

Talk to Monmouth Associates, 1980  
The NEH Challenge Grant for a Chair of Classics

The last time I spoke to you, I entertained you. But being an entertainer is not really my vocation. This time I want to be dead serious -- with no pictures. And I wrote out what I wanted to say for two reasons: so that I would not talk too long (which will please you), and so that I would not overlook something that I very much wanted to say (which will please me).

You are all interested in the welfare of Monmouth College or you would not be here. But I suspect that many of you are not completely convinced that a Department of Classical Languages is all that important in a college like Monmouth. This department has often been referred to, even by some past administrators of the college, as a "luxury" department -- something nice to have around, but only if you have the time and money to spend on "extras" beyond the important things to learn.

It is true that "anything" beyond the bare necessities for survival (i.e. food, drink, and shelter) is a luxury. Your secretary and her typewriter, your telephone and the desk it sits on, your computer are all luxuries. A college education itself is a luxury. In fact, all the things that make a difference between merely existing and really living are luxuries. We simply have to decide which luxuries are important.

I am convinced that what a Classics Department has to offer is essential in this luxury called education, especially in a liberal arts education. The function of a liberal arts college is not primarily to train a person for a given profession or job. It is to develop all of a student's capacities so that he acquires at least a slight understanding of as many phases of life as possible. He can specialize in his field later on; but here he becomes a "well rounded person" (to use an old-fashioned phrase) who, with some further specialized training, can fit into any profession he chooses, and whose whole life is made richer -- not just on his job, but also in his home, in his social contacts, and in his recreations. In college he has acquired just a bit of wisdom, not just knowledge. At least that is our aim for him.

In our very practical times, the idea of a liberal education has been de-emphasized, and children start thinking in terms of specializing as early as high school. This is sad, because it is a liberal education that makes an individual a cosmopolitan person, not just one who knows business, or medicine, or law.

But does the study of Classics have any unique role to play in this kind of education? If so, what is it?

Well, for one thing, no other area of education gives a student wider contact with the knowledge that enhances his appreciation of the world around him -- in art, in music, in literature, in law, even in the sciences. Doctors still take the Hippocratic oath, or, as one of my students called it, the Hippocratic oath.

Also, nowhere else can a person lay such a solid foundation for effective communication as in the study of Greek and Latin. He can find no better examples of organized coherent expression than in the Greek and Latin writers. Some knowledge of these languages also increases his English vocabulary tremendously, since two thirds of the words in English come from Latin or Greek -- not the words like "dog" and "goat," but the words like "humane" and "democracy" -- the words that separate a civilized man from a primitive man. Nobody will know every word in the English language. But the student who has studied the Greek and Latin roots of these words will know hundreds (perhaps thousands) more English words than his

equally bright peer who has not had this contact. Sometimes one Latin word is the base for as many as 150 English words.

Then too, in a world where for any international communication a knowledge of a number of languages is advantageous, a person who has studied Latin can learn such languages as French, Spanish, or Italian very quickly because they are all the children of Latin.

Also, from studying this area, one gains knowledge of the civilizations which are the foundation of our own civilization; and he has the opportunity of making a careful reading of some of the acknowledged great works of world literature and philosophy. These things are priceless for the truly educated man. The Greeks had the first democracy and the first Olympic games; the Romans codified laws into a form which became the foundation of our modern legal system. The Greek Demosthenes and the Roman Cicero are recognized as the two greatest orators that the world has ever produced. Many ancient writers, such as Plato and Cicero, have written thoughtful discussions of some of the most complex questions that we ourselves have to face and try to solve today -- how to cope with the problem of growing old, what life and death are all about anyhow. I could go on indefinitely on what these people have to say to us today, but I won't. If you would like to check this out a little bit, you can read a little book, called *Paraphrases from the Latin Poets*, which Dr. Garrett Thiessen and I had printed some years ago.

I just want to say that it is important for this area of learning to be kept available to our students in spite of financial and ideological pressures to discard it. Many high schools and colleges did discard the study of Latin and Greek from their curricula during the late sixties and early seventies. But recently parents and students have begun feeling that they are missing something worthwhile, so they are now trying to reinstate this study. These schools include Knox College. But Monmouth college had the foresight to maintain its Classics Department throughout those dark years. We have always had and now have a strong Department of Classical Languages, a statement that can be made by very few small colleges today. We want to ensure the permanence and national prestige that the department has now.

This challenge grant from the NEH will make possible the continuance of the department at the same good quality it has maintained in the past, or with some improvement, for even a good thing can be improved. The challenge is not easy. \$450,000.00 is a lot of money to raise for this purpose. Many people and companies are not really conscious of what a valuable contribution this study offers to students. Therefore, I am asking you to recognize its importance and to help convince other people of it. If we do this, we can ensure that the college will never lose one of its strongest assets.

I would like to answer two questions that might have occurred to you as I was talking:

1. I said that study in this department increases a student's understanding of almost any area that he is interested in. Let me give a bit of evidence.

- a. in art - he knows not only the beauties of Greek vases and the Parthenon, but he has a better insight into such modern artists Picasso.
- b. in music - at least twenty-seven operas are based on the one story of Aeneas and Dido. The opera playing at the Met right now is

*Elektra.*

- c. in law and the sciences - the vocabulary is almost purely Greek and Latin, and the international language of science is still Latin.
- d. in literature - there are innumerable references to mythology in writers from Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot. One recent version of the Medea story relates that whole story to women's lib.

2. Is there any reason for a person to actually study Greek and Latin? Can't he find these works in translation in the library? Yes, but a translation often loses the idea. Here are two examples:

- a. Cicero said that the ancients respected old men so much that they named their highest governing body the senate. This means nothing if you don't know that the Latin word for old man is *senex*.
- b. From the Bible comes Christ's statement: "Thy name is Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my church." This means nothing to the person who does not know that in Greek the word Peter means rock. I think that a clearer translation would have been: "Thy name is Rocky..."

Now I have come to the punch line. With all these facts and this evidence, you can hardly fail to acknowledge that the Classics Department offers a student a priceless contribution to his development, and that it fills a greater variety of needs than almost any other single area in the curriculum. Now, if you believe this, you will do everything in your power to help us attain this goal of meeting the NEH challenge.