

Classics and “Academic Renewal” at Howard University

Norman B. Sandridge @ CHS Saturday, April 2, 2011

- I. The “Renewal” Process
 - a. Fall 2009—Formation of Presidential Commission for Academic Renewal (PCAR)
 - i. Composed of 55 members, mostly Howard faculty (including myself), some deans, staff, and external advisors
 - ii. Tasked to survey, evaluate, and make recommendations for elimination of, consolidation of, or additional support to the University’s ~180 (!) degree-granting programs (within a 9-mo. time-frame)
 - iii. Tasked to develop new models, frameworks, outcomes, programs, centers, clusters, clustered centers, synergies, interdisciplinarity that address problems of, e.g., low student-performance and faculty apathy
 - iv. External academic consultant\$ hired to address these issues and others (e.g., finances)
 - b. August 2010—PCAR recommends that the Department of Classics be “consolidated” with the Philosophy department and the non-existent Religious Studies department. Many other permutations of this recommendation were considered.
 - c. September 2010—President Ribeau “reviews” the PCAR recommendations and recommends, preliminarily, that the Classics major be eliminated, along with Philosophy and African Studies. (Throughout this process the Classics department fought to justify itself and correct misperceptions.)
 - d. January 2011—President Ribeau affirms the elimination of the Classics major as part of his final recommendations. Philosophy and African Studies are spared.
- II. How Your Classics Program May Be Viewed
 - a. Money Talks
 - i. Howard University, as it is explained by the president, could no longer fund its numerous degree-granting programs. Widespread cuts to as much 30% of existing programs were necessary.
 - b. A Numbers Game
 - i. The Classics department, so it was claimed, did not graduate enough majors to remain a stand-alone department. In fact, the Classics department graduates majors every year at roughly a 1:1 major-to-faculty ratio, which is equivalent to or much higher than many other departments.
 - ii. It was believed (incorrectly) that a small number of majors implied under-enrolled courses, when in fact with few exceptions Classics courses routinely contain 30+ students and Classics faculty often teach 90+ students per semester.
 - iii. The full-time faculty of eight was deemed not large enough. It seems that departments with 30-40 members are preferable.
 - iv. As a side note, the University seemed incapable of measuring the *quality* of a program except at the graduate level (according to external standards).
 - c. Understanding and Fulfilling the Howard Mission
 - i. Classics is not a discipline our students understand before coming to Howard.

- ii. Low enrollments are seen as a lack of student interest; accordingly Classics is deemed not as viable.
 - iii. Howard sees its future as tied primarily to STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and to the African Diaspora. Howard seems to feel that it can address areas of, e.g., reading/writing/critical thinking/general enlightenment in other ways than through Classics.
 - iv. “Classics” has a particularly bad ring to it at Howard because it can seem to imply a cultural/racial superiority.
 - d. Ignorance Abounds
 - i. Many of my colleagues on PCAR, and in the administration, had little idea what Classics was. Some assumed that it encompassed all “Classical” (or “European”) literature and thus could be consolidated with it.
 - ii. Those who knew Classics as the study of Greece and Rome saw the field as any other “area study” and were unaware of its methodology or of its interdisciplinary nature. Our attempts to “brand” Classics as “the math of the Humanities” (as my colleague Molly Levine likes to say) did not meet with much success.
- III. Two False Gods
- a. Transparency
 - i. No term was used more frequently or optimistically to characterize the new presidency (President Ribeau arrived at Howard in August 2008 and succeeded a president with a reputation for secrecy). From the president’s announcement of his recommendations (<http://www.howard.edu/president/>):

Dear Members of the Howard Community:

I am excited to inform you that the Howard University Board of Trustees has unanimously approved the academic renewal recommendations. The Board has also approved recommendations for the construction of two new residence halls for students.

The Board’s action on academic renewal is a much welcomed outcome of a 13-month process in which our entire community was engaged at some level in our discussions on how best to position Howard University for the future. I thank all of you for your part in the process. Now the real work begins and I look forward to our continued collaboration as we move forward.

To read details about the Board-approved academic renewal program changes, click [here](#) . To read the full press release click [here](#).

Thank you again.

Sincerely,

*Sidney A. Ribeau, Ph.D.
President*

- ii. In fact, transparency more often than not meant regular communication between the president and the Howard community with *virtually no intellectual engagement*. On a more cynical reading, PCAR would seem to have been

designed for nothing more the *appearance* of collaboration.

b. Interdisciplinarity

i. This concept sounds promising on an intellectual and social level.

1. Colleagues in one department are unaware of what colleagues in other departments are doing.
2. They may be asking the same questions from different perspectives and thus benefit from collaboration.
3. *Yet* interdisciplinary approaches may be influenced more by the personalities and idiosyncratic interests of individual faculty members than by the needs of the students or any sound intellectual rationale.

ii. Administrators, as well as I can tell, are not as interested in the intellectual or social benefits of interdisciplinarity as in the marketing and financial ones. As in the marketplace, “newer” is quite often seen as “better”.

1. There is concern that upper-level courses with 5-10 students in them are not sustainable.
2. Thus, e.g., pairing an upper-level Latin class with an upper-level Spanish class and calling it “Comparative Romance Language Linguistics” can seem like an exciting new idea.

IV. A Happy Ending for Howard Classics?

The Provost, tasked to “implement” the president’s recommendations, has recently proposed transforming the Classics department into a “Classical Mediterranean Studies” department, much larger and much broader than before. The CHS has offered to facilitate this transition by hosting a conference in the fall on developing AMS programs. Stay tuned.