

## **Classics as Cost Center?**

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When I sat down to formulate my ideas on the future of Classics, as luck would have it, the political pundits were littering the national discourse with an old catch phrase that has obviously gained new popularity these days: “It’s the economy, stupid!” As we debate the fate of national economies here and abroad, this rallying cry has found a new audience as another financially bleak election season begins. Classics (in fact, the international education system as a whole and especially its universities) has not been immune to the effects of this downturn,<sup>1</sup> but the penny-pinching and budget-tightening started long before the current financial problems surfaced. Universities the world over have been dealing with trying financial times (real and imagined) by optimizing their management structures and aligning all their varying divisions more closely with their corporate goals. These changes have resulted in mission statements and assessment strategies, but, also, cost and profit centers. Normally, no self-respecting classicist would be caught dead reading a paper that had “cost center” in the title – the phrase smacks of the fabled boredom of the insurance seminar. Unfortunately, the times, they are a-changing – many of us have already been visited by our deans and/or chairs with just such terms prominently featured in their PowerPoint slides. It has happened at my university – luckily, I was hard at work at the Center for Hellenic Studies when the Dean showed up at my department this semester. Being a good corporate citizen, I decided to try to understand this system (even while on leave!) and these investigations, in turn, have led me to ponder the significance of such restructuring to the future of Classics and, indeed, the whole of the humanities.

What exactly is a cost center? According to my source for all financial information, Wikipedia, a cost center is a unit that “adds to the cost of an organization, but only indirectly adds to its profit.”<sup>2</sup> But it can be construed in another way, as it is at my university, as a discrete unit within a business that is responsible for its own budget – it pays out what it owes and keeps what it earns. The key, within either model, is that the unit has a manager who is directly responsible for the budget of that center, and each center is in direct competition for resources with other such centers. This market is regulated, at least at my university, to protect underperforming centers, provided they further the mission of the University – it can also be regulated, say, to pay more per credit hour to science classes than to an equivalent level Classics course. This model is moralistically termed Responsibility Center Management, or RCM, for those in the know, and this is the road most large, public universities are traveling as the fetishization of accountability in the crudest of quantitative terms sweeps throughout this country and the halls of the Academy.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, my fairly negative rhetoric suggests that I think this is a woeful misstep that could have ill effect on the future of the Classics. I'm not sure that I believe that. But I'm also not sure that I don't. When one looks at the raw numbers, it seems that Classics will be fine, and could even excel within such a paradigm, provided we keep offering large, popular lecture courses (profit) to offset the small, under-enrolled language courses (cost). Hopefully, within this framework, our programs can survive without becoming intolerably watered down. After all, we tend to be far ahead of our colleagues in the foreign languages in terms of culture courses, and even if we can't hope to rival them (especially Spanish) in language course enrollments, the numbers of students studying Greek and Latin are not discouraging on the national level.<sup>4</sup>

The potential problem as I see it is two-fold.<sup>5</sup> First, the blatantly market-based approach offers little reassurance that smaller programs will remain aligned with the mission of a university. For instance, at my university, the higher value assigned to a science class is disconcerting not so much because it is unfair, as because it shows how the mission of the university is subject to the pressures of the times, e.g., the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) initiative and other similar federal and state pushes to encourage the study of (literally) profitable subjects. What I fear is that in this climate of Tea Party-style rugged individualism, which equates the free movement of capital with a certain conception of the freedom of democracy, and disregards people and institutions that "cost," it might not be so prudent to integrate further the academy, especially public universities, into such a brazenly market-based system. We run the risk of endorsing the primacy of the Market as a legitimate means of assessing academic success or failure. Moreover, as a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* suggests, what the market sees as profitable at present may not be so conceived in the near future; thus, there is a greater probability that education will be determined by ephemeral and marketable trends rather than the costly and "useless" curricula that have formed the backbone of the American university since its inception.<sup>6</sup> The Market sees perfecting technical communication as a profit, but the reading of Homer (or Orwell) as a cost. If left unregulated (or poorly regulated), the university will sever the connection between the two pursuits.<sup>7</sup> How can classicists be sure that the study of ancient Latin and Greek will stay in the black within such a system, especially as faculty lose more and more managerial say, and the managers become less and less akin to faculty in their career trajectories and day-to-day responsibilities? To say the least, this marriage to the Market should give those of us in the humanities pause and lead us to be vigilant of the regulatory commissions at our universities.

Secondly, I fear that such an overt endorsement of the current, dominant Western ideology, a further alignment with the inexorable advance of consumer capitalism, can only be problematic, even if Classics can remain in the black. And here is where the immediate problem arises – the more like McDonald's the Academy becomes, the more we seek to maximize profits and minimize costs, the more we have to compromise on quality, then the cheaper and faster we have to sling our Sophocles and Cicero, the more time we have to spend on brand management and customer relations. In a recent piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Brian Hall did his rendition of what has become a cliché rant, detailing his experiences with students who approach

the college classroom as if it were a drive-thru window.<sup>8</sup> If Classics – really, any humanities program – is to survive under such conditions, we’ll have to convince the customers that what they want is not the intellectual equivalent of a big, greasy cheeseburger and fries, but a giant bowl of broccoli over quinoa. And that will take some serious customer relations, which, of course, is the classic example of a cost center in the literal sense, that is, the division within a business that is nothing but cost and only indirectly, but essentially, contributes to profit.

Now, we don’t have to like it, but, we do have to live with it – and, for the record, I think we will. As Settis has recently argued in his *The Future of the ‘Classical’*, it is precisely Classics’ propensity to renewal that has characterized the discipline (and should continue to do so). From the discipline’s origins as the study of Greece and Rome, three interrelated concepts lay at its center: continuity and transformation as well as the hybridity that interaction between the two entails.<sup>9</sup> The study of Classics requires a recursive interpretive bridge, one between Ancient and Modern, but also one between Self and Other. The intellectual curiosity fostered by the impulse to compare, to bridge “us” and “them,” is a real strength of the study of classical antiquity; but, especially as focus shifts toward the literally profitable, we must be ever more careful to ensure a real engagement with ancient civilization grounds our comparative efforts.

Unfortunately, the adaptive hybridity Settis sees as a property of Classics, and as a central feature of Classics’ contribution to Western culture more generally, is already at risk in the current intellectual environment. The connections that once bound the West into an intellectual whole have been trumped by the connectivity monster that is the modern web. No longer are major works of literature, philosophy and history read as a means of fostering intellectual connectivity; according to Sloterdijk, the demise of these “thick letters to friends” has destabilized the multi-temporal and -spatial dialogue that it is the duty of the humanities to foster.<sup>10</sup> Instead of engendering a true multi-cultural dialogue, we scholars of the humanities have been reduced to caretakers of our archives, a format much better suited to the functionality of the Internet. If Classics and the humanities in general are to be more useful than as subject matter for effete pub quizzes, we must be more than archivists; we have to keep our thick letters in the minds of our students, and we have to foster the dialogue in ways that both honor its complexity and show how it contributes to the conversations of the moment within the Academy and society at large.

Actively resisting our own reduction to archivists by sending our students into the stacks seems to me that the only way to fight the false equation (engendered by consumer capitalist mentality as well as ease of access) between information and knowledge (information is, in fact, superabundant and easily obtained online; knowledge is not). In the current academic environment, we have to destabilize the consumer capitalist mentality and show that the trove of information that every student has in the palm of his/her hand is not knowledge. I am hopeful we can temper the current changes with some of our stubborn dedication to time-honored ideas and practices. But we have to be careful not to give in totally to market demands. If we abandon the costly, difficult, long-standing aspects of the study of Greco-Roman civilization in favor of the profitable, easy, and novel, Classics is liable to become merely a dressing for the emerging “real”

goals of a college education, an increase in student profitability. So, Classics (indeed, all of the humanities) needs to ensure we provide our students with a balanced diet, one consisting of intensive, serious critical engagement with ancient culture and a systematic analysis of the relationship between then and now, us and them.

## Notes

1. See Papazarkadas for remarks on Greece, and Graziosi on Britain and Italy, both in this volume.
2. *Wikipedia*, s. v. “Cost centre (business),” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cost\\_center\\_%28business%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cost_center_%28business%29).
3. Many of the nation’s finest public universities have adopted this system, e.g., Indiana, Ohio State and Minnesota. Private universities have adopted the model as well, e.g., Harvard.
4. According to the most recent MLA language enrollment survey (Nelly Furman, David Goldberg, and Natalia Lusin, *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2006* (Modern Language Association, 2007), [http://www.mla.org/pdf/06enrollmentsurvey\\_final.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/06enrollmentsurvey_final.pdf)), ancient Greek and Latin enrollments are up 12.1% and 7.9% since 2002, respectively. But, see Gephardt’s discussion in this volume for a possible indication of lower enrollments in the future.
5. There is a third problem associated with the model, namely, the fact that RCM and other such de-centralized management structures offer little incentive for broad institutional collaboration (e.g., between colleges and other larger divisions within a university). I don’t discuss this issue here because it is operative on a larger level than that which is of immediate concern here.
6. Russell A. Berman, “Foreign Language or Foreign Policy?” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/11/23/berman>.
7. In a related vein, Texas’ public universities are currently embroiled in a debate with Gov. Rick Perry, over his new accountability program, the “Seven Breakthrough Solutions,” which basically assess faculty performance according to raw enrollment numbers and research dollars in an effort to quantify the most profitable educators. Texas A&M used this system to formulate and publish a ranking of its faculty, printing, in order of profitability, the names of those who make money in black and the names of those who cost in red. This gross accounting seems nearly farcical, nonetheless, it has spawned a huge debate in Texas and is suggestive of the extent to which market forces can enter the management of the university. For an overview of the issues, see Paul Burka, “The Old College Try,” *Texas Monthly*, April 2011, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/2011-04-01/btl.php#>.

8. Brian P. Hall, "Educating our 'Customers.'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 30, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/126916/>.
9. Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the 'Classical'*, trans. Allen Cameron (Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), *passim*, esp. 109–11.
10. Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*," trans. Mary Varney Rorty, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27.1 (2009): 12–28.