

12 Reasons to be a Classics major in the 21st Century

By: Liam Kinney

"When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life." – John Lennon

Introduction

I get a lot of mixed reactions when I tell people I'm majoring in Classics. Most think I mean Classical literature. I tell them my field is a tad bit older than *Pride and Prejudice*. Classics is the cross-disciplinary study of Ancient Latin and Greek language and culture. The response is almost always "so what can you do with that?" I say that the Classics community is like an academic centrifuge, mostly churning out high school teachers and professors to raise the next generation of Classicists, but occasionally spinning off a doctor, lawyer, or other — *cough* Mark Zuckerberg.

This makes the field seem like a machine for impressive professions, but that's not what Classics is to me. I give that answer because I know the question is code for "how are you going to make money?" and it comes from the modern expectation that college is meant to provide pre-professional training. This is certainly *part* of the undergraduate experience, but it shouldn't define it. College gives us the time and resources to reflect on ourselves, confront great ideas, and deepen our understanding of the world. Remember what Socrates, the founder of European moral philosophy, said: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Saller, 2014). To approach higher education as a means to grow one's future salary and nothing more is to forfeit the opportunity of a lifetime.

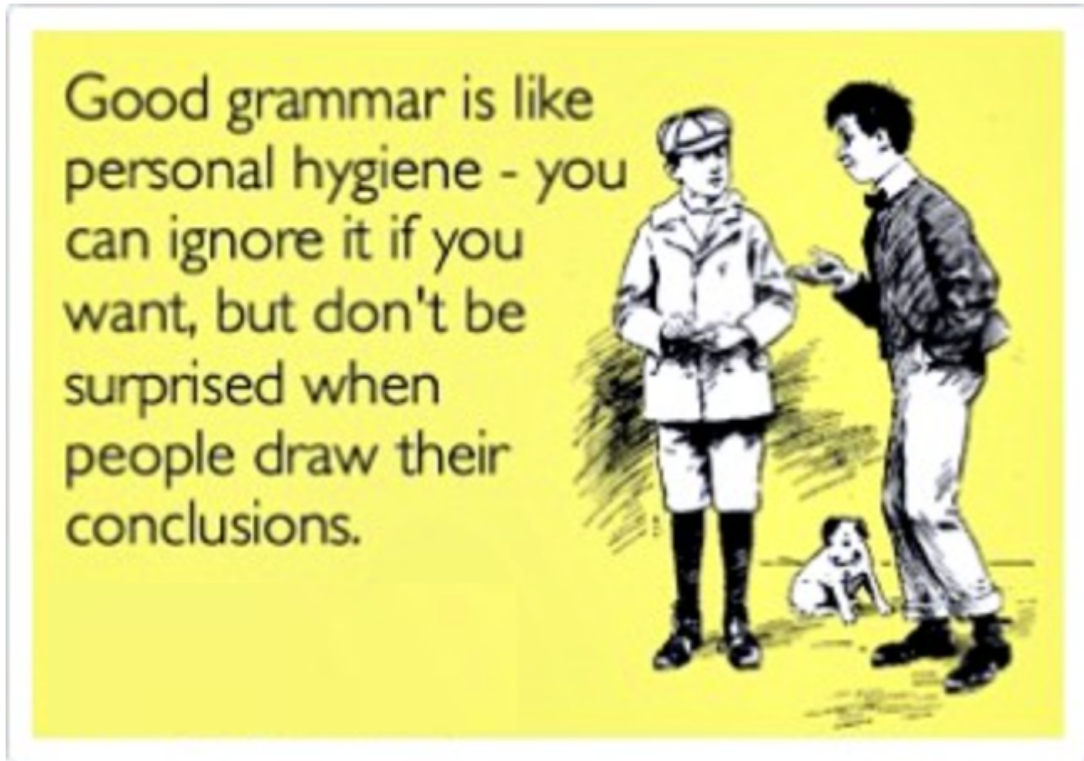
Consider this poll taken amongst college freshman of the last 50 years: in 1967, 83% stated that their main goal was "to develop a meaningful philosophy of life" whereas only 40% said it was a main goal of theirs to be well-off financially. After only 20 years, the numbers had flip-flopped, to 73% and 40%, respectively (Gold, 1989). At my home institution, Stanford University, enrollment in Humanities and the Arts has dropped 10% in the last 10 years (Saller, 2014). I would say there is a connection in these two trends; the liberal arts aren't traditionally lucrative fields, and students nowadays are largely in it for the money.

I would have fit in well with those freshman 50 years ago, since I haven't thought much about my financial fate. I don't see the Classics as a means for some other end, but rather as an end in itself. The Ancient Greeks had words for these two motives behind education: τέχνη (techne, like technical) is defined as a *skill, a craft in work, a manner or means whereby a thing is gained* (Liddel & Scott, 1819). The τέχνη majors are engineering or finance. παιδεία (paideia), on the other hand, is *education, culture, accomplishment* (Liddel & Scott, 1819). It is intellectual fulfillment; knowledge for knowledge's sake.

I do Classics for the παιδεία, so I've never thought of it as a *means whereby a thing is attained*. But every college student must eventually face the daunting 'real world,' so I've begun reflecting on and researching how my major will serve my future. I've composed the following list of reasons that Classics counts as both a τέχνη and a παιδεία field in the modern world.

τέχνη

1. To score #1 in GRE verbal



In 2012, a geneticist at Discover magazine named Razib Khan wanted to know the GRE scores for individual undergraduate disciplines. He took some numbers from the ETS (the Educational Testing Service writes the GRE) and, in a blog post titled “Classicists are Smart!” he released two graphs (2012). They are copied on the following page.

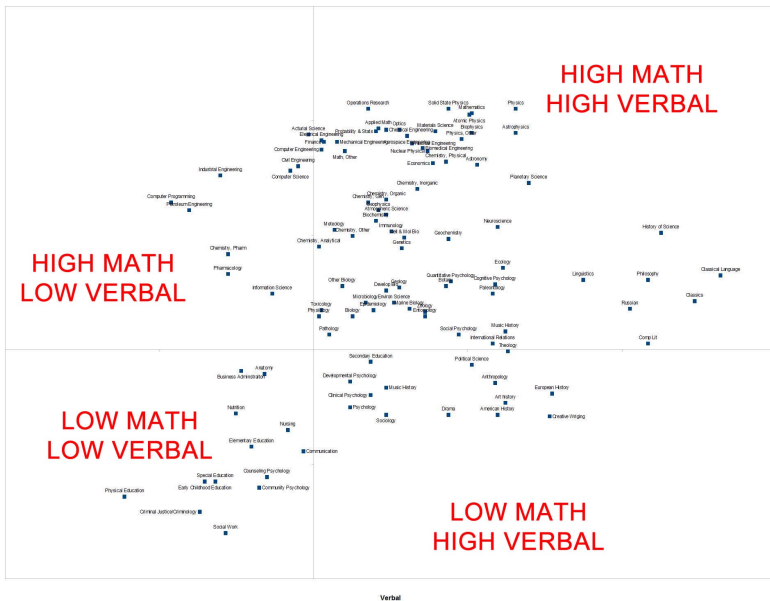
The first one shows math vs. verbal scores for students who specified a major on the GRE. The number one highest scorer in verbal (the farthest to the right on the graph below) is Classical Languages, followed immediately by Classics (CompLit comes in fifth). This comes as no surprise to me; in my first year latin class in high school, we spent the first two weeks hammering English grammar. I thought this was silly until I learned that latin grammar is so variable and convoluted that it demands a mastery of one’s native language rules in order to study it. Unlike the modern languages, translating each word of a Latin or Greek sentence left-to-right usually produces nonsense. The fun of it is finding meaning in the nonsense. “Ok, where’s the subject and direct object?” “What’s the main verb?” “What do the prepositional phrases modify?” These are all questions I still hear and still ask in my seventh year of Latin. A knowledge of English grammar is one of the tools Classicists use everyday, so we learn to use it well.

2. ...and top 10 in aggregate

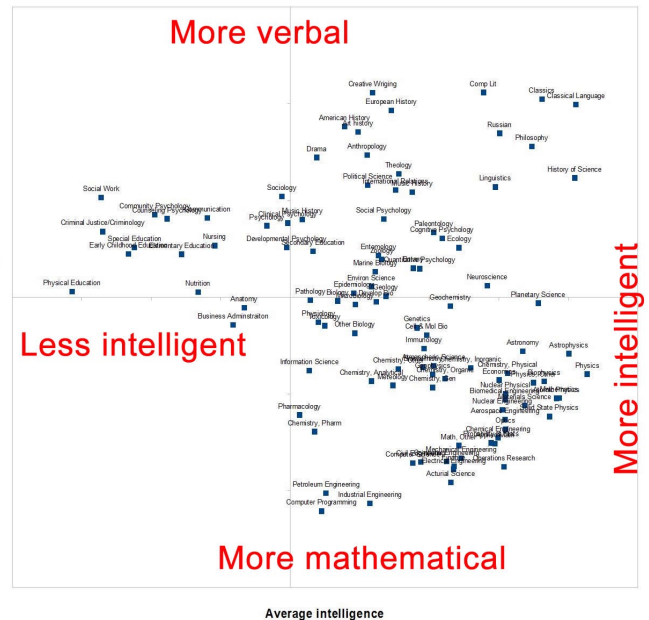


The second graph in the article, below on the right, shows “intellectual balance” (whether the students in each major score better in the verbal or quantitative sections) vs. “aggregate smarts” (aggregate GRE score). Classics and Classical languages are the two dots in the top right corner. In terms of aggregate score, Classical Languages comes in second after physics, and Classics finishes in the top 10. They are the third and fourth most verbal fields after Creative writing and CompLit, but we can see from the previous graph that they only fall below because Classics and Classical Languages outperform both CompLit and Creative Writing in math (so they are “more mathematical,” therefore lower on the graph). Besides the unparalleled verbal scores, Classicists are among the top three most competitive majors in general GRE performance.

GRE mean math vs. mean verbal



Difference in intelligences vs. Average intelligence



3. To get into any graduate program



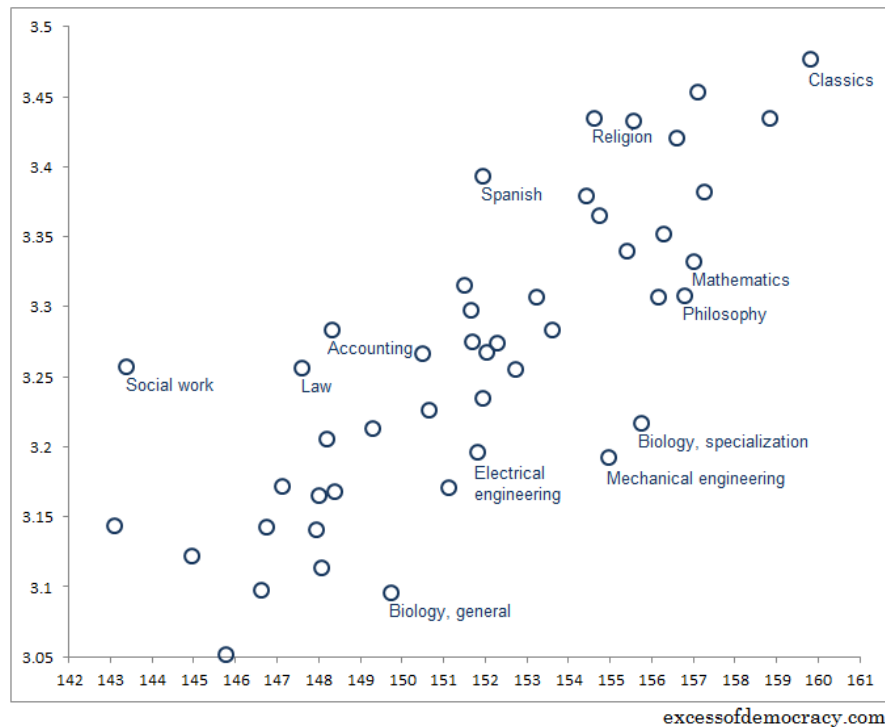
According to matriculation data from GRE tutoring service Magoosh, the GRE numbers from the ETS mean that the *average* Classical Language student scores about a **162 in Verbal** and a **150 in Quantitative**. This is roughly 2 points above the Verbal average and 8 points below the Quantitative cutoff for the average Stanford and MIT graduate programs, some of the most competitive in the country (Swimmer, 2013). With those scores in mind, look at how Classical Languages outperforms three of the other most popular liberal arts majors (the leftmost two number columns), and how much closer they are to the top PhD program cutoffs in each of those fields (the rightmost two number columns):

Average GRE Scores and Top Graduate Programs (Swimmer, 2013)

| | Undergrad Major Average Verbal | Undergrad Major Average Quant | Verbal Cutoff of Top Program | Quant Cutoff of Top Program | #1 Graduate Program |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| English | 157 | 148 | 166 | 152 | Harvard/UC Berkeley |
| History | 156 | 148 | 165 | 152 | Yale/Princeton/UC Berkeley |
| Art History | 156 | 149 | 162 | 154 | Princeton |

4. ...especially Law and Med Schools

Mean LSAT & UGPA by college major for law school applicants in 2013



Derek T. Muller, an associate professor at Pepperdine University School of Law, set out on a mission similar to Razib Khan's, but concerning LSAT scores and GPA rather than GRE results (2013). Using data from the Law School Admission Council, he mapped the GPA and LSAT scores of students who self-identified majors in groups greater than 150. The most well-represented majors were Political Science, Criminal Justice, English, and Psychology, but Classics blew those average scores out of the water. It was just barely sufficiently represented — only 190 Classics majors took the test — but their average score and GPA were 159.8 and 3.477, the highest in both categories.

It is hard to say whether the study of Classics teaches testing skills or the types of people who choose this difficult major are better testers. Does the hard work pay off or are the people who do it just the kind of people who like hard work? It seems the latter argument is supported by this fact: students who major or double-major in Classics have a better success rate getting into medical school than do students who concentrate solely in biology, microbiology, and other branches of science. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (The Princeton Review, 2014). In other words, concentrating in a field that overlaps with pre-med requirements is the easy path, but those who add Classics on top have a better chance of getting into Med School. It seems like the people who go into Classics like rigor, ok, but is it the major that teaches them rigor? It's a chicken-or-egg problem.

This doesn't undermine the fact that Classics is inextricably linked to success in graduate program acceptance, and in graduate school itself. According to *Harvard Magazine*, Classics majors (and math majors) have the highest success rates of any majors in law school. Three of the most represented majors, political science, economics, and pre-law, lag fairly far behind (The Princeton Review, 2014). When it comes to navigating higher education, it seems like a Classics major is invaluable.

5. To Understand why People do what they do



Up to this point, I have focused the τέχνη discussion on graduate programs, but of course that's not a ubiquitous goal. In fact, it seems that students are increasingly wary of grad school. Forbes released a popular article in 2012 called "Why you shouldn't go to Grad school," the "100 reasons" blog released "100 reasons NOT to go to Graduate School" in October, and countless pamphlets and help sites that attack the question "Should I go to graduate school?" will tell you to wait and reflect before deciding (Rothman, 2013). For those of you as trepidatious as I am about jumping back into academia after graduation, know that the practical applications of a Classics major do not end when your education does.

If being able to understand people doesn't sound like a marketable skill, then allow me to welcome you to the technological revolution. eBay.com uses two data warehouses to manage 90 petabytes (1 PB = 1000 terabytes) of search records, consumer recommendations, and merchandising (Tay, 2013). Walmart handles more than 1 million customer transactions every hour, which is imported into databases that contain 2.5 PB, the equivalent of 167 times the information contained in the books in the Library of Congress (Data, data everywhere, 2010). The ability to amass information from billions of people is up to the engineers, but interpreting it is the job of humanitarians. Companies pay billions for the ability to observe trends and control buying habits. Studying human behavior is what humanitarians are trained to do.

The applications of understanding people are not relegated to the worlds of tech and retail. Lloyd Minor, dean of the Stanford School of Medicine, wrote an article in the school newspaper in response to the Stanford humanities enrollment drop. In it, he points out that recent advances in biomedical technology, from genomics to medical records, have presented a host of ethical dilemmas that scientists are far less equipped to handle than those of us who study the humanities, not to mention that the best doctors are those who understand their patients emotionally as well as medically (2014).

Stanford Classics professor Christopher Krebs recently published a book titled *A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich*. It explores how Tacitus' *Germania*, a book on the people and cultures of the Germanic tribes outside the Roman Empire, inspired Montesquieu, the Pope, and Nazi ideology. His book exemplifies the way that Classics is being redefined today. It's no longer just about the people 2,000 years ago, but also with everyone since then. Classics means engaging with material that humans have been reading for over 2,000 years. It means engaging with a book in the same language in which founding fathers and tyrants read it, then puzzling out what parts of the text inspired those readers. Classics is becoming the study of how millions of people throughout history respond to an idea, and predicting peoples' responses is a priceless skill in today's world. (Beard, 2013)

6. To meet the new criteria for tech jobs



The ideal resume is not what it used to be. Businesses, especially tech ones, are realizing that the ideal company is not necessarily composed of straight-A ivy league engineers. Consider the hiring styles of Google vs. Apple. Google, which was ranked the number one best company to work for in 2012 by *Fortune* magazine, has a senior staff from Ivy League and other prestigious institutions, Rhodes scholars, and the former Chief-of-staff for Larry Summers in DC (2012). No surprises there. Apple, which Omnicom group named the world's most valuable brand in 2013, has a senior staff of Phil Shiller, a biology major from Boston college, Tim Cook, who received a B.S. from Auburn and a M.B.A. from Duke, Scott Forstall, who joined the startup NeXT (acquired by Apple in 1996) right out of Stanford undergrad, and other curious hires (Elliot, 2013). Despite comparatively mediocre backgrounds, the accomplishments of Apple's staff has certainly matched that of Google's. In 2011, *Forbes* writer Eric Jackson asked Al Gore, who is both a member on Apple's board of directors and a senior advisor to Google, to reconcile this, and he replied cryptically that Apple's candidates get hired the same way they do at other companies: by proving themselves in their past jobs.

Jackson looked into how Apple's staffers could have 'proven themselves,' and found that every member had a background at the intersection of humanities and technology. Steve Jobs, who audited creative classes such as Calligraphy after he dropped out of Reed college, has proven, along with his colleagues, that a degree is no longer the definitive measure of potential. Starting with Silicon Valley, the business world is rethinking its hiring processes. Recently, my friend in the Notre Dame Classics department received an email sent to all 'arts and letters' students bemoaning their poor attendance at information sessions for technology and media firms in Silicon Valley. The email, sent by the dean of arts and letters, explains that Notre Dame is in the "unique position" of having a number of companies request resumes from liberal arts students who are "creative" and "adventurous." This email sounds similar to dozens that have passed through my inbox as well.

Dr. Minor, the Stanford Dean of Medicine from #5, describes what employers are looking for in better terms than "adventurous" or "creative." He writes, "We as physicians heal best when we listen to and communicate with our patients and seek to understand the challenges they face in their lives. The perspectives on illness, emotions and the human condition we gain from literature, religion and philosophy provide us with important contexts for fulfilling these roles and responsibilities" (2014). Classics students spend their college careers reading about and debating the human condition from its first records. We learn to be courteous to others in an argument, since the most satisfying solutions are only reached through communication. It is the years of collaborating and innovating on tough questions that these companies want. They've spent years hiring the best *doers*, but now they need *thinkers*, and the demand is far greater than the supply.

παιδεία

7. To Experience the “Matrix Moments”



The other day I asked a friend who recently earned his PhD in Classics from Princeton why he does Classics. He avoided the question for a few minutes, arguing that he was a “special case” and that his reason wouldn’t apply to the average Classicist. Finally he yielded: “Have you ever seen the Matrix?”

Jason related to me the scene where Neo finally “gets it” and is suddenly able to stop bullets, fight off an assassin with one arm, and manipulate the world around him. All this is possible because Neo understands the Matrix better than anyone else, and is able to view its very foundation, the binary code. I remembered that one of my professors told me a few weeks earlier that the more he learns about the Classical tradition, the more of it he can see in the daily newspaper. “Latin and Greek really is the binary code of western civilization,” Jason told me, “It is understanding at a really fundamental level.”

There’s no question that cutting through the Latin and Greek to get to these realizations is difficult, but the greatest rewards often hide behind the toughest challenges. The second century Roman satirist Lucian wrote a metaphor for education that captures this idea: students are hikers who start out in a group, proceeding easily, but when the hill gets steeper and more treacherous, many turn back “gasping for breath and dripping with sweat.” The few students who make it to the top of the hill enjoy the beautiful view of the world below them, and the common people who never even attempted the climb seem like tiny ants (Cribiore, 2005). Now think of an ant farm. It is simple to know the behavior of every ant in the farm from outside, but an impossible task for one of the ants. Education lends perspective on humanity so that trends can be observed and even manipulated. If the behavior of my father reveals something about me and the behavior of my grandfather *and* father yields more, then studying humanity since the start of recorded history should reveal the most about the present.

8. To Reflect on the Now

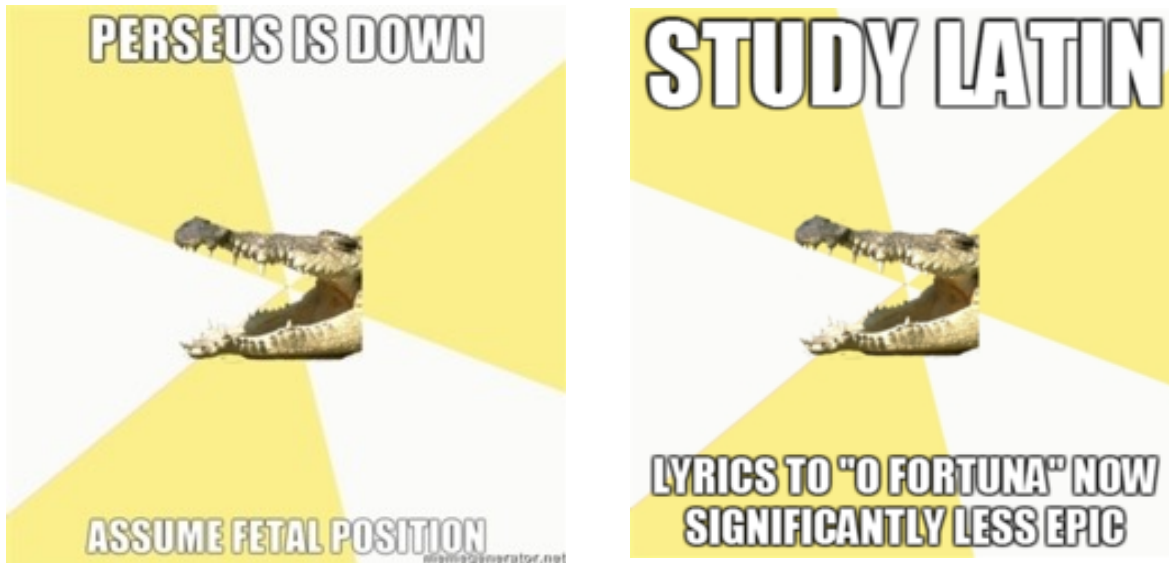


The importance of this next point is demonstrated by one of my favorite Disney characters, Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*. Her motto is “I never look back, darling, it distracts from the Now” yet when Mr. Incredible asks if he should acquire a cape, she provides a number of horrifying anecdotes off-the-cuff elucidating why capes are cumbersome and dangerous. Her behavior reveals two vital truths: the modern mindset is geared towards “moving forward,” but consulting history is a wise step when approaching the future.

In the same way that getting some distance from a problem helps you see it more clearly, Classics takes us outside familiar contexts and lends perspective. Catullus is one of the most popular ancient poets because of his boyish love, filthy mouth, and generally relatable themes. His material is often familiar in its boyish charm but it is occasionally surprising and can force us to question modern relationships. For example, in an ode to his girlfriend, he uses a dying sparrow to symbolize her waning libido, and says that the bird “had known its mistress as well as a girl knew her mother...” (2013). Is this some kind of Oedipal statement? How does the relationship of a mother and daughter relate to the daughter’s libido? Later in this book of poetry, he uses profane and domineering language against critics who have called his poetry girly. This brought me, at least, to question whether oppressive and sexist language is still alive in modern insults and profanity, and to reflect on whether I have been responsible.

Catullus and other writers allow us to juxtapose modern situations with ancient ones in order to understand the most timeless truths about human nature. It is incorrect to assume, because of the time difference, that society has been purged of the faults and habits which existed millennia ago. By putting ourselves in the shoes of those who exist on the other side of history, we are able to view contemporary features in a different and sometimes clearer light.

9. To be Part of a Tight-Knit Community



Before landing in Classics, I flirted with an engineering major, and even went so far as to declare biomechanical engineering. It took three weeks to work through the bureaucracy and to schedule appointments with busy secretaries to get it done — plus they had run out of t-shirts. I was hesitant to go through the process again to declare my Classics major, but it went much smoother. The same day that I announced my decision, the secretary gave me a key to the department, exclusive access to their library and facilities, and a personal tour through the offices of every professor that happened to be there. Perhaps this particular difference can be attributed to the sizes of the two departments, but the sort of transparency and camaraderie that the Classics secretary afforded me seems to permeate the field. At Stanford, the competition inherent in large and desirable majors like Mechanical Engineering and Biology give way to stressful and isolating environments. Whereas, in order to write this article, I was able to schedule consultations with three professors from my department, two Classics fellows in Rome, and twenty members of my abroad program in one week.

Such a strong network fosters confidence and innovation amongst its members, which has led Classicists to create new ways to interact with the world through their studies. Jason Pedicone, the Princeton PhD from #7, founded a non-profit study-abroad startup that provides high schoolers, college students, and teachers opportunities to immerse themselves in Classical languages and cultures and to connect with the international community. Such a project wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't found support from his teachers and friends at Princeton, some of whom are still on his staff.

Part of the reason I have never worried about my future is that the Classicists I know have been so successful at inventing their own. My advisor, a career professor, recently approached me for my opinion on a startup that would offer professional ancient translation consultation. Betsy and Tom Franco (James's mother and brother) recently published a children's book called *Metamorphosis, Junior Year* which follows a modern high schooler named Ovid through the myth-inspired tales of a year in high school. A resident professor at the American Academy in Rome set out to create a detailed graphic model of the Roman Forum last year, and is now consulting on an RPG video game. It is deviant and wonderful ideas like these by which I find myself constantly surrounded as a Classics major.

10. To Unlock the Mystery of its Longevity



It looks like Classics is dying. In recent years, fewer than 300 people in England and Wales have taken classical Greek as one of their A' levels. In November 2011 a petition was launched for UNESCO to declare Latin and Greek a specially protected 'intangible heritage of humanity'. The famous Classicist Mary Beard, in a lecture she gave at the New York Public Library in 2011, points out that hundreds of books have appeared over the last ten years or so which herald the death of Classics or offer some "rather belated life-saving procedures" (Beard, 2013). Along with these books come countless answers to why Classics is losing popularity, but few tend to ask the far more pertinent question: "how it has lasted so long?"

The study permeates history and some of its most important figures. C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Chris Martin (lead singer of Coldplay), W.E.B. duBois, Toni Morrison (recipient of 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature), and J.R.R. Tolkien all received degrees in Classics (Meadows, 2012). Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx (whose PhD was on classical philosophy), and 31 of the 40 presidents since Thomas Jefferson also knew Latin and Greek (Beard, 2013; Mount, 2007). In cinema, we've had *Pompeii* (2014), *Gladiator* (2000), *Spartacus* (1960) *Ben Hur* (1959), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), and more. Not to mention *Life of Brian* (1979), one of the most popular Monty Python movies in spite of (or partly because of?) a five minute scene in which a Centurion corrects a vandal's Latin grammar. The role that Classics plays in contemporary art is immeasurable, from the names of Harry Potter spells to Percy Jackson and the Olympians. Beard points out that even the "mini publishing industry" that has formed to bemoan the demise of the Classics proves the continued fascination with it.

Mary Beard ends her lecture by pointing out that the decline of Classics has been lamented before. She mentions Thomas Jefferson's 1782 lament that "The learning of Latin and Greek, I am told, is going into disuse in Europe." Since then, there have been multiple deaths and revivals. In 1905, 56% of American high school students studied Latin, then in 1977, only 6,000 students took the National Latin Exam, but in 2005, 134,873 students took it (Mount, 2007). There's no institution orchestrating this revival of Classics; there's been no educational reform seeing to its presence in classrooms. These are real high school students choosing to pursue Latin of their own volition. Perhaps we should stop asking why Classics is dying and go learn why it hasn't already.

11. To Enhance our other Studies



When people hear “Latin” or “Greek”, the phrase “dead language” comes to mind, but this wasn’t the case for Dante, Raphael, William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, T.S. Elliot, and many more who engaged in the Classical tradition (Beard, 2012). The study of Classics is not only a dialogue with Homer and Virgil, but also with everyone since then who was familiar with Homer and Virgil. I referred to this revival at the end of #5: Mary Beard has redefined Classics as “the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity and ourselves.” It is a holistic study of the liberal arts that is always changing alongside contemporary theories of culture, history, language, and gender and other forms of identity (Hitchcock, 2008).

Beyond the Stanford professor I mentioned in #5, the other writer who demonstrates this holistic view of Classics to me is Toni Morrison. A recent book by Tessa Roynon explores how Morrison uses Classical tradition to reflect on American History. For example, two of her books, *Tar Baby* and *Love*, use the myth of Lucretia and works by Ovid to show that the colonization of the ‘New World’ was more of a devastation than a metamorphosis. She challenges the ideals of ancient Athens and Plato’s *Republic* that were once common to pro-slavery rhetoric. In her story *Home*, Morrison creates a dialogue with Homeric epic and the ancient theme of *nostos* (homecoming) in regards to American war veterans (Freiert, 2014). I’m not saying that Morrison understands the civil war better than someone who doesn’t know Ovid, but that her study of the Classics has allowed her to frame and enhance her engagement with art, history, and English in new ways.

Whether you’re an engineer looking for a brief foray into the humanities or a Gender Studies and Philosophy double major, there is a holistic and unique perspective on history waiting for you in the Classical tradition.

12. And to Cultivate Originality



25 years ago, a Classics professor named Barbara Gold published an article in which she reflects on her transition from teaching at a “big, public state institution” to teaching at a “small, private, Jesuit institution” (Gold, 1989). She points out that students from the former seemed to be “stuck in the earliest stage of cognitive development”, when the mind can only discern between right and wrong. Her students did not bother to sort through possibilities, argue, accept differences, or sink themselves into intellectual exploration. What they were doing was fact acquisition, not learning.

She found that the students at the Jesuit college had the same skeletal, practical approach to higher education as the ones at the state University, but that the school’s general undergraduate requirements forced students to focus on a wider breadth of knowledge than what mattered for their future professions. The smaller college’s guidelines boasted “an education seeking to answer not only ‘what is’, but ‘what should be’ ”

My school sounds a lot like Gold’s old gig, where matters are reduced to quantitative terms and majors are populated in proportion to the size of the salaries they promise. Gold calls this the “Big Business approach” to learning. Students, like workers in an assembly line, do not engage with one another or even question why they are there. They are mindlessly operating under the notion that harder work means a better life. This system produces excellent employees, but leaders and free-thinkers are hard to come by. With the ‘real world’ always looming over undergraduates, it is uncomfortable to break from the mediocrity and conformity of a tried-and-true pre-professional track, but that is the path of the world’s greatest success stories.

There are literally hundreds of students in the Stanford Computer Science department who think that straight A’s will make them the next Mark Zuckerberg. If this is an attempt to reenact Zuckerberg’s approach, it is nothing like how he spent his young adult life. Every year, he gives a speech to the Introductory Computer Science class at Stanford in which he announces that he would have been a Classics major if he had stayed at Harvard. But his major is not the point. Mark achieved what he achieved because he did not subscribe to any model. Hearing him talk about founding Facebook, he sounds like he had no idea what he was doing.

There was no grand scheme to build a multi-national company, just a kid doing what he loved. It was the trust that his passion would pay off and the audacity to make it up as he went that earned him his fortune. He encapsulates the mantra of “what should be?” rather than “what is?”

Not by reimplementing existing ideas, but by creating our own, can we achieve success at the highest level. Classics is a field of ancient and fundamental ones that have sprouted off many other thoughts throughout history in the same way that Latin and Greek gave birth to the Indo-European languages, or that Socrates inspired Plato who inspired St. Augustine who inspired millions of Catholics to view their faith differently. It’s not that old ideas are better or more inspirational, but rather that the great number of interpretations we have for each one allows us to think through them thoroughly and tempts us to choose an opinion or invent our own. Being a Classics major means constantly debating and engaging with art, literature, and language in which there is often no right or wrong. Out of this between space comes originality.

Conclusion

Razib Khan, the author of the blog post mentioned in #1, admits, “I have no idea why people drawn to traditionally classical fields are bright,” but he has a good guess. Because they are not “sexy” fields, he posits, those who choose Classics have a strictly intellectual investment. This touches upon the major caveat for this article: however enticing the aforementioned payoffs of Classics may be, they are strictly *byproducts* of an independent interest in it. As Mary Beard wisely said, “there is only one good reason for learning Latin, and that is that you want to read what is written in it” (2013). If you’re considering Classics, do it for the puzzle of the language; do it for the thrill of teasing meaning from something arcane; do it because you can’t stop reading. Don’t focus on the tests or the jobs. If you love what you study, rather than what studying will bring you, your passion will become your profession.

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