

REPORT TO THE TEAGLE FOUNDATION

Listening on Classical Studies

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By

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On December 3, the Teagle Foundation convened a group of 20 participants to Rockefeller Center. The gathering was exploratory and presented as a way of exploring in depth the relationship of one discipline to wider issues in liberal education. Participants included faculty at the junior and senior levels, a graduate student, several deans, a provost, those on boards of institutions supporting academics and the arts, and staff of the Teagle Foundation. The institutional range was wide, from large, prestigious research institutions to small regional liberal arts colleges. Several issues were on the agenda to help organize discussion, including: how best to foster students' engagement and active participation in their own education, rather than just to be "exposed" to a field; how to deal with the demands that the increasing specialization of knowledge place on institutions operating with finite resources; how to prudently maintain the initiative in the ongoing discussion about assessing the results of a liberal education via clear goals and measurements to see if they are met; how to use technology wisely in teaching; how to enhance learning in classics by taking full advantage of the learning benefits of groups and communities; how, in actual practice, to make undergraduate teaching a priority.

This report, although commissioned by the Teagle Foundation, is a personal statement by one of the participants, Peter Struck. It makes an attempt to be synthetic and synoptic, but is not a transcript. The recommendations it contains would, he believes, be supported in varying degrees by the participants.

CLASSICS AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

As this broad and ambitious list of topics makes clear, the listening began from the premise that the field of classics is well-positioned, perhaps even uniquely positioned, to be a proxy for thinking about a liberal arts education generally. The experience of one regional public university suggests the currency of this idea. The university's leadership found its distinctive character, within the universe of a large state higher education system, to be a focus on the liberal arts and they judged classical studies to be a *sine qua*

non of developing this identity. In an environment of spirited competition for resources, a new department was actually created in 2000 and has grown to six faculty in only four years.

In regard to each issue in the agenda mentioned above, classics has made real progress and it faces further hurdles. Many aspects of both these successes and remaining challenges may also apply to other disciplines that typically make up a liberal education. All disciplines within the liberal arts, it appears, despite their great variety, are facing an environment where their value is no longer simply assumed and where a case needs to be made. Undergraduate training in the various professional fields holds real attractions for ambitious students and their parents. At the same time, an unmistakable sense endures that core liberal arts disciplines, like classics, are "good things to do." This prevailing wisdom presents a ripe opportunity for those ready to make use of it. It is also true, though, given that this good will is more an inarticulate feeling and a general appreciation than a firm conviction, that friends of the liberal arts need to advance their agenda in a timely way with positive, concrete steps.

None of the participants had much interest in defending the traditional construction of the field as weighted toward 5th century Athens and Augustan Rome. Many asked for an expansion of what should be considered under the umbrella of classical studies, including, both the chronological range of classical studies through Late Antiquity and the Byzantine era, as well as the reception of Greco-Roman traditions in Persian and Arabic literature and in Medieval Europe. Similarly the usefulness of the traditional disciplinary boundary between classics and early Christianity and early Rabbinic Judaism was called into serious question. The teaching of koine Greek proved a case study of many of these issues. This variety of Greek, spoken by non-native Greek speakers during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, was the language in which the New Testament was composed, and presents a ripe opportunity, largely unexploited by classicists. Further discussion might have adduced reasons for keeping some boundaries, but no good reasons were raised to prevent a serious reappraisal of them.

ACTIVE LEARNING

Gone are the days when imperious Professor Incharge could simply arrive in class, dispense knowledge for his pupils to absorb, and then depart to his study or his lab. Serious pedagogy is at least part of the picture across the disciplines and across the various institutions of higher learning. "Active learning" was construed in different ways by the participants, but all held that the learning environment was enhanced when the means and ends toward which students are learning are made as concrete as possible and the end point of their study is the ability to do something they were previously unable to do. Many participants were sanguine about both the existing progress and the further prospects of this kind of pedagogical improvement in classics.

Most often noted among the participants was classical studies' relative richness in material culture. Coins, pots, temples, manuscripts, frescoes, jewelry, curse tablets, and papyri, not to mention whole cities where the ancient world is showcased as a living museum, offer exceptional opportunities for classicists. There was considerable

discussion of how best to share these materials, since they are concentrated in a relatively few, resource-rich locations. Sharing via both the museum loan and via the internet offer the best avenues. More could be done to improve these ways of delivery as well as to foster the desires of colleagues to integrate these objects (whether virtually or actually) into their curricula. In many cases, more could also be done to coordinate curricula with exhibitions at nearby museums.

Another way of construing active learning concentrates on the "learning to do something" model. One participant reported achieving great success in teaching the languages via a specific goal-driven approach. Students learned Greek *in order to* learn to read, say, Homer, the New Testament, or Plato, etc. He has constructed his language courses around units as rigorous as any intensive introductory textbook, but with a continual focus on the target text, which unfolds in richness as the introductory year advances. Another participant noted that it is possible to implement a "learning to do" model in nearly any class by focusing on the mechanism that tends to concentrate students' attention most directly, the graded assessments they produce in the class. Replacing the standard, midterm / paper / final exam structure with an assessment system that tests students' abilities to perform tasks goes a long way toward re-orienting the students' focus in a class. For example a course on Roman law might present students with 3 or 4 case studies over the semester, asking them to adjudicate a particular lawsuit or to play the part of a legislator drawing up new laws, etc. Such assignments foster an ownership of the material and an ability to assimilate and manipulate the rules that is the indicator of true mastery of the material.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

support initiatives that

- foster the use of material culture in the classroom*
- make material resources available in innovative electronic formats*
- support faculty development of new methods to support active learning*
- support community-based learning with other local institutions, including museums, universities, colleges, and high schools*

ASSESSMENT

While we participants were more or less convinced of our own effectiveness in helping the students who find us, it is also of course true that classicists, like all those engaged in the liberal arts, would benefit from articulating more precisely and comprehensibly their goals and aspirations for their students and to demonstrate their students' progress toward those goals. A breakout group in the listening considered this issue directly. They agreed generally to the usefulness of specific goals and timetables. They also strongly advocated the idea of some long term, longitudinal measure of the personal satisfaction and success (including financial success) of their students, whatever their chosen profession. This call seemed based on a hunch that students trained in classical studies would measure up very well vis-à-vis their peers trained in other fields.

The easier question seemed to be measuring improvement in student mastery of the ancient languages over time from some baseline. This was a measure classicists were

used to taking and comfortable taking. Measuring the development of the non-language learning raised more complicated questions. First, what was it, we as classicists thought worth measuring. The participants came up with an open-ended list, including: creativity; analytical skills; ability to evaluate data, come to a conclusion, and argue for it; ability to think empathetically; and an ability to provoke productive thinking in themselves and others. Second, the participants wondered how they might find instruments to measure these things.

More discussion produced a list of questions for further consideration. Would a classics department prefer to come up with its own department-specific set of criteria for measuring student progress, or would it submit to broader, liberal-arts wide sets of measurements for student progress? The second raised the issue of competition among liberal arts departments, and the question of whether this was the right way to go. Further, participants made a strong call that the criteria used to measure progress should be both robust enough to be meaningful and thoughtful enough to produce results that were beneficial for both students and faculty. Given that classicists have for years relied on some form of comprehensive exam, at the undergraduate or graduate level, we were confident that it was possible to come up with a test that would produce the results we as educators would be interested to see. Finally, participants were concerned to keep the focus of the assessment issue on pedagogy, that is, on making the project of measuring our results with students a project to help us become better teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

support initiatives that

-develop new instruments for assessing general liberal arts learning outcomes

-measure long-term effects of education in the liberal arts for life satisfaction and for financial success

GOING PUBLIC

A lively discussion in the listening centered on the various opportunities available to classicists in the more public arena. None of our participants considered their mission to be solely defined by tending the ivy around the campus walls. We agreed that teaching, whether in the form of large lecture courses to undergraduates, or in the form of specialized training of the next generation of teachers, has to do, precisely, with public engagement. Even our own specialized research, one senior participant offered, is an iteration of this public mission--publication, after all, is a form of making public new knowledge.

Another consensus developed among the participants of the salutary benefits of getting more deeply involved in the ongoing public engagement with the classical world in the more popular media venues. Participants pointed to at least two beneficial effects. First, since our students are arriving as freshmen with sensibilities shaped by new forms of media, our engagement with these forms, both inside and outside the classroom, will help us realize the possibilities these new media hold for reaching them. Second, our popular culture has experienced a noteworthy spike of interest in the ancient world. Evident in

cartoons, television documentary channels, popular fiction, and especially in blockbuster motion pictures, this rather wide public curiosity about the ancient world presents the discipline of classical studies with a rich opportunity for collaboration. That these waves of interest come and go in Hollywood is no argument against the great benefits that could result from more sustained and ongoing engagement between the worlds of academic and popular knowledge production. The participants were unanimous in their expression of interest in seeing this happen. While we need to have a conversation partner, of course, we also need to do our part, and we have hardly begun.

Participants also noted with frequency the role of classics (and the liberal arts generally) in fostering genuine civic engagement. This observation came to a head in the question of the current health of public discourse in America. Participants saw a real opportunity for improvement in the quality of debate across all sectors of society. Not only television, but also newspapers, magazines, and political venues, seem to have succumbed to the view of debate as a clash of dogmas, where speaking is privileged over listening, extremism over subtlety, and bluntness over nuance. The participants held the view that the liberal arts was good at fostering meaningful debate, which precisely reversed the values on the binaries listed above, and called for further consideration of steps we could take to foster self-awareness in our students about the importance of public discussion and argument in civic discourse.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

support initiatives to

-produce a database of classicists and their research interests to make them more accessible to those who might want to reach them

-support a "Classical Tanglewood" which, during the summer months, in a festival environment, hosts seminars, performs plays, invites scholars to do research, etc.

-develop self-sustaining summer language institutes for college and high school students, and any others interested in learning the languages

TRAINING IN THE PROFESSION

Participants were open to and interested in re-assessing the current track of professional development in classical studies, which is guided by the three T's of training, transition into professional life, and tenure. The broadest consensus emerged around the notion that graduate students need to receive more considered preparation in pedagogy. Too often, they quickly get the message that specialized research is their sole route to professional prosperity. Some more careful direction from their faculties was one desired intervention. Similarly the group was interested in seeing senior faculty more consistently reinforce the notion that pedagogy counts for assistant professors. At the same time some account has to be taken of the schemes by which decisions surrounding the final "T," tenure, are made. As long as the highest achievement levels in the profession are open exclusively to those who excel at specialized research, the most potent incentives will be pointed in that direction. Several participants noted that, within liberal arts colleges (as opposed to research universities) good teaching was actually a requirement "with teeth" at their institutions and that tenure would be denied to excellent researchers who were poor

teachers. One participant noted that at his prestigious private university, the assistant professoriate is aging. Half of the assistant professors at his university are over 37, 25% are over 41. They tend to be more risk averse than someone in their late 20s. Whatever reforms are made in the training process will need to take account of this, and organize incentives accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

support initiatives to

- create programs of "graduate student exchange" where advanced graduate students in research universities spend a teaching year at liberal arts colleges, thereby improving their own teaching and allowing college faculty to take leave for research or pedagogical development*
- raise the value of teaching not only at the level of institutional mission statements, but also within the incentive structure for advancing in the profession*

ACCESS TO CLASSICS

It was widely recognized among the participants that classical studies faces a "critical mass" issue, especially at smaller colleges. Full-time faculty are expensive and the level of demand for classics within a small student population may or may not justify devoting resources to a standing faculty in classical studies. This situation raises the issue, How do we lower the threshold for offering a full, rich range of classical studies to these under-resourced areas? Several opportunities were considered. Electronic environments offer real prospects. In particular, one group of colleges has developed an extraordinarily rich range of inter-institutional collaborative courses and online pedagogy (<http://www.sunokisis.org/CAMWS2003/collabclascamws2003.html>). Using chat, streaming video, web logs, online assessments, graphics, text, and creative database usage, this project has involved over a dozen small colleges that share resources in this manner. In addition, more traditional modes of sharing resources, through library and museum loans through joint appointments of faculty offer promise.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

support initiatives to

- encourage shared appointments of faculty between nearby institutions*
- encourage the development of rich electronic environments to serve under-resourced colleges and universities*
- facilitate the sharing of library and museum resources.*

CONCLUSIONS

Most of these challenges faced by classics, and the other liberal arts disciplines, can be embraced under the need to come up with good arguments for our importance. *Among the initiatives mentioned two in particular stand out* as the most potent means of accomplishing this. Until such time as we have hard data on what effect a liberal education (here as opposed to a more strictly pre-professional one) has on students, we live under the reign of the anecdote. Those involved in teaching the liberal arts have their own positive set of stories about how their students do out in the wider world. But these

will be difficult to make stick without some more systematic data to hang them on. We therefore face *an especially urgent need for some kind of more rigorous measures of what happens to a student who successfully completes the course of a liberal education.* A RFP that encourages development of instruments to measure the outcomes of liberal arts educations in the various disciplines, including classics, would be most welcome. Secondly, support of programs that bring the case for the humanities, in particular, to the wider public would be especially welcome. *Among the ideas for initiatives here, the possibility of a "Classical Tanglewood" holds the most promise for getting a core group of interested parties from inside and outside of academics whose good will and interest could then be tapped for further initiatives directed toward the wider world.*

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