

Howard University students and educators protest elimination of classical studies department

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Howard University in Washington D.C. has declared its intention to liquidate the university's Department of Classics—the program dealing with the study of ancient Greco-Roman history, literature and philosophy—by the fall. Students, alumni and educators at the college have denounced the move, drawing widespread support from around the world.

The classics department at Howard University, established at the college's founding in 1867, is the only classical studies program at a historically black college in the US. The department currently includes courses in Mythology, Latin, Love in Antiquity, and Ideas in Antiquity among others.

Last fall, the university board of trustees made the decision to dissolve the department. A few of the courses that are taught in the program are to be dispersed throughout other departments.

University officials rationalize slashing the classics by citing low enrollment numbers, an alleged lack of student interest, and claims of financial scarcity, voiced in the lingo peculiar to the philistine college administrator. Provost Anthony K. Wutoh told the *Washington Post*, “We obviously believe that the content that we offer in classics is important, but we also must contemporize that teaching with practical application.” University spokeswoman Alonda Thomas told the *Post* that the move would “allow the university to function more effectively and efficiently.”

The announcement has provoked an outpouring of support for saving the Department of Classics from students and educators from all over the country and internationally. An online petition entitled Save HU Classics has garnered more than 5,000 signatures. The petition reads, in part: “Words in English, Latin, nor Ancient Greek cannot adequately express the impact the Classics Department and its professors have had on so many of our careers and lives, but we make this final plea in a hope of conveying just how passionately we disagree with the plans Howard University has set forth to dissolve the Classics Department.”

Student comments in the media have been hostile to the move to eliminate the classics. “We didn’t want the department to essentially fade away as though it had never been there,” Howard University student Alexandra Frank told the *New York Times*. “We wanted to put up at least some sort of rallying cries so that the provost knew that we cared deeply about this department, and we weren’t the only ones who did.”

Another student, 19-year-old Tiye Williamson, told the *Times* that she suspected the classics department would not be the last to go. “I feel like the classics department is just the beginning,” she said. “Other smaller departments could be on the chopping block next.”

The liquidation of the classics department would result in the termination of all staff in the program who are without tenure or contract, including four nontenured professors. One of them is Anika Prather, an adjunct professor of humanities. Speaking to the *Post*, Prather noted that abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who taught himself to read as a slave, had studied the classics. “He learned as an enslaved child through reading the speeches of Cicero and all the different dialogues and classic texts to practice rhetorical skills, so that he could know how to exercise his mind to use logic,” Prather said.

The move has also been condemned by intellectuals, including Harvard University Professor Cornel West, who in an op-ed at the *Washington Post* denounced the destruction of the classics at Howard as a “spiritual catastrophe.” He also stressed the role the classics had played in the education not only of Douglass but of Martin Luther King, Jr. “Academia’s continual campaign to disregard or neglect the classics is a sign of spiritual decay, moral decline and a deep intellectual narrowness running amok in American culture,” West said. “Those who commit this terrible act treat Western civilization as either irrelevant and not worthy of prioritization or as harmful and worthy only of condemnation.”

Given the outcry raised by students and staff at Howard and beyond, the claims made by the university that there is a lack of interest do not hold water. As for the alleged lack of funds, this is patent nonsense and a deflection. Howard University has an endowment of more than \$712 million. According to the Department of Education, the university received more than \$221 million in federal funds in 2020. In addition, the university was granted \$8.72 million in additional federal aid as part of the 2020 CARES Act. According to the website nonprofitlite, 13 administrators at Howard University pocket more than \$200,000 annually. College President Wayne Frederick takes home more than \$1 million.

The planned destruction of the classics department at Howard, though not unprecedented even at this university—the Anthropology Department was dissolved in 2013—is not taking place in a vacuum. It is an expression of an ongoing attack on the humanities, art and culture, taking place at educational institutions across the US. This, in turn, is a reflection of the deep and terminal crisis of capitalism, which manifests itself in the realm of education as a repudiation of everything that is progressive and enlightening in human history.

The study of classical antiquity was once a staple of higher education. In an earlier period, all learned individuals were expected as a matter of course to be familiar with ancient Greek or Roman literature and philosophy. While there was certainly an aspect of pretentiousness and elitism to this, it nevertheless reflected the ideal that the purpose of education was not merely to train the younger generation in their chosen field of expertise but to raise them as cultured individuals with a nuanced, critical understanding of the world.

More than that, as the references to Douglass and King make clear, access to the summits of human culture has always been a demand of the oppressed. In this vein, Howard University's own history warrants mention. It was founded in 1867, two years after the Civil War by the anti-slavery Union General Oliver Otis Howard, after whom it is named. It contributed to the education of 150,000 former slaves by 1872. A document celebrating Howard's founding, written in 1916, explained that the college founders aimed higher education for

those who had never had the privilege of getting any education, much less of getting higher education. They set about the task as if there could never be any question as to the right or expediency of the undertaking. They wished to provide for all men and women the privileges which they themselves had

enjoyed. No institution was ever founded with purer, loftier motives.

Among the privileges Howard offered was an education in the classics. The systematic devaluing of the humanities in favor of what Provost Wutoh, without a hint of shame, calls “practical applications” is an attack on the cultural heritage of the working class, aimed ultimately at stultifying the intellectual and spiritual growth of the population. The ruling class has little need for individuals who think critically about history and culture. It is in its interests to have a docile workforce, just capable enough to carry out their duties and keep the machines running, but not much more than that.

To this development must be added the noxious influence of reactionary ideologies such as critical race theory and intersectionality. From the perspective of the peddlers of this racist poison, classical studies are worse than useless. They are actively harmful as expressions of “whiteness.” To the racists, modern students, especially “students of color,” have nothing to learn from these “dead white men.” Such ignorant rhetoric was once the hallmark of the most right-wing black nationalists. But now it is a staple of American liberalism, and a major focus of the *New York Times*. Recently, the *Times* gave prominent voice to the demand that the study of classics be eliminated entirely.

The response of Howard students, which has won support throughout the world, indicates that the great majority of students and youth do not share this backward perspective. Whatever their present state of political confusion, they understand that there is something precious and invaluable contained in the study of classical antiquity, and moreover, that it applies to their present-day lives and should not be merely thrown into the garbage. The classics department at Howard must be defended as part of the broader fight of the working class to defend true culture and the best traditions of education.



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