

## Keeping Latin in the College Curriculum

Talk to teachers of Latin, c. 1968

Great progress has been made in reducing the death rate for polio and other physical ailments in the last few years. But the casualty figures for students of Latin is appalling. The most susceptible age for this Latinectomy is between high school and college. It is very important that we develop some kind of antitoxin for this fatal malady before Latin suffers the same fate as the elm tree in our nation. Perhaps you think that I am exaggerating the situation; but I assure you that I am not.

At my college Latin fulfills the foreign language graduation requirement on the same basis as any of the modern foreign languages. And a student can dispose of that particular graduation requirement in half the usual time if he picks up a language in which he has a two-year background in high school. The majority of students who come to my college with Latin from high school come with exactly that amount. But a very small percentage of the students who have had Latin and "no other" "foreign language" in high school continue it in college. The attitude of advisers seems to be that if a student has had Latin in high school, it has served one purpose -- it has given him a background for starting the study of a modern foreign language in college. It never seems to occur to them that it has also given him a background to continue the study of the classics on a more advanced level. Four years ago, out of 106 incoming freshmen who had had Latin and no other foreign language, only eight continued it in college.

As I see it, the high school and college share responsibility on this problem. The high school teacher should try to present a course which will arouse within students a curiosity to dig deeper into the subject of classical knowledge. Then the college department must be very careful not to kill this curiosity by submerging it in boredom.

Don't let anyone kid you that there is a neat formula by which you can suddenly bring back vitality to an expiring Latin Department. There have been no wonder-drug shots nor vitamin pills developed for this.

But to move from vague generalities into some specific recommendations. First, for high school teachers:

When you have a student who is both capable and interested, encourage him to go on. Plant the idea in his mind and give it a chance to grow. In many instances it will die, but in some it will take root. Remember the effectiveness of *Karthago delenda est*. Our college once had a professor whose department, while he was there, turned out more majors in his field who went on to get their Ph.D. than the same department in the Ivy League schools had. He simply kept saying to his students, "The A.B. is not enough."

Suggest that your students investigate colleges and universities that you know have good classics departments. High school students from many parts of Illinois, and a few even from other states, have come to my home to talk with me or have visited my classes, sometimes as early as their sophomore year in high school.

When your good students (or just ordinary students, for that matter) have chosen a college, let the Classics Department of that college know so that between your pushing and the college department's pulling the student might be seduced into continuing his classical studies.

Perhaps the greatest single cause of Latin drop-outs is the student's lack of confidence, based mostly on the fact that he had Latin during his freshman and sophomore years in high school and has now been away from it for two years. He is sure that he has forgotten what little he thought he knew, and he is convinced that everybody else is alert and ready to dash forward while he would be just trying to get his bearings.

My solution to this is to have a quick refresher course available, reviewing in one ten-week term the work of the first two years of high school. Of twenty-one students in my Vergil class last year, sixteen had taken the refresher course first.

To be sure, the ideal is for the high school to have given the student a good four-year course before he comes to college. Then he arrives with his contacts with Latin fresh, and his curiosity whetted. He has served his apprenticeship in reading Cicero and Vergil, and he can now look at a "page" instead of a "sentence" of Latin without shuddering. He is ready to study more extensively and intensively such topics as the drama, lyric poetry, and satire.

Then it is "our" duty in college to keep his zest alive, to see to it that he does not get the impression that he is doing just what he did in high school except that he is being given it in a little bigger doses. And yet we must avoid plunging him into graduate level technicalities, which he is not yet ready for. I honestly believe that the intermediate level of a language requires the most delicate handling of all for success. On the elementary level the student simply has a lot of basic material to learn, so he learns; on the advanced level he can "fly solo" to a great extent. But that vast area in between, where he is too far advanced to be treated as a beginner and not far enough advanced to be allowed to experiment on his own -- "this" is where only a wise teacher can prevent students from dropping by the wayside, one by one. For survival, Latin has to face all the problems of any other non-science department in our technological world, with a few special ones reserved just for it. However, we have one great comfort. The prejudice against Latin seems to come from only two groups of people -- adults and youngsters!

Adult prejudice usually boils down to two points:

1. Many people (including the person speaking, of course) have not had Latin and are doing O.K., so what good is it? Rarely does the adult who "has" had a decent course in Latin call it useless. But every year fewer adults have a background in Latin.
2. Many people also ask what it "prepares" one for --except, of course, to teach Latin (always said with smirk).

I really don't know what we can do to combat adult prejudice. It is a little bit late to put in night courses in Latin and Greek to combat adult ignorance. Perhaps our best bet is to leave the convincing of the adults up to the youngsters, after we have convinced "them".

As for the objections put forward by the young people themselves, perhaps the most frequently voiced sneer is that, after all, Latin is a "dead" language. Only a square or a fink or an egghead would be interested in anything inert. After all, "Come alive -- you're in the Pepsi generation." Remember?

Then too it has the reputation of "hard." Only bookworms can get it. We actually encourage this idea by saying that not everyone should take Latin. True, but more people should take it than do. Worrying at this point about who should "not" take Latin seems to me

like my college worrying about where to cut off enrollment while we are still not getting enough students. Granted that the wrong people taking Latin can do the subject more harm than good, but that is a calculated risk we have to take. And just what students "should" take Latin? Well, those who plan to go into medicine, law, or the ministry, certainly; and those who plan to take the Graduate Record Examination in such subjects as English or business, where vocabulary is stressed: in short, those who will be going into anything where a discriminating knowledge of word meanings will be of value. In other words, only those students who are really qualified to attend college should take classics courses in college.

The way to win youngsters, I believe, is to make Latin a subject they enjoy. I personally do not believe that the way to do this is to ape the modern languages with all the gadgets to play with in the language labs. Since our aims are not the same as those of a spoken language, the language lab items have a real but limited use for us, and we should let them be our servants rather than our masters. Some of my best friends disagree with me on the amount of emphasis that should be put on "spoken: Latin, among them Margaret Forbes of the *Classical Journal*, and Dr. Alexander Lenard, who wrote *Winnie Ille Pu*. He finds it a bit fantastic that students read Cicero's philosophical essays in Latin when they don't know how to say such basic things as "I want a drink of water" in the language.

Another strong belief of mine is that being "easy" is not the way to get or to hold students. Young people like a challenge, and boredom is much more destructive than toughness. I think that if each one of us starts out with a genuine enthusiasm for our subject, avoids the monotony of the same old class pattern every day, and treats the student like a fairly mature, normally intelligent being (neither a genius nor a moron), we have the foundation for a beautiful student-teacher relationship -- the real basis of all good teaching. Also, if we maintain our interest in the student's other activities besides his Latin, he will respect us as persons and not just as Latin teachers.

Really, the only way that I have found to develop a course is through the slow process of chain reaction. I can talk to students by the hour, using an excellent vocabulary and impeccable logic, about the great value of studying the classics. They listen more or less politely but they are not convinced. They say, "yes, we know" and then they go away and register for Spanish. But I start out with a class of six in Martial, and we have fun reading the epigrams. Later I find out that they have been translating some of them to their non-classical roommates. My next Latin class has nine in it. The news spreads that "Latin is not so bad." We get a list of incoming students whose only contact with foreign language has been through Latin; and my current students write to them, encouraging them to continue this contact in college. Note that these letters are written by "students", not by me because students believe other students. After all, they are looking at the world from the same point of view. And in this way, slowly -- oh, so slowly -- the Classics Department develops into an entity, not just a couple of subjects taught on the side by members of the English Department. And the enthusiasm I feel has become contagious. Students have caught it, and other students (sometimes unwillingly and to their own surprise) become infected. As one pre-med student said to me when he registered for a course "beyond" his language requirement: "I guess I'm hooked."

The Classics Department will never be the largest department in Monmouth College, but it is one of the most enthusiastic, and it now has the complete respect of the student body and the teaching staff. And now my problem is that of the woman who has "caught" her

man. I must not "let down," but must continue to be interesting. It is harder to keep admiring glances than to get them in the first place. I must, at all costs, avoid becoming "old hat."

After all, the qualities necessary to be a good Latin teacher are not numerous. All you need is: a knowledge of and love for and faith in both your subject and your students, plus an indestructible optimism and a deeply rooted sense of humor.