

Panel Abstract CAMWS 2010

Tenacity of Purpose: Growing Classics in a Harsh Climate

There can be little doubt that higher education in the United States is experiencing a shift in basic practices and priorities. There is an increasing emphasis at many institutions on, for example, assessment and accountability, diversity, student research, and educational research initiatives aimed at the development of teaching and learning practices. Programs and disciplines that have traditionally been seen as integral to the university are increasingly under pressure to explain and justify their contributions to “student learning outcomes”. Even the basic notion that the Liberal Arts, broadly construed, are central to a first-rate education must be argued – and under terms that are sometimes not well suited to qualitative demonstrations of value. At the same time, research continues as a priority for faculty even as it itself becomes yet another measure of the “excellence” or “productivity” of the university. In this climate, Departments of Classics face significant challenges, even threat of elimination, because of their relatively small size and because of the complexity of demonstrating learning outcomes under the terms of the current conversation.

There are initiatives under way that aim to change the terms of the debate, or at least present them more appropriately for disciplines such as ours. The Teagle Foundation, for example, in collaboration with the Center for Hellenic Studies, conducted an 18 month long investigation to study “undergraduate programs in classics with the goal of developing a better sense of how a major in classics [fits] within the broader agenda of liberal education” (<http://chs.harvard.edu/chs/Outreach>). The AAC&U for its part has developed LEAP: Liberal Education and America’s Promise, “an initiative that champions the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.” (<http://www.aacu.org/LEAP/index.cfm>) The Teagle Foundation and the AAC&U are developing plans to support selected colleges and universities working on assessment of liberal education outcomes. These kinds of initiatives and the data they generate will be important resources for Classicists who must present the value of their discipline to other stakeholders in the academy – and in funding agencies. Sometimes, however, the battle is fought closer to home, as we struggle to establish a presence, a purpose, and a position of relevance in our home institutions also. There are success stories, and practices that support the vitality of Classics without altering its basic nature. By sharing resources, best practices, and ideas, classicists – even at institutions that do not normally share similar challenges – will better position the discipline in order to prove its relevance and vitality in the changing educational climate.

Presenters on this panel will address issues relevant to the external assessment of Classics, as a discipline that has an historically central role in liberal education, as well as practices aimed at creating visibility and success within institutions.

Titles of Papers:

“Classics and the Koala: Lessons in seeming bigger than you are”.

The Department of Classics at {state university}, now with seven full time tenure track faculty, has enjoyed a phenomenal period of growth and success since its creation in 2000. This paper will present successful practices through which the Department has increased its visibility on campus, from major events such as the bi-annual HOMERathon to the campus wide ad campaign to inter-departmental cooperation on issues such as planning, orientation/registration and other administrative activities.

“Assessing the Effectiveness of Classics within Liberal Education”

If recent world events have taught us anything, surely it is that a great deal of human decision-making rests upon information that is qualitative and incomplete and derived from sources whose reliability must be carefully and critically assessed. In much the same way, today’s challenges demonstrate the need for leaders and managers who take words and ideas seriously, who are capable of looking outside of their own cultural and historical assumptions and approaching problems from every angle, and whose choices are informed by long-term perspectives and a concern for the judgment of posterity.

Classics offers an implicitly and intuitively student-centered and inquiry-based approach to teaching the critical thinking and post-formal reasoning skills demanded by the world in which we live, yet Classicists are often ambivalent or hesitant about staking claims to the contemporary relevance of what we do. This paper reflects upon the instrumental value, in the era of academic assessment and accountability, of the departmental self-study as a vehicle for articulating and evaluating the relationships between the disciplinary and methodological objectives of a Classics program, on one hand, and larger institutional and socio-economic imperatives, on the other.

“Ἴσον θυμὸν ἔχοντες: Co-curricular offerings and the Classics Department”

This paper will discuss the importance of identifying and cultivating potential institutional partners in order to build ties around the classroom with other departments and agencies within the university, with particular attention to efforts to build ties with Theater (which have resulted in two main stage productions at {state university} of classical dramas in conjunction with cross-listed courses) and Modern Languages and Literatures through a Translation Theory course.

Note: We expect to have two more presenters from other kinds of institutions who will present papers on the perspective of senior administrators concerning Liberal Education outcomes assessment or on “growing” enrollments in liberal education courses and majors or on diversity issues among students in Classics.