

Review Committee Report for the Department of Classics

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Re: Review Committee Report for the Department of Classics

Committee Charge

The Program Review Committee for the Department of Classics was established and charged on May 31, 2018. Our task was to assess the quality of the undergraduate and graduate degree programs offered by the department, and, following extensive interviews with faculty, students, and staff, to recommend ways in which the program might be strengthened. We were asked to investigate the following questions:

1. Is the department doing what it should be doing?
2. Are they doing it well?
3. Can they be done better?
4. How can the University assist them?

The first section of our report, “Findings” will treat questions 1 and 2, with relevant examples and qualifications supplied in subsections. Recommendations for strengthening the department are addressed in section 3, and recommendations for the College and University comprise section 4.

Process

On January 31-February 1, the Review Committee held a two-day site visit with the following people:

- Chris Partridge (Program Review Specialist, Graduate School)
- Alain Gowing (Acting Chair) and Brian Reed (Divisional Dean of Humanities)
- Full and Associate Professors: Ruby Blondell (Professor), James Clauss (Professor), Catherine Connors (Professor), Stephen Hinds (Professor), Alex Hollmann (Associate), Deb Kamen (Associate), Sarah Stroup (Associate), Olga Levaniouk (Associate), Kathryn Topper (Associate)
- Assistant Professors: Sarah Levin-Richardson
- Adjunct Faculty: Joel Walker (Associate Professor of History)
- Emeritus Faculty: Lawrence Bliquez (Professor), Daniel Harmon (Professor)
- Staff: Douglas Machle (Assistant to the Chair)
- Undergraduate students: Lorraine Abagatnan, Theo Anderson, Rose Bugel-Shunra, Grecia Leal Pardo, Forrest Martin, and Sheila Panyam
- Graduate students: Kaitlyn Boulding, Sarah Brucía Breitenfeld, Joseph Bringman, Emma Brobeck, Konnor Clark, Grace Funsten, Edgar Garcia, Mary McNulty, Megan O'Donald, Anna Simas, Nicole Speth, Fana Yirga, and Joshua Zacks.
- Exit Discussion: Becky Corriell (Director, Graduate School Academic Program Review and Strategy); Unit representatives: Alain Gowing, Deb Kamen; University administrators: Brian Reed, Kima Cargill, Patricia Moy (Associate Vice Provost for Academic and Student Affairs), Michaelann Jundt (Associate Dean, Undergraduate Academic Affairs), Chris Partridge, Negin Dahya (Assistant Professor, Information School, Graduate School Council Representative), Valerie Manusov (Professor, Department of Communication, Graduate School Council Representative).

Findings

1. Is the department doing what it should be doing?

The Classics Department at the University of Washington is nationally recognized as one of the leading departments in the field, both for the eminence of its faculty and for the excellence of its graduate program; indeed, the review committee for the department's most recent 10-year review stressed that UW Classics "ranks among the very best programs in the nation." The department is one of the principal programs that consistently shows UW in a prestigious light as a nationally and internationally important university for the study of the humanities. Moreover, for its size, Classics is among the university's most esteemed departments not only in comparison with other units in the humanities, but with units across the arts and social sciences as well. In sum, it is well described as a Center of Excellence.

2. Are they doing it well?

The Classics Department is particularly outstanding in the study of poetics, of the ongoing impact of the ancient world, and of gender, sexuality, and class in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. These research strengths are not only academic; they inflect the way the department positions itself in a politically-fraught world. In an era in which the

study of Classics faces challenges both from declining investment in the humanities, and from the attempted appropriation of Greco-Roman culture by the alt-right, the UW department has become nationally renowned for its idealism and effectiveness, and its deliberation in recruiting under-represented minorities to the study of Classics at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The Graduate Program

Currently, 33% of Classics majors are underrepresented minorities, and 19% of its graduate students (the national average is 4%!). The department maintains very close relations with OMAD (the UW Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity) and GO-MAP (Graduate Opportunities and Minority Achievement Program), and has been so successful in recruiting students from underrepresented backgrounds – and creating a supportive climate for them – that some recent recruits have turned down full funding at Harvard and Berkeley to attend UW. The department has also had a stellar record of placing these students in good positions as they graduate, with students being offered tenure-track positions at UCLA and Stanford among other fine programs.

Between 25% and 30% of both graduate students and faculty are LGBTQ, and in 2014 the department won the Award in Professional Equity from the Women’s Classical Caucus. Thus, the department is not only recognized for outstanding research and graduate training, but for taking a national lead in expanding and transforming what the field of Classics looks like and how it will be taught and practiced in the future. All of the graduate students with whom the Review Committee met underlined their deep attachment to the department, and praised its intellectual, emotional, and financial support for graduate students’ work, in a rich culture of respect, inclusiveness, and enthusiasm.

Undergraduate Program

While one might not assume that in our current age “Classics” would hold wide interest for undergraduates, the department at UW has shown this to be a myth. Classics has made heroic efforts not just to fund its graduate students in recent years but to grow its population of undergraduates, offering a new and innovative array of large courses, taught in English, by some of the department’s most dynamic faculty. The external members of the committee were especially impressed not just by the numbers but by the positively innovative approach to courses and teaching that were to be found in the department’s undergraduate offerings. Every Classics department offers a myth course of some sort or other, but none to our knowledge has anything like the “STEM in Antiquity” or “Status and Society” courses that are available to UW undergrads. This shows a commendable and innovatory approach to teaching and the undergraduate experience that has seen a commensurate growth in student demand for Classics courses. The undergraduates with whom the Committee met expressed particular desire for more courses in English translation, which would be accessible to Classics majors still in the early stages of learning Greek and Latin, and would appeal also to general education students.

Indeed, demand for the Classics Department's courses is exceptional, and well beyond its ability to accommodate that interest, particularly with the constraints on Academic Student Employment (ASE) funding. For instance, the perennially popular CLAS 430, Greek and Roman Mythology, has 261 students enrolled this winter quarter 2019 – but with *216 denials*, an extraordinary number, indicating a demand beyond anything one might expect and offering a particularly powerful argument for increased ASE support. That this interest by undergraduates has not only been maintained but steadily increased since the financial crisis of 2008 is testament to the Classics Department's tremendous skill in attracting and retaining students, despite the shrinking of humanities enrollments overall. The department's commitment to undergraduate education goes beyond the classroom as well. The undergraduate students interviewed by the committee emphasized the openness of the Classics community, its intellectual passion, and the personal support and care they receive from the faculty. Students' kindness and support for each other, too, was clearly an outgrowth of the community and common purpose modeled by the department as a whole. Continued support for teaching by both graduate students and faculty is essential to maintaining this culture of enquiry and collective endeavor.

Challenges

During the last ten years, these remarkable accomplishments have all been won in a grinding uphill battle against declining funding, and these declines have now reached a critical point, which calls for University intervention. It is the finding of the Review Committee that a rhetoric of crisis is not exaggerated; the continued top status of the department, its faculty, and its students at all levels, depends on timely and continued support from the central administration.

Reduction in ASE Funding and Pressure on the Graduate Program

At the center of the problem is the drastic reduction in ASE funding for the employment of graduate students in teaching, which has been one of the ways in which the department has ensured 5-year funding packages for the excellent graduate students it recruits. Partly in an effort to reduce time to degree completion and thereby cut costs, the department has streamlined some of the requirements for the PhD, especially by eliminating one of the required exams.

Initial reports suggest that this is working well, but it should be stressed that a 5-year program is the very minimum number of years for a PhD in Classics, and most peer institutions expect that their students will need 6 years (and thus many offer 6-year funding). It may be useful in this context to remember that a well-qualified PhD in Classics must exhibit advanced competence in two ancient languages and two thousand years of ancient Mediterranean civilization. Moreover, the number of modern languages in which many classicists need a degree of fluency (Italian, German, French, modern Greek) greatly exceeds the number of languages required even of candidates in a field like Comparative Literature. Even under ideal circumstances, it remains a daunting challenge for the best students to finish the program with a completed dissertation within 5 years.

Classics currently has endowment support that provides students initial funding for their first year, and often some support for summer work and for completing dissertation writing. Its only means of creating 5-year packages, however, includes leveraging a significant number of TA-ships for its students. The external members of this year's Review Committee were adamant that in Classics, 5-year PhD funding packages are both the norm at peer institutions (including the wealthy private universities against which the UW department successfully competes) and essential for the recruitment and retention of good students. Since the last review in 2008-9, however, Classics has effectively lost nearly half of its ASE support, and is now able to employ only 9 ASEs in a given year in comparison to the 16 ASE positions it could count on in 2009.

As the department stresses in its self-study, the extent of this reduction is creating formidable challenges in maintaining competitive funding – an issue, we might add, that is often of particular import for students from underrepresented backgrounds, whom the department has so effectively recruited, and who enhance the UW's reputation as a university on the leading edge of diversity and inclusion.

National and International Reputation and Impact

The repercussions of a decline in UW Classics would be felt well beyond the question of enrollments or the daily workings of the College and University. The Classics Department at the UW has maintained a national and international reputation for decades, both in terms of scholarship and of participation in the Society for Classical Studies (SCS), the national organization for Classics. As to the latter, several UW members have served on the Board of Directors of the SCS and have held important committee memberships. Both external members of the committee, who have served on the SCS Nominating Committee, noted that faculty from the UW are always among the premier candidates for the elected offices of the Society.

In terms of its scholarship, what is particularly notable about the UW department is that it has earned its reputation despite being relatively small in terms of the number of faculty. One of the external reviewers noted that every one of the department's peer institutions has a much larger number of full-time faculty, not to mention that quite a number with a reputation inferior to the UW's also have a significantly higher number of full-time faculty. The reason this needs to be emphasized is that the department has built its reputation not by adding people, but by having the people here give their utmost in terms of teaching, scholarship, and service. It can be safely predicted that any diminution of their numbers will have a deleterious effect on the department's ability to maintain its excellent reputation.

Indeed, the current pressures on faculty time and energy are already causing significant problems for faculty development. It may be the case that faculty decline to apply for prestigious grants and fellowship opportunities because success in these endeavors would cause a problematic shortage in department headcount. Yet such success is essential to the department's intellectual prestige; the department cannot run indefinitely on the self-sacrifice of its faculty members. The stress already caused by teaching shortages in the department threatens its famed collegiality and harmony, and has resulted in strains and

miscommunication that are the more marked because of their usual rarity. More generally, the absence of reader and TA funds for faculty teaching lecture courses entails a substantial grading burden for already overworked scholars, which, added to the intense mentoring work they engage in with students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, creates additional stress.

3. Recommendations: Departmental level

In so many ways, UW Classics has done all that could be imagined to deal creatively with the pressures and challenges facing it and the University during the past years. The Review Committee has a group of suggestions that might open further possibilities in the current environment.

(1) The Mythology course is currently offered with variable credits, with 3 credits being the norm for most students. It appears that the department, the division, and the College would benefit considerably if this course became a univocally 5-credit course with discussion sections.

(2) In order to staff this new, 5-credit version of the course, additional TA support would be needed. A promising way to accomplish this, even given the current constraints, might be to shift some TA allotments from the department's introduction to etymology (CLAS 101, Latin and Greek in Current Use) and CLAS 205, Bioscientific Vocabulary. These are also popular courses, but they are ripe for redevelopment as hybrid or online courses, which would demand fewer TA resources. The department's graduate students themselves have expressed interest in and enthusiasm for such a reapportioning.

(3) Because of all the excellent work the Classics Department has done to engage students and expand its class offerings, online innovations could present further opportunities for growth. Based on fruitful discussion between the Review Committee and College and University administrators at the conclusion of the site visit, Classics might consider piloting one or two online courses, to be taught by graduate students. It seems possible, from our discussions with the administration, that some funding might be available for the design and/or support of such courses, which – while certainly not a comprehensive solution to the funding problem – might provide additional help in mitigating it. Developing online courses also opens up new pedagogical possibilities for interested graduate students, which would at once position them well on the job market and allow Classics to reach yet more students with its fascinating and innovative courses.

(4) The Committee recommends that the department institute a program of ongoing faculty development and support for Assistant and Associate Professors, so that there is complete transparency – particularly in the case of the path to Full Professor – in tenure and promotion. Support for this is particularly crucial in periods of financial constraint, which will have the greatest impact on the most junior faculty.

(5) The Committee recommends that the department institute a teaching proseminar for its TAs. Several graduate students mentioned this as desirable, and it would further reinforce the excellent support the department offers its academic student employees.

4. Recommendations: College and University level

This report has discussed at length and in some detail the challenges facing the Classics Department as a result of cuts to ASE funding, and the extraordinary means taken by faculty to make up the shortfall with minimal pain to students. The precarious nature of funding through endowments, faculty energy and good will, and graduate student stoicism and solidarity cannot be maintained indefinitely, and the strain is starting to show.

(1) The Review Committee understands the seriousness of the budgetary issues the UW faces in funding ASEs with relatively flat annual allocations for TA-ships and dramatically increased costs per ASE. Nonetheless, we would strongly recommend that the College and University consider ways to offer more TA lines to the Classics Department. The allocation of some additional resources to the department would pay the university huge dividends in enabling the program to continue to be a national model of what an excellent Classics Department – and more generally, humanities department – can be at a great public university.

If no additional funds could be located, we would even – with great reluctance – advocate redirecting a few ASE lines from around the Division or College toward the Classics Department. It seems to us that the fallout for the UW – should Classics decline in prestige as a leading department in the nation – is much worse than the damage that might be sustained by the loss of one TA-ship in units that have neither achieved national prestige and ranking, nor generated the student interest so evident in Classics.

(2) While this report has focused principally on the effects that funding cuts have had on teaching, support for faculty and graduate research travel has suffered as well, and the Committee recommends central support for these. Even though the department controls some endowment revenue, these funds are already fully, even over-, committed (see our previous comments on funding). Such support will be an important contribution to faculty development (and thus to maintaining the faculty's outstanding international reputation) and to graduate student preparation (and thus to maintaining the PhD program's remarkably competitive status).

(3) The department is experiencing significant anxiety at the prospect of the retirements of senior faculty Prof. Ruby Blondell (2019), Prof. Stephen Hinds (2022), and Prof. Alain Gowing (2023). Prof. Jim Clauss cheerfully predicts that he will have to be carried out of Denny Hall feet-first, but even he may have second thoughts should the financial and staffing situation of the department deteriorate further.

Given the small size of the department, and its already streamlined and efficient operation and equitable sharing of teaching responsibilities, it is difficult to imagine the Classics Department functioning with *even fewer faculty*. The necessity of maintaining as many tenured faculty lines as possible cannot be understated; reports that upcoming losses in headcount due to retirement will only be replaced at 50% are causing significant problems in morale. Hiring at the senior level is not required, and given the department's outstanding record of hiring dynamic, imaginative, and productive young scholars, there

is every reason to be confident of the department's adding even more luster to its reputation as one of the top Classics programs in the nation.

Final Recommendation

The Review Committee unanimously endorses the continuing status of the department's degree programs, with a subsequent review in ten years.

We would also like to thank the Classics Department and the administrators of the College of Arts and Sciences for their great collegiality and professionalism. It is not often that committees can say that a state-mandated administrative review has been both interesting and enjoyable, but in this case, it has been both.

Sincerely,

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