D R A F T

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THE CLASSICS NOW

Changing Discourses, Emerging Opportunities

I was walking in our nation's capital during the recent Great Recession when I saw a great banned hung on a pretentious building. It said JOBS, JOBS, JOBS. I thought that this must be the slogan of some left-leaning think tank, or maybe of the Democratic party trying to drum up support for new federal efforts at stimulating job creation.

Wrong! When I crossed the street to see whose building it was, I found the national headquarters of the Chamber of Commerce. The slogan was not advocating Obama's stimulus program – far from it! The Chamber had co-opted an Obama slogan and turned it into a weapon against what they regarded as stifling restrictions on free enterprise. It was a clever move as can be seen in the recent history of, for example, action to combat climate change.

I misunderstood that slogan, however, in another respect. It was not only effective in environmental, economic and political matters; it also helped shift thinking about higher education. In North Carolina, for example, the newly elected governor, Pat McCrory, announced a few years later that he wanted a funding formula for public higher education that was "not based on how many butts [were] in seats but how many of those butts can get jobs." The shift to job preparation may also explains why the administration of Governor Scot Walker of Wisconsin deleted the sentence "Basic to every purpose of the [University of Wisconsin] system is the search for truth," and inserting language about meeting "the state's workforce needs."

Both governors have backed away from the phraseology, but university budgets continue to be cut and the jobs discourse has become the dominant discourse about higher education, public and private. That often turns into calculations of Return on Investment**, a** powerful concern for both students and their parents facing high tuition bills, worried about student loans, and scared by everything from the offshoring of jobs to the expanding role of robots. Although Paul Krugman pointed out on February 23rd, 2015 there is little evidence to support the claim, the public is often swept along by talk of a "skills gap," and hence by the calls for reallocation of resources to the STEM disciplines. On top of all this comes the fashionable demands for "disruptive

innovation," made by followers of Clayton Christensen. (These have been nicely dissected by Jill Lepore in the New Yorker of June 25th, 2014).

Leaders of higher education have often responded by using the same discourse as their critics. The University of North Carolina along with a consortium of private colleges has, for example, recently issued a report crediting higher education in the state with generating "$27.9 billion of added state income, equivalent to creating more than 426,000 new jobs," yielding an 11.8% return on investment. (Eric Johnson has written a telling critique of the report). Such arguments reinforce the view that higher education is really all about jobs, jobs, jobs, and that resources should be reallocated to achieve that one goal.

This way of understanding the purpose of education has a long history, but the big break came in 1967, as Dan Berrett has shown in his essay "The Day the Purpose of College Changed" (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 26, 2015) . The change in discourse, combined with the restructuring of the economy, the slow recovery from the recession, and cutbacks in funding for education has taken its toll. Classics, as so often, is the canary in the mineshaft – the early warning system about problems affecting higher education more generally. That became clear when the Modern Language Association released its data collected from colleges and universities in 2013. Language enrollments compared to 200 were down overall; European languages almost all showed decreases; Latin and ancient Greek were especially hard hit.

Still, Classics seems to be weathering the storm. While many Classics programs feel themselves under pressure, few have been destroyed by it. According to the Humanities Indicator Project in 2012/13 there were 276 degree granting Classic programs in the United States. (That is aboutv10% of the four year institutions in the country.) There is little evidence of a change over the past few years in the total number or the percentage of institutions with a Classics department.

In number of majors the Classics seems to be following the Humanities generally: "Little change was observed from 2007 to 2012 in the numbers of majors declared and bachelor's degrees conferred by departments … In only two disciplines were statistically significant differences detected. English departments experienced a decline … over the five-year period, while linguistics programs reported an increase …" (Humanities Indicators Project). In 2011/12, 2240 students completed a bachelor's degree in Classics, an average of 8.1 per department. In addition, 1928 students were reported to have completed a minor in Classics. Notable also is the humanities-wide trend toward second majors; those numbers increased 46% over the 2003- 2013 period. Classis, in all probability, is part of this trend.

The strength of the Classics in colleges and universities depends to a considerable extent on Latin in the high schools. The Humanities Indicators Projects summarizes that situation in this way, "Latin enrollments, which dropped steadily from 1960 through the late 1970s, were stable over the next two decades…" The collection of such figures goes slowly, but

there is anecdotal evidence of growth, and, at the same time, of a shortage of high school teachers of Latin. For motivated Classics majors there are indeed jobs, jobs, jobs.

The overall picture, in summary, shows a stable situation, albeit with only a small percentage of students (less than 10%) having access to a classical education. Such stability amid so many pressures for "disruptive innovation," is partially explainable by the emergence of another discourse about higher education – not the old snobbery about admission to "the company of educated men," but another way of talking, thinking and acting about learning in college. It's a swing toward engagement, satisfaction and personal well-being.

Students sometimes do better at articulating that approach than their parents or the leaders of educational institutions. Consider, for example, the words of a business major at Penn quoted by Frank Bruni in "College, Poetry and Purpose" in the New York Times of February 18th, 2015: "…going to college develops something in you that's like a muscle, in the same way that when you go out and play tennis or whatever sport, you develop certain muscles." Her comments echo the perennial power of Walt Whitman's view of reading as a "gymnast's struggle." (Democratic Vistas, ed. F. Stovall, Volume II, p. 424 f.)

A richer discourse than those that have dominated higher education in recent years emerges in remarks by the eminent historian of Renaissance Europe, Anthony Grafton, in "Latin Lives" in the February 16th 2015 issue of the Nation, Grafton points to a recent "explosion" of love of learning among his undergraduates: "*Other factors must also play a role. But it turns out that for a surprising number of students Latin – and Latin studying of a special kind -- has been the fuse that sparks this explosion*." Grafton, to be sure, is an exceptionally skillful teacher at a highly selective institution, but he is also an astute observer of emerging developments. His description of that "special kind" of study, moreover, matches what has emerged from recent quantitative research into student engagement and learning. Results from three major studies of student learning seem to me to be converging, those by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and Wabash College's Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts. Working from NSSE data George Kuh has identified ten high impact practices closely correlated with student academic engagement. These include First Year seminars, shared intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity / global learning, service learning, internships, and capstone projects such as a senior thesis. To these can be added the mastery of a foreign language, and, in general, active rather than passive learning. In Academically Adrift and other works Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa have used CLA data to underline the importance of rigorous and challenging teaching. Charles Blaich and his colleagues at Wabash have identified pedagogical practices that make such institutional programs truly effective. They have,

for example, clarified what “diversity” and “clear and well-organized teaching” really entail.

The “high-impact practices” that emerge from these studies are to a large extent consistent with the “special kind” of Latin study that Grafton found in the Paideia Institute in Rome, a total immersion, living Latin program – collegial, collaborative, active learning in a global setting. And among Grafton’s students their experience was followed by the intensive writing demands of a senior thesis. It’s not surprising such an experience should result in high levels of student engagement and learning, the “explosion,” or “epidemic” to which Grafton refers.

The long-term impact of student engagement emerges with compelling clarity in the 2014 Purdue-Gallup Index report, a study of more than 30,000 college graduates and their experience in the workplace. This survey found that more than half of college graduates employed full time were either “actively disengaged” or “not engaged” in their work. That’s the bad news. The good news is that those who as students had high level of intellectual and extra-curricular engagement were much more engaged in their work, and in community involvement and reported higher levels of satisfaction and well-being.

One crucial factor in their experience was good mentoring: “… if graduates had a professor who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams, their odds of being engaged at work more than doubled … And if they worked on projects that took a semester or more to complete, their odds of being engaged at work doubled as well.”

This report is a discourse shifter, a powerful alternative to the jobs, jobs, jobs talk that has dominated decision making in higher education in recent years.. People who uses the tired old discourse should be directed to this report and asked what they expect from their employees and what they really want for their children and grandchildren. The answer in one form or another is likely to include engagement and satisfaction in one’s vocation. From there it is likely that students, parents and funders will search for places where the practices that lead to high levels of engagement are cultivated. .

Classics is well positioned to respond to this shift in discourse. It’s a field where many high-impact practices are standard operating practice, and where it is relatively easy to be more systematic about them. Classicists often urge their undergraduates to study in Greece or Italy, for an academic ear or in the summer. As the evidence accumulates about the life-changing effects of such study, efforts should be redoubled to make sure this is financially possible for every undergraduate.   Classics programs tend to be writing-intensive, especially when research papers or a senior thesis is the norm. Similarly, in Classics mentoring is part of the daily routine. Most of us need, I suspect, to learn to mentor more effectively, but the habit is already well-developed. That is

perhaps less the case with internships, a powerful driver of engagement (not to mention future employment), but opportunities are at hand. Teachers of Latin in local high schools, as well as potential employers are likely to welcome college students of the Classics. It's not hard to work down the list of high-impact practices and make sure that they are being systematically implemented in a Classics program.

If Tony Grafton and the state-of-the-art studies of engagement and satisfaction are right, being systematic in this way should produce dramatic results, if not an "explosion," as Grafton styles it, then surely students who learn more, and are more rewarding to teach. But actions speak louder than words. The hypothesis that Classics can achieve high levels of student engagement needs to be tested in a series of demonstration sites around the country, places where the new 'learning about learning' is put to work and its effects carefully monitored. There is no reason for Classicists to be defensive about this. Classics programs can be beacons for other fields to set their course toward higher engagement, greater satisfaction and, yes, well-being, rather than to jobs, jobs, jobs.

For Classicists the knowledge gained in recent years about what works best is likely to produce few big surprises but a lot of practical help. Yes, it also demands hard work, as Grafton puts it, "sleepless nights, exhausted mornings and boundless pleasure. The joy of Latin, the joy of scholarship." That's a word we have not often heard in recent higher education talk. Maybe it's time to start using it again.

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W. Robert Connor

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These comments were originally delivered as a Bonnie Fox lecture at Monmouth College, in March 2015.