

The Value of Latin: A Personal Perspective and Other Notes

By Katie Robinson, NCLG

The benefits of studying Latin are manifold. Students not only learn a language whose rich literature has had a tremendous influence upon the history of European writing in all genres, but they come face to face with classical culture. This culture is the basis for western civilization and helps students of all backgrounds understand our modern American institutions and the relationship of both of the Americas to Europe. Because the Roman world was a multicultural society within an empire made up of many provinces, students can also make many correlations to present day situations and events. The history and traditions of the Christian church are also tied to Roman culture and especially the Latin language.

Learning the language of Latin has also been proven to build student's verbal skills and critical thinking. The logical structure of the Latin makes one think about how language works, and we still use the poetic and rhetorical devices of Greco-Roman origin. Not to mention how allusions and borrowing from Greco-Roman myth and legend are common in our own writing.

Over half of English vocabulary is derived from Latin and 90% of English words longer than 2 syllables are Latin-based! (This is why a knowledge of Latin and Greek roots is part of upper elementary and middle grades content standards in most states.) The extent of one's vocabulary directly affects communication skills which have been shown to be the single most important factor to career success – no matter what job you choose. And of course in medicine and the sciences, there are literally millions of words, terms and names that are based directly on Latin. And Latin still provides common terminology for international communication. Many legal terms are Latin and our legal system has interesting connections to Roman law. Latin is also an excellent base for learning other Romance languages, whose vocabularies are about 80% Latin.

Latin instruction across the nation is slowly growing on all levels in both public and private schools, even to the point that during the last decade some areas of the country have not been able to find enough teachers! Despite news of programs and electives being cut due to budget deficits, Latin numbers have continued to rise. Nearly 140,000 students took last year's National Latin Exam, and about 50,000 students are active in the National Junior Classical League, i.e., the Latin Club at junior and senior high schools. Latin texts have been updated and teachers employ all the newest methodologies, from oral usage to podcasting. Students attend regional, state and national competitions, showing that Latin is still very much alive!

Author Weatherford, H. Jarold wrote for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics Washington DC. Educational Resources Information Center, "In addition, data from the Admission Testing Program of the College Board show a definite positive correlation between Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and the study of foreign languages. In one recent test group, for example, students who.....had taken only one year of a foreign language had slightly higher scores in reading and math, whereas students with two years of foreign language showed more dramatic increases. Each additional year of language study brought a further rise in scores."

The College Board also calculated correlations between length of study of certain subjects, including English, math, biological sciences, physical sciences, and social studies, and SAT scores, and found that in almost all cases the longer a student studied one of these subjects, the higher were the scores. However, the verbal scores of students who had taken four or five years of a foreign language were higher than verbal scores of students who had studied any other subject for an equal length of time.

College Board: Total Group Profile Report (From CB website)
 Percent by Gender SAT Reasoning Test Mean Scores
 Test-Takers: Foreign and Classical Languages

AVE SCORES: Critical Reading Mathematics Writing

Course Work or Language Experience, with student numbers

| Latin 72,264 | 557 (TOP) | 556 | 544 (2nd) |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| Chinese 17,746 | 521 | 600 | 521 |
| French 205,161 | 523 | 525 | 514 |
| German 51,955 | 535 | 543 | 516 |
| Greek 3,539 | 543 | 545 | 534 |
| Hebrew 4,949 | 547 | 552 | 547 |
| Italian 26,194 | 497 | 506 | 494 |
| Japanese 19,373 | 528 | 556 | 511 |
| Korean 3,348 | 480 | 587 | 491 |
| Russian 4,839 | 503 | 527 | 501 |
| Spanish 820,526 | 497 | 507 | 490 |
| Other Languages 37,724 | 478 | 504 | 474 |
| Years of Study | | | |
| More Than 4 Years 57,154 | 554 | 574 | 553 |
| 4 Years 271,160 | 549 | 559 | 546 |
| 3 Years 378,462 | 510 | 523 | 503 |
| 2 Years 381,172 | 472 | 481 | 460 |
| 1 Year 60,498 | 441 | 449 | 428 |
| 1/2 Year or Less 39,304 | 421 | 443 | 410 |

On a higher level, results were also positive in favor of Latin for the GRE for college seniors testing for graduate school (last data:2008). *Classical Language/Latin majors scored the highest on verbal and quantitative sections of all language majors and the highest on verbal of all of 300 major college fields of study listed! (619 Ave. Verbal)*

Jarold also states that a "second language is now becoming a vital part of the basic preparation for an increasing number of careers. Even in those cases where the knowledge of a second language does not help graduates obtain a first job, many report that their foreign language skills often enhance their mobility and improve their chances for promotion. In addition to any technical skills that foreign language students choose to develop, they also have further tangible advantages in the job market. In a recent study that sought to ascertain which college courses had been most valuable for people who were employed in the business world, graduates pointed not only to career-oriented courses such as business management, but also to people-oriented subjects like psychology, and to classes that had helped them to develop communication skills. Foreign language students, whose courses focus heavily on this aspect of learning, often possess outstanding communication skills, both written and oral. Furthermore, recent trends in the job marketplace indicate a revived recognition of the value of liberal arts training in general in an employee's career preparation."

Novelist John Updike attributes the deterioration of writing skills in America to two generations growing up with less Latin: "In some curious way, the study of thisintricate language enabled writers to write a beautiful, clear idiomatic English." ***Due to an interest in strengthening verbal and critical thinking skills, and the clear correlation between Latin study and improved academic performance, Latin instruction in elementary schools has doubled in the past ten years!***

Sources: NAEP Nation's Report Card: " Latin [is] on the rise. Among [public] elementary schools that teach languages, Latin instruction has increased from 3% to 6%." (NAEP results—or The Nation's Report Card—NAEP is part of the U.S. Department of Education and is mandated by Congress.