

Classics: Curriculum & Profession



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.

PETER T. STRUCK

symbol:
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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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*Classics:
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& Profession* 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

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. The liberal arts have been pur-

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