

# INFLUENCE OF THE EARLY UNL CLASSICS DEPARTMENT

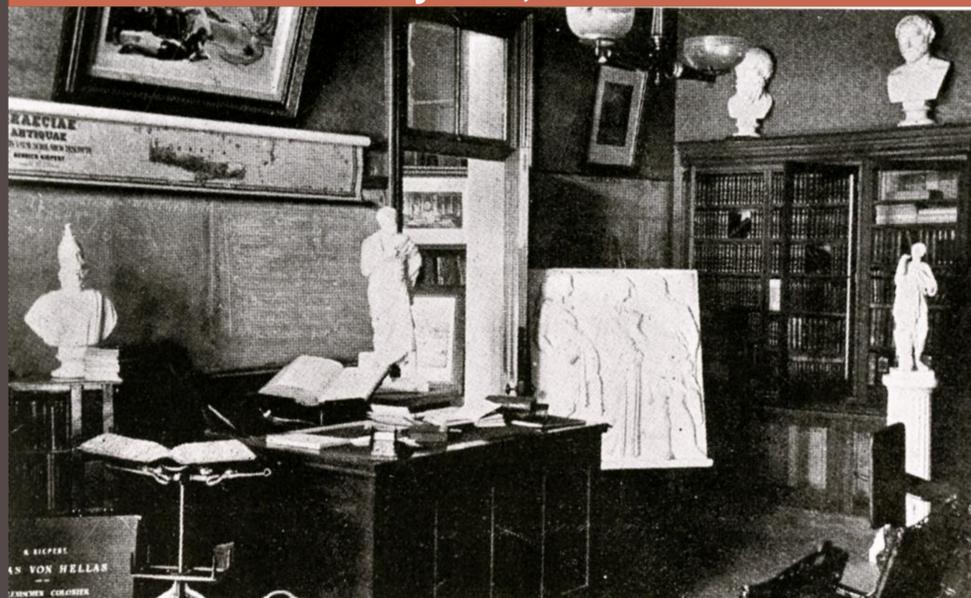
An Undergraduate Research Project by Kourtney Klein

## Introduction

The Classics have been taught at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since it received its charter in 1869. During the early years of the University, the Classics were more heavily emphasized in curriculum than in years to come. A University education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would have emphasized that the knowledge of ancient languages along with courses on ancient history, philosophy, and rhetoric allowed for a more broad humanistic education for all students.

The 1920s, though prolific times for the American economy, were a dark time for government-funded Universities. By 1923, the University could no longer afford to keep post-secondary education free for students. In reaction to this change, many students, parents, and educators called for a curriculum reform that increased job security. A decrease in a classical curriculum meant a decrease in the teachings of Classics itself, and faculty members had a difficult time convincing the University that the Classics needed to live in some form, even if no longer a requirement of a college education.

## Greek Recitation Room University Hall, Circa 1895



## Curriculum

### Instead of "ACE," Students had Latin

The "Classics Department" didn't exist until the fall semester of 1925. Originally, students had a rigorously classical curriculum no matter what they wanted to do when they graduated. They were expected to know Latin before admission into the University and by the time they left, they knew how to read, write, and speak Latin as well as Greek (though to a lesser extent). The curriculum was split into a "classical" course, a "scientific" course, and a "special" course. The latter two deviated from the "classical" course slightly to include more of the sciences as well as languages besides Latin or Greek.

### Then the 1920s Came, and Students Had Options

With the 1920s came two new required to UNL: credits and tuition. The result of these requirements sent students into a frenzy to get the best education they could with their time and resources. For one thing, a student had the new challenge of getting a certain amount of credits in order to obtain a diploma. With the knowledge that they had to pay for their education, some students became more concerned about accruing credits that would give them the skills to work instead of the education to continue learning. Several influential individuals pushed to beat the classical curriculum out of the system, and this push eventually prevailed. In order to keep Classics alive within the University, it was corralled by the faculty into its own department and its teachings became optional.

## Conclusions

The Classics had a heavy influence on the University in its beginnings, especially through its domination of the curriculum, but by the 1920s, the University seemed to have more of an influence on Classics. The study of Classics went from required to optional (and it remains optional today). A similar phenomenon in the present is that as business and science majors give students more job security, the humanities (still including Classics) become less "safe" as profitable career paths and their departments receive less funding. Looking at the influence of the early Classics department can help people to see that money, not necessarily lack of interest has the most influence on a student's educational options, and might encourage people to support keeping the humanities alive in education so long as there are students who are interested in studying them.

### A Typical 4-year Plan in 1875 [1]

- 4 years of Latin, Greek, and Arithmetic
- Some of the language classes replaced by Zoology and Physical Science for "scientific" and "special" course students
- 2 years of French and German
- 2 years of Geology and Physical Science
- 1 year of Philosophy and Political Economy

## Research Methods

The materials for this project were acquired over more than 150 hours of research in the University Archives and Special Collections. The materials shown here, in addition to a larger collection, are currently being analyzed and prepared for web publication. The website will be divided into six categories. An Introduction page will explain what the Classics are and give a brief description of how they influenced the University from 1869-1935. A Curriculum page will show how much the Classics were incorporated into a University education, how that broad incorporation declined over time, and how the Classics Department was formed. There will also be a Faculty page about the professors, lecturers, and scholars that taught Classics in that time period. Included will be biography files, published works, and analyses of their participation and influence in the department. A Memorable Students page will highlight people who studied Classics in the early years of the University and went on to do great things with the knowledge they'd acquired. Finally, The Latin Club page will show how Classics students met outside of class to continue the study and interpretation of the Classics.

## References

1. Robert E. Knoll, *Prairie University*, pp. 8-9.
2. Grove E. Barber, *The University Journal*, "Latin as a 'Practical' Study," pp. 27-28.
3. *Sunday Journal and Star*, "Personality of Ellen Smith," March 19, 1933.
4. Kara Alexander, "There is a Dead Professor on Campus?," pp. 7.
5. John A. Rice, Jr., *School and Society*, "The Exceptional Student in the Middle West," pp. 543-547.
6. Charles Oldfather, "Objectives of a Liberal Education."

## Memorable Professors and Their Influence

### GROVE ETTINGER BARBER Faculty member 1882-1931



"Looseness and carelessness in the use of one's language leads inevitably to looseness and carelessness in thinking." [2]

Barber published "Latin as a 'Practical' Study," which described the study of Latin as useful because it helped students to understand English grammar and vocabulary, where learning other languages was a waste of time because students usually forget the languages they learned in school.

### ELLEN SMITH Faculty member 1882-1902

"Constructive, always constructive, whether the methods she needed to use was a big stick or love." [3]

Smith, the first female professor on campus, was an instructor at the Latin School, which was the University's preparatory school. She felt that the Classics, along with discipline and personal hygiene, helped children to develop into respectable adults.



### JAMES THOMAS LEES Faculty member 1889-1926

"One must study Greek in its original form to know Western Civilizations." [4]

Lees, hailing from England, believed the study of Classics to be an elitist course of study. He loved teaching Greek, but it probably didn't concern him that the number of working class students choosing to study the Classics was decreasing. He probably felt that it should remain a high class subject.



### JOHN ANDREW RICE Faculty member 1917-1927

"The standard that we have set is the standard not of excellence but of mediocrity." [5]

Rice did not like the new "credit" system because it took the emphasis off of learning and put it onto getting enough points to graduate. He fought for the University to return to its original classical curriculum, but was eventually asked to leave the school because he couldn't get along with any of his colleagues.



### CHARLES HENRY OLDFATHER Faculty member 1925-1951

"I am personally too far removed from the ascetic way of looking at life to believe that education for the purposes of pure intellectual contemplation can be defended." [6]

Oldfather believed that learning ancient history was important because it served as a way for students to learn about the human condition. Ancient languages, however, were helpful to those who struggled with English Grammar, but shouldn't be taught just for "intellectual contemplation."

