-established professional organizations, journals, conferences, scholarships and endowments, has what newer programs aspire to, but may never achieve: long-standing criteria of disciplinary authority that have evolved and stood the test of time, well-tested educational materials in the form of textbooks, long-standing graduate programs with proven excellence and track records. The classics section of most academic libraries is large; but that is only part of the story. Classics has been a leader in the implementation of technology in scholarship and teaching, as witnessed by innovative projects like the TLG, Perseus, and many others.

A defense based on quality is especially relevant when administrators suggest that newer interdisciplinary programs are more hip and room must be made for them in the curriculum at the expense of these older outdated programs. It is important to point out that a balance between disciplinary and interdisciplinary work is essential for the good health of both kinds of endeavor. The Achilles heel of interdisciplinary programs is lack of disciplinary depth, whereas disciplines tend to become excessively narrow. Students and scholars suffer in both cases: in the former, they can end up never engaging any subject deeply, with a superficial acquaintance of numerous fields; in the latter, they can end up unable to relate narrow disciplinary work to any other context. Aside from its very solid traditions of teaching and research, Classics has also been an interdisciplinary field for a long time, combining many specialties and always increasing the number of ways that classical antiquity can be studied or included in emerging fields (gender studies and identity studies are salient examples).

Emerging fields like Arabic and Chinese language instruction often lack the resources and personnel in cognate areas (history, religion, philosophy, etc.) with the result that language becomes taught and learned in a vacuum. Classics has the kind of broad representation in the curriculum outside of our departments that is required for the study of literature and language to be meaningful. The expansion of the curriculum into underrepresented areas is certainly a valid goal, but it is risky to replace tried and tested programs like Classics with emerging or evolving programs that may take years to implement properly. This is particularly true if those new programs rely heavily on individual faculty members whose expertise is not easy to reproduce when that faculty goes on leave or departs the institution completely. A better approach is to make room for these new programs within existing curricular and administrative structures, and classicists should be making strategic alliances that can move such an approach forward (Mediterranean Studies, for example).

High-achieving high school students frequently select Latin as their foreign language because of its reputation as a prestigious choice. High school Latin programs are often excellent in part because of the self-selection of these high-achieving students. College programs that wish to attract the best students will see Classics as a key resource. It is a good idea to get some data about these trends from relevant schools to help make this point. Contacting high school Latin teachers and guidance counselors can help build a case centered around recruitment.

A defense based on quality will inevitably make reference to the prestige that a classics curriculum adds to a liberal arts curriculum. It is easy to point to peer and aspirational institutions that have classics programs and argue that this should be part of the “arms race” in which all colleges seem to be embroiled.

3. Centrality

The centrality of Classics is a direct result of the institutional history of American universities. The centrality of Classics in the modern university will be evidenced in the way classicists participate in other kinds of programs, contributing a perspective and a set of tools that are distinctive and interesting. Again,

gender studies and identity studies are good instances of the way Classics can occupy an important position in emerging fields of study. One way of putting ourselves in a stronger position in difficult times is to make ourselves useful and relevant to other programs around the university: history, art, religion, literature, etc. This can range from curricular support to collaborative research to just being a good citizen of the university. The role that Greek science and philosophy played in the development of Islam makes that now suddenly important field of study a source of new collaborative and curricular opportunities for classicists. Perhaps more to the point is the versatility that the skills involved in the study of Classics brings to our students. Studying the Classics provides students with the central components of a liberal education, as opposed to an education more narrowly focused on a specific occupation; and that is a preparation for a life of learning new skills and of transferring skills to other goals and arenas of activity.

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