

Departmental Inquiry Project Grant Report  
Fall-Spring 2021-22  
Classics

Participants: Kate Shea, Michelle Jenkins, Anna Conser

### **Outcomes**

What was the outcome of your project and how did it align with your original goals as stated in your application?

As outlined in our proposal, the original goals of our project were oriented towards strengthening the vibrancy and viability of the Classics major following the retirements of Prof. Burgess and Prof. Vandiver. We set out to assess our current program and resources and identify ways to strengthen our core focus on philology, Greek and Latin language, literature, and art, to strengthen our current interdisciplinary approaches and identify new areas of emphasis and outreach, to improve accessibility, to diversify our curriculum, and to identify and implement antiracist practices. We achieved all of these goals as well as several more accomplishments.

Of particular value were our discussions around the review of the Classics program. We conducted a comparative analysis of majors, course offerings, and DEI efforts at colleges and universities across the US. We selected three groups of comparative colleges based on (1) their similarity to Whitman (including our Panel of 14), on (2) a recent SCS survey of the 4-year colleges whose Classics programs have experienced growth, and on (3) colleges and university Classics programs that have taken a leading role in DEI efforts. Prof. Shea also attended meetings and reached out to other programs and reported back to the group. In response to our findings, we revised our major description and outlined a revision of the structure of the majors in the program, both to better communicate the differences between the majors and to remove the sense of hierarchical preference between them. We also sketched out the introductions of new majors in specialized aspects of the study of Classics that could incorporate more rigorously other disciplinary approaches outside of the current Classics major model.

We gave considerable thought to how the study of Classics is integrated within the student's wider experience and goals at Whitman and created a four-year major map to help guide students in their coursework, research presentations, off-campus studies, mentoring, internships, and community/public outreach.

Another fruitful area of exploration was regarding opportunities for outreach and community engagement. In addition to the Latin4Kids middle school language outreach program that was very successful prior to Covid, we discussed how peer-mentoring could be employed within our language courses that will connect our elementary, intermediate, advanced students that could improve skills and improve retention. There is very little structural incentive at Whitman to continue language study, outside the declaration of a language major. Rather, we find that even the most eager students encounter many barriers at Whitman that deter them from continued language study. We developed a plan to integrate mentoring opportunities that will encourage

connection between the levels, increasing opportunity for language exposure, for review of morphological and grammatical concepts, and for the creation of a language community.

We also explored ways to better connect our courses to the local community. We looked for ways to build upon the efforts we are undertaking this year to reach the larger Whitman community beyond Classics, and the larger NW community within the discipline. This year we explored a rethinking of the senior capstone course by pairing it with a new lecture series, Transforming Classics, led by Prof. Shea, that brings leading and rising voices to Whitman to discuss ways in which they are transforming the study of Classics in ways that are inclusive and committed to social justice. This year, under the lead of Prof. Conser, we are also organizing and hosting a performance and symposium on Euripides' *Medea*, in coordination with our Advanced Greek and Advanced Latin classes, which are reading Euripides' and Seneca's *Medea*, respectively. This collaborative project is bringing together students and faculty of NW Classics programs (including Gonzaga, UW, UPS, and Reed) and the Walla Walla Immigrant Rights Coalition to produce an original musical performance of Euripides' *Medea* and a symposium that will highlight the plays depictions of race, ethnicity, immigration and gender. In addition to these ambitious projects, our group discussed ways we could continue these types of efforts in future years. We identified rethinking aspects of the Classical Myth course to integrate a unit on Umatilla story culture. This unit could include a trip to the museum at the Tamástslíkt cultural institute or work with the archives in the preservation efforts of oral story culture. We also discussed the addition of a course that collaborates with incarcerated students and scholars in the Washington State Penitentiary. There have been considerable efforts made in the discipline of Classics to design a meaningful Classics curriculum for students in incarnation contexts. Prof. Shea also attended two panels on this topic.

### **Service to Students**

What sense do you have at this point that your project has enhanced student learning and what will you be looking at in the future to know whether the project was successful?

We are very excited about all of these new directions. The revision and introduction of our majors will not only help communicate the major, but will also encourage better integration with curricula across the campus. We anticipate that the new peer-mentoring program will help greatly with retention and improved language skills. Many of our students are already working as peer-mentors and peer-tutors and are finding considerable gains. We are already seeing the value of our community outreach efforts. The Transforming Classics series was very well-attended by students within and outside the major and encouraged really valuable conversations in the post-lecture discussions between the students and the guest speakers. The *Medea* Symposium has considerable student participation and promises to be a fantastic event for the entire community. We anticipate our future projects to similarly enhance student learning and student engagement.

## **Limitations**

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

The primary limitation of this project is the lack of permanent faculty in the Classics department. We made good progress in how we can better design the major and communicate its value, and that will certainly shape how we move forward with the program. However, real innovation requires long-term faculty. Next year the Classics department will be staffed primarily by two not-yet-hired one-year VAPs while Prof. Shea is on sabbatical. We are therefore waiting on any changes to the catalog until permanent staffing is secured for the program and we have a better sense of the scholar-teacher who will occupy the only position fully devoted to the Classics department. The new mentoring and outreach programs will largely be performed by this as of now not yet hired new faculty colleague. Likewise, final decisions about which of the new majors we eventually introduce will depend upon the new hire's areas of expertise. These limitations are best addressed by hiring a new tenure-line faculty member using the ample restricted funds that have already been given to the college for that purpose and are sufficient for a second tenure-line position in Classics.

## **Sharing Results**

How do you envision sharing the results of your work with other colleagues at Whitman (or elsewhere)?

Our primary means will be by introducing catalog changes once the new hire is made. In the meantime, we will publish the new program description and the major map on our Classics webpage. The major map will also be distributed to pre-major advisors to help guide students during registration. Once a new hire is made and we are ready to move forward with introducing the redesigned majors, we would like to hold an informational meeting with faculty whose areas of expertise align with the new majors to discuss how their courses may contribute to the structure of the major.

## **Brief Faculty Reflections**

### **Kate Shea**

I drafted the report above so I will just add that I have found it really helpful both to discuss the issues surrounding the Classics major with my colleagues and to get to know better how Classics programs across the country are responding to the major issues and crises we currently face.

### **Michelle Jenkins**

I've had a long-standing relationship with the Classics department, but as a member from an outside department, I had not really spent much time considering the structure of the major, the

ways in which a Classics department could be structured and the larger goals of a Classics program. Spending time over the semester looking at other programs and having sustained conversations about the program here has given me much better insight into our program, both where it currently stands and what it can become, if it is given adequate staffing. This insight will help me better plan my own teaching schedule (insofar as I have a better idea of how my teaching can complement the current curriculum in the program) and will help me as I advise students interested in studying more of the Ancient Mediterranean.

**Anna Conser**

As a VAP in Classics, participating in these discussions was an extremely valuable opportunity for me to learn about the structuring of academic programs both at Whitman and at departments around the country. In my opinion, it became clear that Whitman's Classics Department has the potential to become a leader in the field – the Transforming Classics lecture series, which was attended far beyond our college, is a clear example of that potential for leadership. Developing a strong program will, however, require consistent staffing. In my one year, I have been able to take many steps to implement the ideas we discussed, but my initiatives and interdepartmental connections will leave with me at the end of this year.