

## On Retaining the Latin Major at the University of Maine

I have hesitated to address this issue until now, due to my natural hesitation in calling attention to myself, and to encourage the decoupling of the question of the Latin major from the person of the only Classicist at the University of Maine – myself.

In the 25 years I have delivered the Latin major, I have taught many talented and creative students in every level of Latin and ancient Greek. Some have become majors, some have not. Some have gone on to become Latin or Classics teachers, and some have not. I contend, however, that all have benefitted from the opportunity to study Latin at whatever level they may have attained.

In an institution of higher education, it is not necessary to talk about the benefits of Latin study. Aside from the practicalities of language – improved vocabulary through etymology, comprehension, understanding of English grammar through Latin reading and composition, and the like – there is satisfaction. This is the satisfaction of gaining deep insight into the actual thought processes, in the original language, of those who formed Western culture, be it in the areas of philosophy, literature, law, history, or culture in general.

It is the satisfaction of stepping into the stream of creative and profound ideas with which thinkers ever since have contended, answered to, and, in the process, moved our culture forward. T. S. Eliot concluded that our only superiority to the past derives from our capacity to include it as part of our present. Another way of expressing this idea is the deeply modern notion that “past is prologue.” Although translation may give us some of the depths of these insights, and certainly will give us the breadth, the deepest understanding and profoundest knowledge comes from the ineffable place where the language itself connects to our being. Knowledge of the actual language is a gift of radical apprehension, where we feel the meaning in our bones.

Access to Latin on an advanced level is what makes this possible. The minor, which will be retained, will give the seeker a taste of this. The major gives full access to reading, writing, and thinking in the language. It prepares future teachers to pass on this legacy. It allows our talented Latin students, often in conjunction with Art History, History and Philosophy, to gain entry to fine graduate schools, and participate in the production of new knowledge and new ways of interpreting and knowing the past. It places our students in the context of time and in dialogue with culture.

The University of Maine is our Flagship institution. It is here that students of Maine should have access to all significant areas of study. The Latin major costs little – it requires no fancy equipment, just good and devoted teaching. Once the possibility of majoring in Latin has been removed, our students will have no recourse but to leave the state for further study or to attend a private institution within the state.

We are not talking about numbers or about popularity – Latin (and Greek) study are difficult, and require great self-discipline. The numbers will always be low and the popularity of the study of the language will not be great. This is true, however, of many other disciplines that require, well, discipline.

I leave you with a metaphor from an enduring work by Plato. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades compares the physically unattractive Socrates to a statue of a Silenus – an ugly satyr – that could be purchased in the marketplace. When the statue was opened, lovely figurines of the gods were inside.

Retaining the Latin major is retaining this ugly little statue. I wish only for our students to have the opportunity stumble upon it in the marketplace of ideas, purchase it, and work hard to open it, to discover the gods within.

Thank you.

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