

## **THE BEST DEFENCE IS A GOOD OFFENSE: Proactive Strategic Planning for the Classics**

The topic of this panel, “The Future of Liberal Arts Education” is timely, indeed urgent, since American higher education seems to be sailing into a Perfect Storm, the simultaneous disintegration of a long-established model for the financing of colleges and universities, a rising demand for accountability, and the emergence of powerful new forms of on-line education. All three of these can, I believe, be turned to the advantage of liberal arts education, especially perhaps in the Classics, but it will take some rigorous and proactive strategizing.

Such strategizing requires evidence, a lot of it to do it right. That is a problem for the humanities in general and Classics in particular, since data collection has been very lax. That needs to change, but in the meantime it's helpful to look closely at the evidence currently available about American undergraduate education in the Classics. I have posted a summary of what I have been able to find in a blog entry (“[A Snapshot of Undergraduate Education in the Classics](#)”) on my website [www.wrobertconnor.com](http://www.wrobertconnor.com). I hope colleagues will help me expand and improve this summary.

**The Bad News:** Here's what is emerging from these data. Let's take the bad news first. Overall, the patient is in stable condition, perhaps even improving. True, the situation varies considerably from campus to campus; those with Classics faculty in the double digits seem in general in good shape. But in many institutions one or two faculty members, a Horatio at the bridge or a Leonidas at the gates, struggle to maintain or create a true classics program. The number of undergraduate programs in Classics, however, seems not to have shrunk much despite the tough financial pressures of recent years and the media and political chorus singing “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.” The MLA reports that over the past three decades college enrollments in Latin have been running between 25,000 and 32,000 a year, with Greek about two thirds those numbers. (For comparison Spanish runs at about 865,000 enrollments per year.) The trend in Latin has been upward during this period, as has the number of high school students taking the AP Latin Vergil exam. (Statistical problems make it difficult to assess the trend in college enrollments in ancient Greek.)

**Problems with Stability:** Why does this add up to *bad* news? For several reasons. First, complacency. Stability is fine as long as change is incremental. But if we are right in expecting more radical change in the near future, stability invites complacency, and the danger of getting blind-sided when radical change suddenly hits.

Second, Classics is stable but at a very low level. Scale matters, and there is danger of falling below critical mass if a field is too small. Let's look more closely, then, at scale. The APA maintains a list of Classics programs in the US and Canada. No one claims it is complete or up to date but the total of about 400 programs at US four year institutions looks about right to me. That's out of 2774 Title IV eligible four year colleges and universities in the country. Classical programs, in other words, are found in fewer than 15 percent of our four year institutions. That means that an American student headed for college has only one chance in seven of finding a classics program at the institution in which he or she enrolls. (In Canada the ratio is better—42 universities are on the APA list, out of (by one count) 98, or about 42%. Of the 1655 US community colleges the APA knows of 7 with classical programs, or less than a half percent.)

What about majors? There were 1197 US Classics majors in a recent year. That's one Classics major for every 50 English majors, or every 300 Business majors. Or an average of three majors each among the 400 four year institutions on the APA list. That's a perilously low number, especially since many administrators rely on the number of majors when making financial and policy decisions. That's a terrible metric, as I have argued [elsewhere](#), but the bad habit persists. In any case, the low number means Classics may be inconspicuous even on the one campus in seven that has a Classics program: if those 400 institutions graduate an average of 500 undergraduates a year, the Classicists are less than one percent among them. This field is a minority within a minority.

That means that it is easy to dismiss or exclude the Classics when serious discussions of curriculum, assessment, institutional structure, or wider cultural issues take place. That is particularly the case when a Classics department is tempted to try to fly under the radar, by being as unobtrusive, non-assertive, inexpensive as possible. That's not a strategy; it's a snare and a delusion.

All these reasons convince me that Classics needs a strategy to break out of this trap – complacency on the one side, exclusion on the other. It needs to function at a new and much higher scale. And that is by no means impossible. The potential for growth is there.

**The Canary in the Mineshaft:** But the issue is not primarily about the size of the profession or the number of faculty positions. It's about students who are missing the opportunity to experience the past in its fullness and depth, and hence the chance to understand and better adapt to the broad scope of change. Classics, moreover, may be the canary in the mineshaft, the indicator of a more far-reaching dismissal of the past.

Let me explain. I've been trolling the web sites of "the other 85%", the colleges and universities without any Classics program, to see how other periods are handled. What I have been finding shocks me. If there is no Classics program, there's no real past at all. As best I can tell at this point in six colleges out of seven in the US students have no opportunity to study any of human experience prior to the mid nineteenth century or later -- no Medieval, no Renaissance, no Enlightenment, no Romantic movement, and little or none of the art, literature, and music from these periods. Once again, a Horatio at the bridge or a Leonidas at the gates may be found at some of these institutions, someone in philosophy or history or another department who struggles to make the past accessible to students. Sometimes I find a survey course in Western Civilization or World Literature, buried four or five layers down in the web site. But if a student finds it and takes it, there's usually no way to follow through, no sequence, no coherent program.

And it's not just European civilization that is lost or foreshortened -- no sacred texts from *any* of the major world religions. Little or nothing about the rise of Islam. No Confucius, no Mencius, no Lao Tzu. When the Classics run into trouble they are like a canary in a mineshaft, a warning that a much broader past is in danger as well.

Think about that foreshortening of the past in evolutionary terms. Humans have been writing for somewhat more than 5,000 years now, making possible an understanding of the past that includes both material culture and the verbalization of ideas and emotions. That means, with all the gaps and deficiencies, we have 200 generations of experience to learn from. Most of our institutions let their students see only the last half dozen or even fewer. .

That's a very poor evolutionary strategy for an endangered species such as the self-styled *homo sapiens sapiens*. But in a perverse way it's good news for Classics. When 85% of institutions have devalued 90% of that past, someone needs to blow the whistle and provide a better alternative to a status quo that deprives students at six out of seven American colleges and universities of a robust understanding of the past and hence of the creativity, adaptability and ingenuity, that have made the survival

of this species possible. Such an alternative is now, I believe, within our grasp, provided we act decisively and skillfully.

**Cognitive Growth:** The status quo is particularly pernicious when we look at cognitive growth during the undergraduate years. We now know that the disciplines of the liberal arts and sciences are the best place for the development of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written and oral expression. The disciplines of the arts and sciences blow away all the vocationally oriented majors that are all the rage just now -- Parks and Recreation, Hospitality Management, Law Enforcement, Business and related fields, and my favorite, Mortuary Science. Talk about a moribund educational system!

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in *Academically Adrift* and other studies, have demonstrated in general the gains that come from the liberal arts and sciences. But Classics has been too small for the separate analysis of its results. Hence, Classics needs to demonstrate the cognitive gains that it helps its students achieve. Powerfully positive results should come as no surprise. It is what we classicists have been doing for a couple of millennia, reading texts closely, studying them in context, asking what's between the lines, arguing about the light they shed on the Big Questions of human existence. We have called those activities Dialectic and Rhetoric and sometimes Philology. We have every reason, then, to welcome that much feared Bogey Man, the assessment movement. Classics has everything to gain from that movement, provided faculty take the lead in insisting it be done right.

**The Break Away:** Many students, I believe, recognize the importance of breaking out of presentism into a robust engagement with the past. They are often more alert to that, in my experience, than their parents, many administrators, and certainly the politicians. There are many [indicators](#) of the broad interest in classical antiquity but the best evidence may come from the three classical MOOCs that have been launched so far. From Harvard Greg Nagy's HeroesX enrolled 35,000 in Spring 2013, of whom 1400 earned certificates of completion. The initial offering of a MOOC in Greek History by Andrew Szegedy-Maszak of Wesleyan University enrolled 43,000 students of whom 3868 earned a "statement of accomplishment." In the second iteration 23,672 students enrolled and 2003 received such a statement. Peter Struck from the University of Pennsylvania tells me that in his MOOC on classical mythology about 50,000 enrolled and over 2500 successfully completed the course.

It's fashionable, I know, to complain that relatively few of those who enroll take and complete the final assignment in the course. But when I see the

completion numbers in some of these MOOCs, I realize they are larger than the number of students than I taught in 25 years of teaching.

So, to summarize, the interest in the ancient world is there, and so is the need to break out of its current scale limits, as are the cognitive benefits that can result as more students study the Classics in depth. All that is missing is a strategy.

**A Strategic Dilemma:** An effective strategy must be ambitious but at the same time alert to an underlying dilemma in our field. Most of us love to teach well-motivated students in small classes taught in the original language. It's there, we believe, that we can share with them the pleasure of studying Greek and Latin texts. The interaction between student and faculty member is where most of us believe such crucial capacities as critical thinking, and written and oral expression are developed. But most students only share that experience after they have been swept up in the excitement of discovering the ancient world, most often through courses that do not require knowledge of Greek or Latin.

That poses a problem for Classics programs, an especially intense one when Horatio is at the bridge and Leonidas at the gates – in the one or two person programs where faculty must introduce students to over a millennium of past experience, and teach two difficult languages as well. These are the heroes of our profession and they need reinforcements.

**Are MOOCs the Answer?** The problems we have seen all point in the same direction. The dilemmas of teaching such wide-ranging and diverse material, along with the need to make it possible for students at *all* institutions to learn about the ancient world, and the need to break out of the current scale limits of the field all demand a smart but critical approach to on-line instruction. That needn't mean substituting MOOCs as currently constituted for face-to-face classes, but it does mean testing the potential of various ways of using on-line instruction. In fact, it seems to me that the most pressing challenge for Classics right now is to find how on-line instruction can help students get started on the road to a robust understanding of the past. We have to figure out how to make it work and work well, especially in light of how current modes of instruction drive up costs, tuition and student debt.

**An Experiment:** Any plausible strategy for the Classics, I am convinced, involves a robust but focused research agenda, aimed at identifying forms of on-line instruction that are effective in various settings. That takes evidence, not untested assumptions. So here is my proposal to the leaders the new Society for Classical Studies.

*First, identify the questions that most need to be answered about on-line learning. What's its potential? Where does it work or not work? What do students of various backgrounds and in various settings need? Etc.*

*Second, establish a base line by confirming and filling in the statistical picture presented above. It's not too late to make 2013/4 the base line year.*

*Third, identify (and if need be, help develop) on-line material in Classics, such as the existing classical MOOCs and develop a repertoire of ways of using such material.*

*Fourth, invite several dozen institutions to test out these forms of on-line learning in ways they consider appropriate to their campuses. These institutions should include several community colleges, some four year institutions where Horatio and Leonidas are struggling so hard, and, not least, some of the missing 85% -- the four year colleges and universities that currently lack a classical program. The individual institutions would find ways of integrating this on-line instruction into their curriculum, set exams, and determine credit, and report on their experience in using them.*

*Fifth, rigorously evaluate the projects, and disseminate results. The classical association should also recognize the individuals (and the institutions) who complete a series of on-line courses in the Classics, and, of course, it would monitor results over time against the baseline year.*

In short, experiment, evaluate results, disseminate models, recognize achievement.

Classics, perhaps more than any other humanistic field, is ready for and can benefit from such experimentation. We started early in using information technology in our scholarship. Now most of us find it indispensable in our research. Now is the time to extend that success into student learning. If we are ambitious enough and forthright in our advocacy the support we need, both advice and dollars, will, I am confident, be forthcoming. But we need to act promptly and decisively.

Such a project would be the start of the good offence that is surely our best defense. The little canary in the mineshaft turns into a high soaring bird, with something to crow about, and ready, if need be, to fight, not to feather its own nest but on behalf of students, everywhere. For the goal of a successful strategy for Classics must be to ensure that every student in this country has the opportunity to study in its breadth and depth the two amazing civilizations with whose understanding we are entrusted.

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### USEFUL READING

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa Academically Adrift (Chicago Univ. Press 2011)

W. Robert Connor “The Culture Wars Again” Huffington Post  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/w-robert-connor/the-culture-wars-again\\_b\\_4312102.html?1384985329](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/w-robert-connor/the-culture-wars-again_b_4312102.html?1384985329)

– “A Snapshot of Undergraduate Education in the Classics” blog entry January 1 2014  
<http://www.wrobertconnor.com/blog.html>

Nelly Furman et al. Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2009, The Modern Language Association  
[http://www.mla.org/pdf/2009\\_enrollment\\_survey.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/2009_enrollment_survey.pdf)

Ernest T. Pascarella and Charles Blaich “Lessons from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education” Change March/ April 2013 pp.  
[http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/2013/March-April%202013/wabash\\_full.html](http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/2013/March-April%202013/wabash_full.html)

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