

Student Address at 2017 Sarah and James Bowdoin Day Ceremony  
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Do you have a time machine?

I've lost count of the number of times that I have heard this retort upon telling my peers that, aside from merely studying the Latin language, I speak it. Having honed their French during a semester in Bordeaux or their German while in Frankfurt, they wonder how, short of time travel, anyone could actually speak Latin.

Although it is true that no nation, not even Vatican City, boasts of Latin as its mother tongue, classicists need not warp the space-time continuum to converse with one another in the language of the Ancients. In the past three decades, the classical community has witnessed a resurgence of interest in oral and conversational Latin. Now showing signs of life, Latin has been dubbed a "zombie language:" not vibrantly alive, yet not entirely dead. From California to West Virginia to Rome, classicists are waving "salve" to this renewal. And to this list we may now add Brunswick, Maine, where, on Wednesday evenings, a small but enthusiastic group of students gathers in the basement of Sills Hall with no purpose other than to chat in the language of Ancient Rome.

Whereas instruction in the modern languages aims for students to achieve complete linguistic fluency—and thus gain both the myriad cognitive and cultural benefits that accompany bilingualism—instruction in the classical languages has focused more narrowly on achieving reading competency, thereby granting students access to the rich corpus of ancient literature and thought. This is a worthy goal unto itself, but there is an important element missing. If you poked your head into an average Spanish classrooms, you might see students reading, chatting, and discussing texts all in the target language. Look into a Latin classroom and you are more likely to see a room full of students collectively reciting verb paradigms or those same students, necks craned over the text of one of Cicero's orations, debating, in English, how best to translate his words into our own. Spoken Latin pedagogy fosters classrooms like the former by encouraging students to engage with language not primarily as a puzzle to be decoded but as a living organism to be nurtured, an organism animated by human beings as they attempt to understand one another, to work for common ends, and to navigate the complex matrices of our world.

This coming winter, the same group that gathers on Wednesday evenings will join the students of Harriet Beecher Stowe Elementary School, teaching these students the fundamentals of the Latin language, exposing them to the world of Ancient Rome, and introducing them, more broadly, to humanistic study. Bowdoin's site will become one in a nation-wide network of

programs overseen by the Paideia Institute for Humanistic Study, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that promotes the study and appreciation of classical languages, and has become a leader in the spoken Latin renaissance.

Known as Aequora, the program's ambitions reach beyond the training of the next generation of classics scholars. As a slew of recent research suggests, students with even a basic knowledge of Latin achieve greater gains in reading and vocabulary skills when compared with their non-Latinate peers. Yet while a venerable literacy crisis continues to beset our nation, classical language programs remain the first casualties of budgetary cuts at primary and secondary school across the United States.

Aequora, which translates as "even surface" in English, pursues just that: a more equitable society through higher literacy rates. Its curriculum focuses specifically on those elements of the Latin language that will do the most to bolster students' English and Spanish literacy skills, such as derivative grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, Aequora makes classics, a subject erroneously believed to be the study of dead white men by soon-to-be-dead white men, available and attractive to students of every strata of our society.

Aequora is an effort to inspire, and I chose that verb deliberately. Etymologically, "to inspire" carries the sense of "to breath into." Language, at its most simple, consists of nothing more breath—the modulation of air into prescribed phonetic units. Yet when properly combined, these bits of breath transform the way that humankind relates both to itself and to the world that it inhabits. Just what sort of semantic alchemy drives this transformation remains one of the most enduring, and most fascinating, mysteries of our species.

The task of inspiring the Latin language draws from the most powerful and most fundamental impulses of the liberal arts, those which animate the best of academic inquiry and, when applied diligently to one's own life, undergird the life of the mind in any meaningful sense. By lifting words off the page and placing them in the mouths of arguing, weeping, laughing human beings, this effort acknowledges that the work of a scholar is as much about her interaction with her peers as it is about her interaction with her publication. By resisting the impulse to "murder to dissect," it realizes the potential of classical studies—of any area of study—to become a vibrant source of creative and moral imagination for its students, not simply a compulsory academic exercise. By temporarily reducing each of its practitioners to infants—literally *infans*, or those without speech—it plunges students into a realm of genuinely intellectual poverty, a uniquely humbling academic experience. By granting us access to a conversation that transcends the boundaries of both time and space, it illuminates our present by letting us peer into the past. And lastly, by spreading scholastic knowledge for the material, intellectual, and ethical improvement of its practitioners, regardless of their institutional standing or demography, it truly accomplishes

Bowdoin's cherished mission of serving the common good. Community, inspiration, humility, perspective, care: though we do not expect to find these values inscribed on Bowdoin students' diplomas or on their transcripts, we do hope to find them inscribed on their consciences. Far from a zombie language, Latin is a Lazarus language, proving humankind's inexhaustible ability to inspire others and to be inspired by itself.

I will close, as seems only appropriate, with a Latin adage from the 12th century theologian Hugh of Saint Vincent, which seems to capture the spirit of today's celebration and the work we aspire to do as students of the liberal arts. "*Omnia disce. Videbis postea nihil esse superfluum. Coartata scientia iucunda non est.*" Learn everything. Later on, you will see that nothing is superfluous, for there is no delight in narrow knowledge.