

Response from the Department of Classics - January 15, 2004

We are grateful to our two outside evaluators, Helena Dettmer, Prof. of Classics at the University of Iowa, and Gregory N. Daugherty, Prof. of Classics at Randolph-Macon College, for their careful review of our department, which included a visit to campus on October 30-31, 2003, and for their efficiency in submitting their report in record time (November 4, 2003). It is heartening to have colleagues from other schools express admiration not just for our program but also for the philosophy and the goals that have shaped it over the years.

The evaluators commented briefly on each of the seven areas of concern that we had listed at the end of our self-study report. Below are our responses to their comments:

1. The evaluators suggest requiring a Greek history course for Greek majors, a Roman history course for Latin majors, and both a Greek history and a Roman history course for Classics and Ancient Studies majors. At the moment our Greek majors have the option of taking either Greek history or a Classics course; our Latin majors have the option of taking either Roman history or a Classics course; our Classics majors need to take just one course in ancient history or Classics; Ancient Studies majors need to take just one course in ancient history.

Although we do want our students to take history courses, we also want them to take our Classics courses, several of which satisfy the general education requirement in Historical Studies in Western Culture. As a compromise, we have decided to change the either/or history/Classics option in our Greek, Latin, and Classics majors to a both/and requirement, and to add to our Ancient Studies major a required Classics course. Since students in the licensure program are often pressed for time, we will leave the Latin education major requirements unchanged.

Greek major: 7 courses in Greek, 1 Greek history course, 1 Classics course [total = 9]. Students who begin Greek at the 231 level or higher have the option of taking 6 courses in Greek, 1 Greek history course, 1 Classics course [total = 8].

Latin major: 7 courses in Latin, 1 Roman history course, 1 Classics course [total = 9]. Students who begin Latin at the 231 level or higher have the option of taking 6 courses in Latin, 1 Roman history course, 1 Classics course [total = 8].

Latin major with K-12 education license: 7 courses in Latin, 1 Roman history or Classics course [total = 8] + Education 349 and all other requirements of the Latin education licensure program. Students who begin Latin at the 231 level or higher have the option of taking 6 courses in Latin, 1 Roman history course, 1 Classics course [total = 8].

Classics major: 6 courses in Greek or Latin, 3 courses in the other language, 1 Greek or Roman history course, 1 Classics course [total = 11]. Students who begin one of the languages at the 231 level or higher have the option of taking 5 courses in that language, 3 in the other, 1 Greek or Roman history course, 1 Classics course [total = 10].

Ancient Studies major: 3 courses in Greek or 3 courses in Latin, 1 Greek or Roman history course, 1 Classics course, 3 electives, 1 IR [Philosophy 235 will become an elective instead of a required course] [total = 9].

Under our current system it is so easy for our students to complete our majors that many are finishing them in their junior year. Requiring both a history course and a Classics course is not likely to overburden our language majors, and it would ensure that they graduate with broader knowledge of the ancient world. The Classics interim in Greece would continue to count toward the major, as would a Classics interim in Italy (should we decide to establish one). Requiring two history courses, on the other hand, would sacrifice some of the flexibility that makes the majors appealing to our students.

2. The compromise presented in #1 adds one course to the minimal requirements for the Greek, Latin, and Classics majors, but the extra course is not a language course. Although the evaluators assume that “any increase of requirements will result in fewer Classics majors,” we suspect that this particular change will not deter students from majoring in Greek, Latin, or Classics. In exit interviews with our graduating seniors, we often hear it said that they wish they had taken more Classics and ancient history courses, or taken them earlier in their college career; it was only with hindsight that they realized their value. Requiring two such courses instead of one is a simple way to address the seniors' concern without scaring off too many first-year students. If we should ever introduce a capstone course (fitting it into our students' schedules would be the major obstacle), it could take the place of the required Classics course.

3. Although our evaluators were not alarmed by our persistence rates, they suggested that capping enrollments in Beginning Latin would be “the best way to improve retention” from one course to the next. It would certainly be a treat, both for us and for our students, if each of our introductory-level Latin courses enrolled no more than 25 students per section. With our current registration system, however, there would be no way to guarantee that the 25 students who enrolled in each section were the ones most eager to be in it, or the ones most likely to succeed. If we started with just 25 students per section and experienced our usual drop-out rate, we could end up with only 15 (or fewer) students per section in the second semester. The ideal solution would be to offer three sections of Latin, each capped at 25, in the fall; these could then be combined into two sections in the second term, on the model of our two sections of Greek 111, which become just one section in the spring. This would require an additional 0.17 FTE, or an overload comparable to the one built into our system for Greek 111.

An even more pressing problem is how we can continue to offer a second section of Latin 231, when we have enough FTE for just one section. (The course enrolled 51 students this year.) For 2004-05 Rick Fairbanks graciously offered us an extra 0.17 FTE, which Jim May's willingness to teach an overload next fall has made unnecessary. Whether spare FTE will be available for us in subsequent years is unclear. Every other solution that we have considered is problematic: we resist canceling our on-campus interim course because it is the one time during the year when we can contribute to General Education by offering a Level I Classics course (as opposed to a Level I Greek or Latin course). If ancient historian Tim Howe shared with us the teaching of the Classics interim abroad, it could count as part of the History Department's FTE, leaving us free to offer a second section of Latin 231--but only in the years when Tim taught it. We could cease offering Golden Age of Greece and Golden Age of Rome, but both are popular courses and give our students, majors and non-majors alike, a chance to study significant eras in the ancient world from a classicist's perspective. The experience of teaching courses in classical civilization also contributes to our department's faculty development.

4. We do urge our students to consider K-12 Latin teaching as a career (two of our four senior Classics majors are applying to M.A.T. programs in Latin), but we are uncertain how to “raise the profile” of the Latin education licensure program at St. Olaf. Our majors know about it, but they would rather not spend their undergraduate years taking education courses; this is especially true of the many students who arrive at St. Olaf with no background in Latin (or Greek) and have to develop their skills in four short years. Some do not become interested in teaching Latin until they are juniors or seniors, when it is too late to complete the education program here. It is also common for our majors to come from outside Minnesota; if they plan to teach elsewhere, they see little value in becoming certified in this state. Perhaps we could meet with students who are already pursuing licensure in another field and propose that they consider becoming licensed in Latin as well.

5. We realize that studying for a semester through the College Year in Athens program or at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome would be a wonderful opportunity for our students--and a few of them have in fact attended CYA, though with the loss of their St. Olaf financial aid for that term. On the other hand, we have spent years debating whether we could afford the high cost of becoming an ICCSR institutional member (a *de facto* requirement if our students are to be accepted into this highly competitive program), and we simply do not have the money. The idea of a Minnesota consortium is worth pursuing, but colleges that are already ICCSR members may fear that combining forces with other schools will decrease their students' chances of being accepted. We have also spent years wondering whether it would undermine our own curriculum, particularly our interim in Greece, if these overseas programs were to gain sanction as "St. Olaf-approved" and be advertised actively on campus.

Lately our students have been taking the initiative to participate in archaeological digs or study abroad programs during the summer or to arrange internships for themselves at museums or research centers during our January term. Encouraging them to do this seems to be more sensible for us than to pursue costly, formal arrangements with CYA and ICCSR.

6. While we thank the evaluators for arguing that our departmental FTE should be increased from 3.0 to 4.0, we realize that, in the current economic climate, the chances of that happening are nil. It would indeed help relieve our enrollment pressures if we had a fourth colleague whose teaching load could be divided between Classics and another department such as Art History, but even that is a stretch of the imagination in these challenging financial times. For now, we can manage with an extra 0.17 or 0.34 "borrowed" from somewhere else. We appreciate Rick Fairbanks' concern to make sure that we receive a fair share of the spoils as he distributes FTE among the Humanities departments. We have to admit, though, that it is discouraging to have been so successful in increasing enrollments in our courses, yet have no tangible reward to show for it. Our willingness to teach overloads ends up being, not an argument for additional FTE, but "a potential source of friction" (in the evaluators' words) to our non-Classics colleagues. In the past we viewed teaching those overloads as a way of compensating for being allowed to teach advanced courses of just 3 or 4 students; now, however, our advanced Latin courses are in double digits, and even our advanced Greek courses have met or exceeded the minimum enrollment for Level III. It would be a morale booster to be granted a permanent increase of 0.17 FTE, even if, thanks to Jim May's overload, we did not need it for Latin 231. That would give us the flexibility to open a third section of Latin 111 or to offer our Vergil course every year without sacrificing Medieval Latin (see #7) or simply to teach the second section of Greek 111 as a regular part of our course load.

As we mentioned in our report, and as the evaluators reiterated, having the majority of our courses taught by short-term, non-tenure-track faculty is not an ideal situation, but we have tried to minimize disruption in the department's routine by hiring Gwen Compton-Engle for five years, Jon Bruss and Chris Brunelle each for two years. Besides being the best of colleagues, all three of them have been outstanding teachers, as evidenced by our record enrollments during their years here. Meanwhile, teaching in the Great Conversation program (and, in the case of Steve Reece, participating in the Boldt Seminar for one term) has resulted not just in personal and professional growth for all three of our tenured faculty, but in increased visibility for our department. Jim May's position as Provost and Dean (which has not stopped him from teaching a course for us each year) draws our department into the limelight, and Anne Groton's new job as Secretary-Treasurer of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South brings with it a new role for St. Olaf College as CAMWS headquarters for the next five years.

7. It is here that we differ most with the evaluators in their assessment. While few St. Olaf students major in Medieval Studies, eliminating the program would be a shame. It costs the college just \$450, half of the \$900 budgeted for Ancient & Medieval Studies. (The \$500 stipend for the Director of Ancient Studies covers Medieval Studies too.) Yes, technically, administering the program is “an additional burden for the chair” of the Classics Department, but she spends no more than a tiny fraction of her time on Medieval Studies and regards it as no burden at all. At St. Olaf there is plenty of interest in the Middle Ages, among students as well as faculty (e.g., Medieval/Renaissance Colloquium, Early Music Singers, Collegium Musicum, Society for Creative Anachronism). Laurel Carrington has just designed a three-course medieval history sequence, culminating in a Level III seminar. The third course in the Great Conversation program is devoted to the medieval period.

This year, just by chance, we have no seniors majoring in Medieval Studies, but there are two juniors, three sophomores, and one first-year student who have already declared the major. Given the small number of Medieval Studies majors graduating from St. Olaf, it is remarkable how many of them (at least five) have gone on to earn advanced degrees in that discipline. Meanwhile 16 students have signed up for Medieval Latin this spring, more than often sign up for Vergil & the Latin Epic. St. Olaf students frequently spend a term at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Oxford; one of our Classics majors is there right now.

We do agree with the evaluators that offering Medieval Latin and Vergil in alternating years increases the likelihood that a Latin major may graduate from St. Olaf without ever having taken a course in Vergil, but it was even more likely to happen when we experimented with offering Vergil every third year, as a Level III course. We may want to go back to teaching Vergil every year as the fourth course in our Latin sequence, but that raises the question of where to put Medieval Latin, a valuable course in its own right. One possibility would be to raise it to Level III and offer it in place of one of the six courses in our rotation of advanced Latin courses. Another would be to offer it during interim (as we used to do, before we made it a regular part of the Latin sequence), perhaps every other year, but it would have to be taught as an overload unless we received more FTE for it or unless it replaced the Level I Classics course normally taught during January. In any case, the difficulty of scheduling Medieval Latin is no reason to wipe out the Medieval Studies major, which serves well the handful of students who choose it.

Remaining Questions:

The evaluators did not make a recommendation about the optimal size of our Greek and Roman Myth, Golden Age of Greece, and Golden Age of Rome courses. Should we continue to allow 60 students to enroll in each of them? Chris Brunelle and Jon Bruss have taught the large courses successfully in 2002-03 and 2003-04, but the size of each class puts extraordinary demands on the instructor. Should we limit the 60-person courses to one per year, or return all three to their original size of 30? Should the enrollment maximum be left to the discretion of each instructor? If we limit the size of those courses, is our planned increase in the number of ancient history/Classics courses required for the Greek, Latin, and Classics majors going to hinder some of our students from completing their majors? Overall, do the benefits (to the students, to the department, and to the college) of offering one or two large courses per year outweigh the costs? We are still searching for the answers to these questions.

As of today, in addition to our 16 senior majors, we have 43 other declared majors in the junior, sophomore, and freshman classes, giving us a grand total of 59. With that crowd of eager young students already at our door, we are optimistic about the future of Classics at St. Olaf.