

The Classics Major and Liberal Education, by The Center for Hellenic Studies (AAC&U Liberal Education, 2009, Vol. 95, No. 2)

Over the course of eighteen months, a project based at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, studied undergraduate programs in classics with the goal of developing a better sense of how a major in classics fit within the broader agenda of liberal education. The study adopted a student-centered approach, employing a team of six undergraduates and one first-year graduate student to conduct the research,¹ and began with two empirical questions: what constitutes a major in classics, and what kind of department offers such a major? To answer these questions, a team of undergraduates collected information about major programs of study in classics, starting with an initial survey of colleges and universities that yielded a list of 305 institutions where students could major in the field. The team narrowed the sample and focused primarily on programs at sixty-nine liberal arts colleges, five institutions that offer a terminal master's degree in classics and ten universities that offer a PhD.

The first part of this article discusses what we learned from assembling this information. The second part focuses on what members of the classics community—especially the students—at four of the liberal arts colleges in the sample had to say about liberal education and the classics. Both parts include some ideas, based on our observations, about improving programs of study in general or, at the very least, providing undergraduate students with a better understanding of how engagement in a particular field of study fits within the overall experience of gaining a liberal education.

Survey of major programs

For approximately six weeks during the summers of 2007 and 2008, two undergraduates “mined” information on the Internet. The use of online sources was deliberate for two reasons. First, colleges now use the Web as the primary vehicle for publishing institutional information. This is particularly true for two audiences colleges are anxious to reach. The first consists of prospective and incoming students who lack access to other sources of information, such as advice from other students and members of the faculty. The second consists of students themselves, especially the generation of “digital natives” who rely predominantly on the Internet whether seeking “official” information—for example, what they find on college Web sites—or staying connected with a network of “unofficial” sources who report on the current state of affairs through tweets and updates to pages on Facebook and MySpace.

The students developed a database to manage the information, collecting information in 130 fields divided into nine categories: institutional profile, program scheduling, enrollment, demographics, graduation requirements, departmental profile, major, faculty, and courses. We developed the fields for the first four categories based on what a college reports in its Common Data Set (CDS), thinking that colleges would provide fairly ready access to that information—if not in the form of the CDSs themselves, then in other areas of their Web sites. As it turned out, however, that was not the case at all. Only twenty-two institutions made their CDS available online—or more accurately, perhaps, the students found CDSs on only twenty-two Web sites. To offer just one example of their success using college Web sites, the students were able to collect complete data on the number of applicants (male and female), the number of accepted

applicants (male and female), and the number of students enrolled (male and female) for only fifty-one institutions. Ultimately, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the National Center for Education Statistics proved much easier to use and more comprehensive. Fortunately for students (both current and prospective) this data, as of 2007, is fully accessible through the College Navigator. The situation—in which an organization collects comprehensive information, passes it on to external agency, but fails to make it available to its own community, at least through its Web site—recurs at the departmental level

Information in the fifth category, graduation requirements, proved much easier to find and more complete, primarily because most college Web sites provide either online versions of their catalogues or the option of downloading a copy in Portable Document Format (PDF). As the team worked on the core of our survey, assembling information about the objectives of the departments, the faculty, characteristics of the majors, and individual courses—all aspects within the purview of the departments themselves—they often encountered complications. Information about faculty members and lists of courses offer examples that illustrate the most common problems.

Departments regularly list faculty members who are not offering courses and whose roles in the department are unclear. They tend to be emeriti, professors who are on leave, professors whose names remain on departmental Web sites after they have left the institution, or affiliated faculty members who may or may not contribute actively to the goals of the department. Furthermore, the profiles of the faculty members almost always list their educational background, research interests, and publications. The profiles less frequently include courses they are currently teaching. Still fewer profiles list courses they have taught in the past, and only a very few include courses they will teach in future semesters. This is at odds with the basic needs of undergraduates. When considering a particular major or working on a plan of study, they primarily care about what courses the department offers, when the department offers them, who teaches them, and how the courses will contribute to their individual aspirations (Will the course help me get into medical school? Get a job? Improve my language skills?) or meet institutional demands (Does this course fulfill my humanities requirement?). In other words, the information that departments provide, primarily in conformity with the expectations of other faculty members and administrators, often undermines their own efforts to encourage a more deliberate approach to a field of study on the part of their undergraduate students, which would include, for example, taking increasingly rigorous courses that complement and supplement one other, feature a variety of approaches, and develop different but related skills.

With regard to the list of courses that fulfill the requirements of a major, departments at the liberal arts colleges in our sample fell into two categories: those that allow students to take courses in other departments, and those that do not. Among the former, the average number of courses listed (including cross listings or offerings listed under the title of other departments) was fifty, and the average number of faculty members was 3.8. Among the latter, the average number of courses was thirty-nine, and the average number of faculty was 3.6. Departments in both groups offer a significant number of those courses at least every year and sometimes every

semester. Consequently, departments tend to list far more courses than they can regularly offer. A long and varied array of courses might express the diversity of subjects within our discipline and reflect broad interests and areas of expertise within the faculty, but it might prove misleading for undergraduates who have to make real choices over a limited span of semesters. What specifically should departments do to address the needs of their undergraduates, the “digital natives” who now populate their classrooms?

First, faculty members should provide more information than was expected in the era of printed catalogues and ephemeral course schedules. A list of past, current, and future courses is an appropriate place to begin. With regard to future courses, departments should develop a schedule of courses more than one year in advance. By nature, academic programs are fluid; professors come and go; research interests evolve; and events in the world suggest and call for new approaches and topics. Nevertheless, departments should provide at least tentative schedules. Institutions typically require students who declare majors (usually in their sophomore years) to outline how they intend to fulfill the requirement for the major over their remaining years in college. Departments ought to work with their students on the same terms.

Second, developing and updating departmental Web sites should be one of the primary responsibilities of the department. Web sites are no longer static representations of printed materials. Institutions refine their sites on a nearly continual basis to attract and keep target audiences more effectively. This means that the information departments routinely provide to various administrative offices often finds its way onto the institutional Web sites before departments can make appropriate revisions to their own data. Also, in an effort to provide more consistent information to online audiences, colleges segment and bundle information from a number of institutional sources to create what appear to be Web sites for programs and departments. These descriptions and overviews may or may not correlate with sites maintained by the departments themselves. Finally, more and more college Web sites are moving away from reflecting the organizational structure of the institutions (departments and divisions) and toward a focus on areas of study, partly in response to the proliferation of interdisciplinary programs. This means that Web sites now feature multiple avenues for arriving at information about departments and majors. Individual programs need to monitor their departmental and institutional Web sites to ensure that visitors of all varieties arrive at information that is consistent, relevant, and up to date.

Third, departments should be more explicit about how the study of their discipline relates to the broader goals of liberal education. As mentioned above, one of the basic objectives of the study was to gain a sense of how departments—as organizational units and as collections of individual professors—view the relationship of classics as a field of study to the overall enterprise of liberal education. For forty-two of the liberal arts colleges we sampled—just over half—the team collected mission statements from both the institution and the classics department (or program). We analyzed these statements using a rubric based on the list of outcomes from the Liberal Education and America’s Promise initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2007; see p. 32) and found that, viewed independently from each other, the

institutional and departmental statements represent different objectives and emphases. Within a more comprehensive framework of objectives, however, they work complementarily. The challenge lies in creating such a framework for students. Because the process of emending institutional mission statements represents a daunting challenge in most cases, each department should assume responsibility for including language in the description of its program that relates the department's more focused, discipline-based objectives to the more inclusive institutional goals and the overarching outcomes of liberal education.

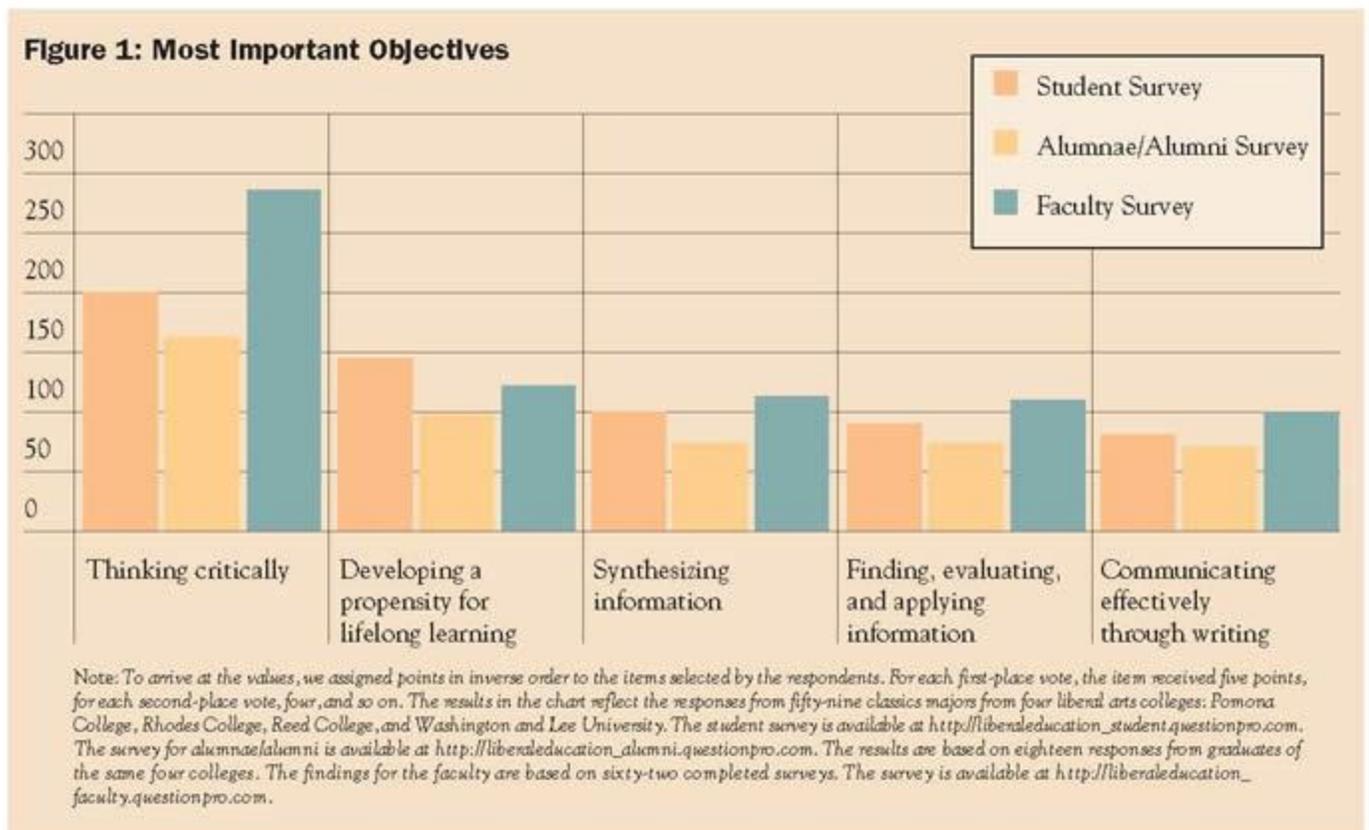
Surveys and interviews

Looking beyond the published mission statements and departmental profiles, the project sought to learn from the practitioners themselves about the relationship between the study of classics and the process of gaining a liberal education. Again, we began with a basic question: what does liberal education mean to members of the classics community—classics majors, faculty members, and graduates of classics programs? In separate but related surveys, we asked respondents from each of these groups to consider various objectives of liberal education compiled from several descriptive statements: A liberal education helps students develop

- a commitment to serve the community and society;
- the ability to find, evaluate, and apply information from a variety of sources;
- the ability to communicate effectively through writing;
- the ability to synthesize information in a variety of forms from different domains of knowledge;
- an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences;
- the ability to think critically;
- an understanding of and proclivity toward behaviors that promote health and well-being;
- a propensity for lifelong learning;
- the ability to formulate and solve problems;
- the ability to work effectively with others;
- the ability to communicate effectively through speaking;
- an appreciation of competing ideas and perspectives;
- a familiarity and understanding of art in a variety of media;
- the ability to use mathematics;
- a sense of and commitment to ethical behavior;
- the ability to use information technology.

We then asked the respondents to identify the objectives they found consistent with their own understanding of liberal education. In a follow-up question, we presented them with a list of their

selections and asked them to identify the five most important objectives and rank them (see fig. 1).



This pair of questions yielded two results that call for some commentary within the context of the entire study. First, respondents in all three surveys ranked developing “the ability to think critically” as the most important objective by a wide margin. This emphasis on critical thinking differed considerably from what we found in the departmental descriptions, which mentioned critical thinking as a departmental objective in only seven of forty-two cases (17 percent). In contrast, thirty-one departmental statements discussed information literacy (for example, in the form of being able to read Greek and Latin texts in the original languages), and twenty-one statements identified integration of learning (as reflected in the ability to make connections between the past and present) as a learning objective. One explanation for this discrepancy lies in the concept of critical thinking itself, which may represent for respondents the most generic and encompassing of the outcomes, one that pertains more properly to the institution as a whole. In fact, twenty-nine of the institutional mission statements (69 percent) identified the ability to think critically as an educational outcome. Also, because it ultimately subsumes a number of other more precise objectives, critical thinking was a convenient choice when our respondents faced the task of eliminating some objectives and ranking others. A second explanation may lie in the way classicists differentiate themselves from their peers in other academic disciplines.

While all the departments fixed their discipline within the humanities, seventeen of the departmental statements emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of the field, and more than half mentioned the social sciences (anthropology, for example) and arts (including theatre and art history) as areas vital to the study of the ancient Greeks and Romans. What seems to unify classicists and distinguish them from their colleagues in allied fields is their emphasis on the ancient languages, primarily ancient Greek and Latin. Results from another series of questions in the survey corroborate this view. We applied the same approach in asking classics professors to identify the most important “domains of knowledge and scholarly activities” within the discipline of classics. From the following list, we asked them to identify the five most important:

- ancient science, mathematics, and technology
- ancient politics, economics, and society
- ancient philosophy
- classical scholarship
- ancient literature
- ancient religion
- ancient art, architecture, and other forms of materials culture
- ancient history
- Latin language
- ancient music and dance
- contemporary significance of the classical tradition
- ancient Greek language

“Latin language,” “ancient Greek language,” and “ancient literature” emerged as the most important, followed by “ancient history” and the study of “ancient art, architecture, and other forms of material culture.” This comes as no surprise, given the overall distribution of faculty by self-identified areas of expertise and published teaching schedules. Of the 248 classicists in our sample of sixty-nine departments at liberal arts colleges, 173 (70 percent) were primarily engaged in the study of the languages and literatures, twenty-six (10 percent) in ancient history, and thirty-seven (15 percent) in art and archaeology.

Students, too, seem to embrace the importance of the languages. In the course of the study, we interviewed forty-six students, of whom thirty-two were majors (nineteen women and thirteen men). In response to our question, tell us about how you decided on your major? the most commonly cited reason (ten respondents) for settling on classics was the desire to acquire the languages and study the literature. “That’s actually sort of what got me into it,” one major noted; “I knew that I wanted to take Latin when I got here—and Greek. Partly that was informed by having read Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, because every so often in there he goes off on how his buddies in pubs start speaking in Greek or Latin. I definitely feel there’s a

strong classic tradition of what it is to be well-educated.” In response to the question, tell us what you will get out of your major that students in other disciplines do not? a majority of classics students said that the study of the languages made their experiences unique among those of their peers. They tended to cite three primary reasons. First, it has a perceptible cognitive effect. One student reports:

As I’ve gone through my major, and gone through taking more of Greek and Latin, and some of my other coursework, I can tell I’ve got clarity of thought, my memory is better, those types of things. And I already had a good memory; I could remember the most ridiculous, strange facts ever. That was why I loved history, because it was just facts, and I could just memorize them and it was fun. But I can tell that my memory is that much better from having to sit and memorize verb paradigms, and declensions, and all of that.

Second, it gives students a clearly defined sense of academic accomplishment. Here is how another student described her experience:

It has really given me confidence in what I can do. Like, if you have had a history degree or a literature degree, you’re like, “Oh, you know, oh that’s good.” But a classics degree? Like she said, reading Horace in Latin, for me reading Homer in Greek was really intense, and reading Herodotus, and being able to read these ancient authors in the original text, it just really gives you so much more confidence in how much you’ve learned and what you can do. I look back on Greek, and sometimes I think I’m not very good at it, but in class we’ll sit down with the *Anabasis*, and we go around in a circle and translate, and I’m like, “Wow, I really do know a lot more than I thought I knew.”

Third, students believe that it makes them more articulate speakers and writers of English, as one of our respondents explained, connecting the acquisition of language to critical thinking: “Learning Latin enables you to speak English better; it enables you to critically think in ways that you just don’t have the opportunity to do in other languages—it makes you a better linguist for sure.”

.Returning again to the questions about the goals of liberal education, the other result of note was the absence of “synthesizing information” among the faculty’s list of top five outcomes. (It actually came in seventh, behind “developing the ability to formulate and solve problems.”) The value students and alumnae/alumni placed on that outcome may reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, which was the second most common reason majors cited for studying classics (six respondents). One student commented: “I think that’s one of my favorite things; it’s comparable to being an English major, a history major, a language major, and a religion major. You get to do all of that with a specialized focus instead of doing one of those with a broad focus on the entire field.” The discrepancy on this point between the views of the faculty and the students, both current and former, may represent a variation on the issue of contextualization. While describing and even highlighting classics as a field of study that draws on a variety of disciplines, faculty members may assume that undergraduates will eventually learn on their own to see connections and effectively synthesize information from different domains. Consequently, students might recognize this as an important skill to develop at the same time as their faculty

mentors take it for granted. This again illustrates the importance of helping students contextualize their efforts and successes within the discipline as well as in relationship to the overall goals of liberal education.

Concluding suggestions

As noted above, faculty mentors should provide a more complete framework for understanding how study in the major contributes to the overall process of gaining a liberal education. Of the 114 syllabi the students collected during this study, for instance, only one specifically addressed how the topics of study for that course and the methods used fit within the objectives of the major and how that course related in its content and approach to other courses offered by the department. Although it is often apparent to professors when students demonstrate the skills of analyzing information, synthesizing disparate types of data to formulate a problem and propose a solution, or effectively marshalling arguments to advocate for a particular perspective—all hallmarks of a liberal education—it is not always apparent to the students themselves. Here is where reflection on the part of the students and their faculty mentors may well represent the most important outcome of all.

Although the data assembled by the project provide, at best, a limited “snapshot” of classics as one of many contributing disciplines in the setting of liberal education, we hope it will provide a basis for further investigation and debate. The Center for Hellenic Studies will make the findings of the study available in greater detail on its Web site (chs.harvard.edu) and provide opportunities for faculty members to meet and discuss the methods, results, and suggestions. Readers may express their interest in this project as well as offer comments and observations by sending e-mail to outreach@chs.harvard.edu.

Reference

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2007. *College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Note

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