

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 banner 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 it regarded as stifling restrictions on free enterprise.

I misunderstood that slogan, however, in another respect. It applied not only to politics; 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 explain why the administration of Governor Scott 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 the rhetoric has worked its way up the political food chain with the result that we now have a US senator and presidential candidate, Marco Rubio, proclaiming, “Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less [sic] philosophers.” Republicans have no monopoly on this rhetoric: similar, though more grammatical, language comes from the Department of Education and even the White House. Meanwhile, the budgets of public universities continue to be cut as jobs talk has become the dominant discourse about higher education, public and private. That mode of talking and thinking about higher education has now added another layer, calculations of Return on Investment, tapping into 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 in the New York Times 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, or to narrowly vocational training. On top of all this comes the fashionable demands for “disruptive innovation,” made by followers of Clayton Christian of the Harvard Business School, even though claims about uncritical innovation were

nicely dissected by Jill Lepore in “The Disruption Machine: What the Gospel of Innovation Gets Wrong“ in the *New Yorker* of June 25th 2014.

Leaders of higher education have often responded to these pressures by adopting the discourse of their critics. The University of North Carolina along with a consortium of private colleges in the state, for example, issued a new release on February 28th 2015 asserting that higher education had a positive impact of \$63.5 billion on the state’s economy in 2012-13. (That would be about one seventh of the state’s GDP). This was, it went on to claim, the equivalent of adding 426,000 new jobs, yielding an 11.8% return on investment. The apparent hyperbole was met with skepticism, but even if the numbers are correct, such arguments reinforce the view that higher education is really about jobs, jobs, jobs, or (as the job market slowly recovers) about “return on investment.” The message is clear: resources should be reallocated to achieve that one goal.

This mode of understanding the purpose of education has a long history, as Daniel Berrett showed in his essay, “The Day the Purpose of College Changed” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of January 26, 2015. But now the change in discourse, combined with the restructuring of the economy, the slow recovery from the recession, and cutbacks in funding for education at every level has taken a serious 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 in February 2015 when the web site of the Modern Language Association released a study by David Goldberg and others of enrollments in languages other than English in Fall term 2013. It showed that foreign language enrollments compared to 2000 were down overall; European languages almost all showed decreases; Latin and ancient Greek were especially hard hit. No less troubling is the finding available on the web site of the Humanities Indicators’ Project, *2012 Survey of Departments in the Humanities*, that 5% of classics programs have recently ceased to offer a degree at some level. The loss in Classics, however, is slightly less than that experienced on average in humanities fields; foreign language departments and, apparently, English experienced the heaviest losses.

In number of majors the classical field shows a pattern similar to those in most other humanistic fields. The Humanities Indicators web report *Trends in the Demographics of Humanities Students* notes that “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 ...”. The same projects estimated that in 2011/12 2240 undergraduates completed a bachelor’s degree in Classics, an average of 8.1 per department. In addition, approximately 1928 students completed a minor in Classics.

New figures from a census of Classics departments conducted by the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) indicate approximately the same numbers for 2013-14.

Such figures suggesting a relatively stable number of majors and minors in the field are consistent with another indicator, the number of institutions announcing positions through the SCS Placement Service. A compilation of figure from 2003 to 2014 on the SCS website shows an average of 164 positions in the first two years of the tabulation and an average of 191 in the last two years-an increase of almost a sixth. At the same time, however, the percentage of positions described as tenure track declined from 62% to 42%, following a national trend toward the use of adjuncts and other non-tenured faculty.

The strength of the Classics in colleges and universities depends to a considerable extent on Latin in the high schools. The Humanities Indicators website 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 compilation 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 picture that emerges from these figures is not bleak, but it is worrisome. Classics is a small and vulnerable field. The Humanities Indicators project estimates a total of 276 institutions offering a degree in classics-less than 15% of the number of accredited four year institutions in the country. That, I fear, falls below the threshold for a robust role in the ongoing debate about what a college education should be. And it means that at best only one college student in seven has access to a systematic understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman world and its reception in other periods and cultures.

Yet, there is good news in 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 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." A richer discourse than those that have dominated higher education in recent years also underlies an article by the eminent historian of Renaissance Europe, Anthony Grafton. In "Lain Lives" in the February 16th 2015 issue of *The Nation* Grafton noted 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." The "special kind of study" to which Grafton refers

is the flourishing 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 in Rome was followed by the intensive writing demands of a senior thesis. It's not surprising that such experiences can have an "explosive" effect. The surprise is that they are not more systematically used throughout our colleges and universities.

Grafton's anecdotes about that "special kind" of study, moreover, matches what has emerged from recent quantitative research into student engagement and learning. There is now strong evidence, for instance, that overseas study is one of a small number of high-impact practice," which can have transformative effects on student engagement and learning. Studying data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) George Kuh has identified ten such practices in *High-Impact Practices*, published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 2008. In addition to foreign study these include first year seminars, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, and capstone projects such as a senior thesis. Similarly, in their 2011 book *Academically Adrift* and other works Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa have used data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment to underline the importance of rigorous and challenging teaching. Charles Blaich and his colleagues at Wabash College's Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts have identified pedagogical practices that show what kinds of teaching prove most effective.

Many of these "high-impact practices" are well-represented in Classic programs. But familiarity should not obscure their long-lasting importance. High levels of academic engagement in college have demonstrably powerful effects over an entire lifetime. The web publication of the *2014 Purdue-Gallup Index Report*, a study of more than 30,000 college graduates and their experience in the workplace, found that more than half of these graduates employed full time were either "actively disengaged" or "not engaged" in their work, but those who as students had high level of intellectual and extra-curricular engagement were much more engaged in their work, and in community projects. They also reported higher levels of satisfaction and well-being than their pers.

One crucial factor in their experience was good mentoring during their college years: "... 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 should be a discourse shifter, a powerful alternative to the jobs, jobs, jobs and return on investment talk that has dominated decision making in higher education in recent years. People who uses that tired rhetoric should be directed to this report and asked what level of engagement they expect from their employees and what they really want for their children and grandchildren. With skilled Socratic questioning “satisfaction in one’s vocation” should replace the crass consumerism of “jobs, jobs, jobs.” From there it is an easy step for students, parents and funders to find where a genuinely enriching education is available. Such dialogues with students, parents, administrators and others are, however, only part of what needs to be done. High-impact practices-overseas study, writing intensive courses and projects, collaborative work, strong mentoring and others-need to be systematically implemented in every classic program. Their effects, is carefully evaluated, will be a success story that should be heard, and imitated, widely in colleges and universities. .

Classics is well positioned to benefit from this shift in discourse and practice. To be sure, we need to be more systematic in implementing what is known to be most effective in enhancing student learning. That will entail acquire the funds needed so *all* our students can experience the most effective undergraduate education possible, from first ear seminars, through study abroad, internships with local Latin programs, to capstone experiences or senior theses. These practices pay off over the long run, but they take money. Sat least, however, we now have a powerful, evidence-based alternative to the tired talk about job readiness.

Classics programs can be beacons so other fields twill also set their course toward higher engagement, greater satisfaction and, yes, the long-term well-being of their students. Documenting the results of our systematic efforts can secure for Classics, despite its small size, its historic role as the standard setter for educational excellence. That will demand hard work from both students and faculty, or as Grafton phrases it, “sleepless nights, exhausted mornings and boundless pleasure. The joy of Latin, the joy of scholarship.” Joy? That’s a word we have not often heard in recent higher education speak. Maybe it’s time to emend that big banner on the Chamber of Commerce’s building, so it reads Joy, Joy, Joy rather than Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.

W. Robert Connor

Wrconnr1@gmailcom

--

This is a revision of an article published in in [Classical World, 109,3](#). Spring 2016, pp. 413 -18. It originated in a Bonnie Fox lecture given at Monmouth College in March 2015. I am grateful to colleagues and students at Monmouth and to Adam

Blistein and Carolyn Fuqua for helping me understand data about the situation of the Classics.