

Classics: Curriculum & Profession

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Abstract: The challenges currently facing classicists are not so different from those our profession has faced for the last one hundred and fifty years, and with each challenge, a discipline sometimes imagined by outsiders to be slow to embrace the new has shown itself naturally disposed to experimentation. The discipline's agility derives from the unique degree of variegation in the modes of thinking required to thrive in it: from interpretive, to quantitative, to those relying on knowledge of culture and context. As the value of education is increasingly judged in terms of workforce development, we stand our best chance to thrive by sticking to our strengths, and anchoring our curricular goals and messages to the value of the liberal arts as a whole, as well as the intellectual dexterity that it fosters.

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The shape of undergraduate training in the classics has changed dramatically. Up through the 1970s, it would be fair to say that our departments modeled curricula with the goal of producing the next Wilamowitz. We have since instituted programs with a wider view of desirable outcomes, and most of us have even allowed that some students could earn degrees in our field without any knowledge of Greek or Latin. That is a profound shift, but it is not the only dramatic change of its kind; in fact, it's not the half of it. A snapshot from one hundred years ago shows how far down this path we have come. In the May 1912 issue of *The Classical Journal*, Ellsworth D. Wright of Lawrence College was taken aback by the results of his survey of 155 of the most reputable and representative American universities and colleges (public and private), with regard to the study of classical languages.¹ (He excluded technical schools and colleges for women "for obvious reasons.") The requirement for ancient languages across the country had shrunk to an average of only five years. It is eye-opening that this would appear to be a regression. But it is downright stunning that Wright was surveying the language requirements not just for

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those specializing in classics, but for any Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree from these institutions.

Wright's discussion is poignant. He speaks of a past, only forty years prior to his day, during which there was wide agreement about what a B.A. degree meant. Training in the classics was so central a component of it that he wondered whether it would be "fair or honorable to label with a B.A. that which is devoid of the classical element." To Wright, the classical element provides rigorous and systematized training in logical thinking, language use, and oratory; further, it grants us a "gallery of lives" through which to contemplate virtue. Citing his recent commencement address at the University of Michigan, Wright points to the decline in study of the classics as the chief reason for "the declining love of noble letters and noble art – the declining respect for tradition and authority, for the heritage and the faith – the declining splendor of the ideal."² While we have toned down our language in the last hundred years, it is harder to claim we have much departed from the general sentiment: ardent, defensive, a bit hectoring, and ultimately appealing to our better angels. All of which is justified, knowing what our discipline can do for those that take it up. What classicist wouldn't offer some kind of defense during such retrenchment? But, then again, the familiar ring of this concern gives pause, particularly to our academic tribe. One wonders, how many men of 1912 would it have taken to move a boulder lightly thrown by one man from the earlier time?

There were reasons – apart from a declining respect for our heritage – for the changes made during Wright's time. Universities were undergoing a massive expansion at the turn of the twentieth century. Their numbers had doubled over the forty years prior, and the number of bach-

elor's degrees awarded had quadrupled, increasing at almost twice the pace of the increase in population. Of particular concern for him was the rate at which state universities were multiplying. These schools were charting a different course, in which ancient languages were less consistently required. The land-grant schools were – by law, after all – mandated to provide training in "such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts. . . in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes."³ Certain other newcomers, such as Leland Stanford Junior University (which Wright knew by this lengthier name) were supported by business money, and they no longer valued the classics at their cores. Charles Francis Adams, the son and grandson of the Adams presidents, gave voice and form to a new idea of college training: on June 28, 1883, he told the Harvard chapter of *Phi Beta Kappa* that the attachment to the classics was an outmoded "fetich."⁴ Minds were changing; and the idea of college as exclusively a finishing acculturation into an aristocracy of the learned (an idea that was itself inflected by the earlier core goal of training clergy) was being left behind. Universities were now tasked to prepare a broader cross-section of the public in the practical arts.

It is not too far a stretch to see an analogous change taking place in our own recent past. The percentage of the population that has a B.A. has continued to swell. It crossed 5 percent in 1940 and sits now at 30 percent, a number unimaginable one hundred years ago. Just as the land grant expanded the notion of what training for the B.A. could look like, so, too, most of the increase since the 1970s has been attributable to the addition of students pursuing formerly unknown college paths. The fields of criminal justice, basic business, and health support, which used to rely on on-the-job training, now require the B.A.

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as standard, entry-level certification.⁵ Not so different from a century ago, we are now at a point at which huge new populations of students are aiming for a B.A., and are in turn changing the larger picture of what purpose the degree serves. We are still right to be concerned about how to position our field most advantageously with this changing student body.

Appeals to shape the minds of moral men, while not irrelevant to what classicists now do, are probably no longer central to their work. In terms of its general shape, our curriculum is not unlike other core disciplines in the liberal arts – emphasizing critical thinking, clear expression, and careful use of evidence – with a certain added intensity deriving from the study of the languages. But with respect to method, and to a degree unmatched by any of the other liberal arts, our field expects us to engage in an extraordinarily wide range of discipline-based modes of thinking, varying from the literary, historical, and topographical, to the linguistic, philosophical, and art historical. We are as interested in strictly quantitative problems of measurement as we are in broadly interpretive questions of meaning and questions of context through thicker understandings of culture and history.

While our degree of breadth is atypical among the disciplines, it is emblematic of a core strength of the liberal arts as a whole. Liberal arts have traditionally produced intellectual agility through a distribution of engagement across domains of knowledge. The breadth of the classics epitomizes this. Further, by housing these variant methods under one disciplinary tent, we move beyond the paratactic aggregation of skills, and contribute to the development of a different kind of intellectual aptitude. We sharpen our students' abilities to move between these methods, along with their judgment in selecting the

most advantageous approach, or set of approaches, to a particular problem. The liberal arts as a whole expects such an outcome, but rare is the curriculum that takes specific steps to promote it. The classics thrive by bringing these methods together, and classicists stand to benefit from being more self-conscious and deliberate about this task, especially given the rapidly increasing complexity and interconnectivity of the wider world, in which nimble minds are ever more valuable.

To some extent, our recent openness to a variety of ways of thinking has been an accommodation of necessity. In response to the changing definitions of the university, some of which were inclined to define us out of existence, we felt a particular urgency to reach out to other disciplines. But this impulse resides in another deep legacy of the field. In fact, a certain restlessness of method has been characteristic of the discipline from its modern beginning, and marks some of its greatest contributions. It was no accident that a classicist, Walter Burkert, first harnessed developments in early cognitive psychology and developmental biology for humanistic gain; nor that George Walsh, of the classics department at the University of Chicago, was among the first to realize the possibilities of computer technology for digital texts in the humanities; nor that an ancient historian like Walter Scheidel has advanced our discipline through conversation with demography, genetics, and geospatial imaging. It took a discipline attuned to the anthropology of religion, to the power of the concordance, and to the insight provided by measurable quanta – of the earth and the human organism – to realize the possibilities in these cases.

Even in the case of Wilamowitz himself, the *Wortphilologie* of his predecessors was not enough; he sought to advance, from Welcker, the importance of a larger investigation, the *Totalitätsideal*.⁶ After gaining

praise for his philological method, Wilamowitz famously remarked: “There simply isn’t any – any more than a method to catch fish. The whale is harpooned; the herring caught in a net; flounders are stomped upon; the salmon speared; the trout caught on a fly.”⁷ Finally, it is also no surprise that the linguistic turn – probably the single most consequential intellectual development in the last century of the humanities – arguably emerged from the ascesis of philology with Wilamowitz’s schoolmate and *bête noir*, Nietzsche, whose *On Truth and Lying in the Extra-Moral Sense* was published in 1873, when Saussure was barely sixteen years old.

The urgency our field faced four decades ago is felt now to an increasing degree across the liberal arts. What does it mean to pursue knowledge for its own sake, given the dramatic expansion of pre-professional attitudes among our students, dramatically shrinking research budgets, and increased calls for accountability from outside the academy? Each of these institutional factors presents a headwind; all three taken together form an incoming tide. The liberal arts, as a whole, need to press the case for pure research with more intensity, and should be at the forefront of making the case for disinterested *Wissenschaft*. Our colleagues in the sciences are ahead in this mission, having advanced a tradition of popularizing books, and even television shows, to help engage the public through the raw power of discoveries in their fields. Such avenues have mostly not been pursued by classicists. A more deliberate approach here – making specific efforts to disseminate our knowledge and bring the public along through our process – is a pressing need. The classics, as a core piece of the humanities, has contributed to the development of new ideas that continue to reshape the world in which we live.

New modes of teaching online, through massive open online courses (MOOCs) offer promise here. The medium (an invention of pure research, by the way) has lowered the barriers for reaching a wide audience. By now, many universities have made a version of their teaching, fit to the parameters of the delivery system, available for free to anyone with an Internet connection. Such offerings in our field have included Gregory Nagy’s Harvard University course “The Ancient Greek Hero,” and my own “Greek and Roman Mythology” at the University of Pennsylvania. No other development has such potential for making our case to the broader public, promoting our larger message, and conveying the value of what we do on our own terms. As of this writing, two hundred thousand potential students have at least signed up for my class, over four iterations. First, this represents a substantial public interest in our field, irrespective of how many follow through. We should do more, as a field, to satisfy it. And when one finds out that twenty thousand *have* done all the work to finish the course, that gives one pause as well.

With respect to our own classrooms, such developments also have a place. Calls for caution are appropriate, of course, since some boosters of the delivery system have their sights set on increasing economies of scale through a more efficient transfer of knowledge. Such a narrowing of the teaching mission would be a disaster. But when harnessed to supplement and not to replace a traditional classroom, these courses offer a growing and rich array of teaching materials similar to no-cost textbooks. Some of these materials will be better than others, as classroom teachers will determine. At that point, further advantages to this development will accrue directly. It will go some steps toward making our teaching a public good, and help to bring the level of scrutiny of it closer into

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line with the kind of scrutiny we expect in our research lives. Our system of publication and peer review has been enormously effective in motivating our best research work, and one can imagine a future in which an amplified public dimension will help shape our best teaching.

Much of this is already mappable onto long-standing currents in our fields. Attention to the traditional strength of our methodological catholicity has been a core

piece of creating the modern shape of the discipline. And further attention to our potential advantages in claiming a central position in liberal learning is not so far afield from the position of classics about which Ellsworth Wright was concerned one century ago. The outcome is as much in doubt now as it was then, which makes the deliberate actions we take to shape it all the more urgent.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ellsworth D. Wright, "Foreign-Language Requirements for the A.B. Degree," *The Classical Journal* 7 (8) (1912): 323–337.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Morrill Act of 1862, Public Law 37-108, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (July 2, 1862). Found in *United States Statutes at Large, Volume 12*, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=012/llsl012.db&recNum=534>.
- ⁴ Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *A College Fetich: An Address Delivered Before the Harvard Chapter of the Fraternity of the Phi Beta Kappa, in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, June 28, 1883* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884).
- ⁵ While the percentage of students in this larger pool who major in the humanities has gone down, the number, when measured against the whole college-aged U.S. population, has not. In fact, it has gone up, more than doubling since 1950. See Ben Schmidt, "A Crisis in the Humanities?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 10, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/blognetwork/edgeofthewest/2013/06/10/the-humanities-crisis/>.
- ⁶ William M. Calder III, "How Did Ulrich Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff Read a Text?" *The Classical Journal* 86 (4) (1991): 344–352.
- ⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*; see also Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Erinnerungen 1848–1914*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Koehler, 1928), 233.