

Modern Greek Studies at the University Level: Challenges and Opportunities

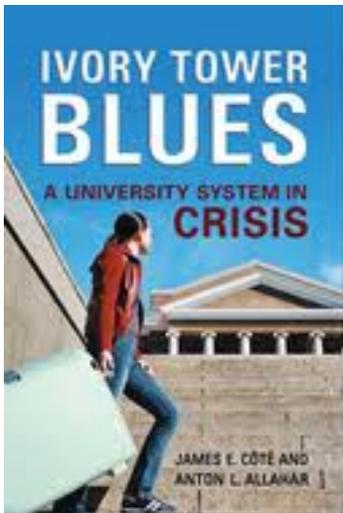
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Expanded and Revised

While deciding how I wanted to open this talk, I tried very hard not to begin with a reference to one topic in particular, but I'm just going to say it: Crisis. We are consumed by crises of one sort or another these days, and I wanted a different angle. But I simply couldn't avoid it. Crises have this power to consume us; to pull us into their vortex. So here I am, opening this talk with a crisis reference.

Modern Greek Studies (MGS) is accustomed to crises. As a field of study with a small demographic, MGS has always been alert to dramatic pressures. But these days "crisis" applies to the entire academy. We speak of language Programs being under strain. We often say the humanities experience a crisis of relevance. And now we face crisis on a grander scale. Most likely you've heard the news: The American University is in crisis.



The University as we know it is undergoing dramatic transformation; from new curricula to tuition raises; from internal reorganization to an outright elimination of Programs; from harsh budget cuts to the increasing numbers of underpaid lecturers. The foundation of the University is shaken.



It's impossible to outline the “challenges” and “opportunities” of MGS without taking into account this larger crisis. As I mentioned, MGS knows a thing or two

about living with crisis. Because of its vulnerable position, it has always been vigilant about changes in its immediate environment. This vigilance has even increased these days in order to best safeguard and, if possible, advance its interests.

I want to discuss two particular University developments that directly impact MGS. The first one is about economic restructuring; the fear-inducing budget cuts. The second development regards the international orientation of the American University. It refers to the University's mission to cultivate learning about and expose students to global diversity.

Let me elaborate on the first development. Budget cuts send waves of anxiety to the entire spectrum of the academy, but they most negatively hit units with small student demographics. In the logic of supply and demand – a logic that increasingly prevails in the academy – Greek studies, or for that matter German studies, are at a disadvantage. They can hardly compete with language powerhouses such as Spanish, which command high enrollments.

Moreover, in an environment of fiscal constraints and employment insecurity, many question the professional value of culture Programs. Why does one need Modern Greek Studies if this field offers only slim opportunities for employment? In this utilitarian approach to education, MGS finds itself in a vulnerable position. Once again it is called on to justify its program objectives to administrators

and financial managers. It has to continually defend the value it offers to students and foundations.¹

I call this development a “contracting force.” Contraction of resources puts MGS under immense pressure. These diminishing resources interfere with the everyday vitality of the Programs: There’s less money for sponsoring public lectures with Greek topics and less funding for lecturers. The economic strain makes it extremely difficult to negotiate new hires for Modern Greek. When it comes to the realities of the classroom, enrollments dictate survival. New policies set the minimum student quota to two digit numbers. This jeopardizes advanced Greek language courses that usually do not command the numbers prescribed by administrators. It’s not only publish or perish now; it’s high enrollments or hit the highway.

The first development then is one of limits and limitations, a contracting force. In contrast, the second development works as a force of expansion. I refer here to the University’s internationalizing. The aim is to produce citizens who can think broadly about issues beyond their own country, to expose students to cross-cultural awareness.

¹ Not every Program is affected the same way; it goes without saying that programs with deep endowments are best positioned to weather the crisis.

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INTERNATIONALIZING STUDENTS,
FACULTY, AND EXECUTIVES

DAVID YAWN

In the everyday working of the university, internationalization means new curricula under Global studies and diversity; summer study abroad programs; and partnerships between American and foreign universities. In turn, students imagine professional lives on a global stage. This ongoing development favors MGS. We can place more courses into the new curriculum and incorporate travel to Greece as a course component. To mention an example from Ohio State University, my home institution: We now offer a total of nine culture courses (in English) under the rubric “Global Studies,” and U.S. diversity issues. Both American and heritage students are drawn to our classes and study abroad programs. For many, this is a life-defining experience. Greek American students often discover Greece anew. American students understand the country beyond stereotypes. In the midst of severe cuts, robust cultural interest maintains morale and keeps feeding our passion.

It is this expansion, along with our traditional strength, namely a distinguished scholarship record, that saves the day for MGS. But for how long? One of the gravest threats we face is the possibility of losing an entire generation of young scholars. How is a new generation to be nourished in a depressed and depressing job market? What will happen after existing faculty retire? No one guarantees that administrators are committed to continuing a Modern Greek Program; particularly not in this era of diminishing resources. The long-term future of MGS is uncertain.

So what can we do? Past speakers in this forum² have identified how Greek America can extend a helping hand. Endow chairs; encourage your children to take our courses; establish fellowships. These measures are necessary, perhaps more than ever. In the era of multiculturalism, we have the opportunity to establish enduring cultural institutions. In the era of economic crisis, this opportunity feels more like an imperative.

Let me make here a particular case, a case to which I am partial: Invite an initiative to support Greek American Studies. This is not merely a neglected scholarly field; it is a field that finds itself in a grave situation within the academy. There is only a handful of U.S. academics in history, anthropology, film studies, folklore, or literature

² See, for example, Artemis Leontis' presentation, in the *American Hellenic Institute Foundations (AHIF) Policy Journal* (Winter 2011–2012): <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/modgreek/Home/Window%20to%20Greek%20Culture/MGStudiesatUniversityLeontis.pdf>

that dedicate themselves full time to this subject matter. This is far from a new phenomenon; it has been the case since the advent of ethnic studies in the United States, almost half-a-century ago. Equally alarming, young scholars are fleeing the field due to a lack of professional prospects. This is why a prestigious research center and/or endowed Chairs along with fellowships are urgently needed to reflect on and further understand the ever-evolving and multifaceted history, culture, and politics of Greek America. Jewish Americans and Italian Americans are greatly investing in cultivating letters, scholarship, and *paideia* for their respective constituencies. The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, for instance, offers a model for ethnic and diaspora studies, as it enriches the educational and cultural life of Italian Americans. What prevents Greek America from investing along these routes?

I would like to say a few words about yet another course of action. If there is a lesson for us to learn from the contraction and expansion of resources it's this: Our answer to scarcity is to maximize available strengths. We circumvent limitations by building on existing resources.

I have in mind two resources that could use our help. One is a population of American students who show interest in Greek learning, students from all walks of life who are drawn to Greek culture. These students are an integral part of our Programs. They take our classes and participate in study abroad opportunities. They exhibit the enthusiasm and commitment of a neophyte. They are the future journalists, anthropologists, scholars, authors, artists, and

lawmakers. They are the ones who will be writing about Greece and Greek America in magazines, newspapers, and books. They will be in a position to move beyond stereotypes and offer nuanced representations of Greece and Greek America.

This population represents a resource we sometimes neglect, or even risk alienating. Let me share with you one of the most painful moments I personally experience during the academic year: The moment when I have to announce certain Greek American scholarships for study abroad and heritage travel to my students. It's a moment difficult to bear because some of these scholarships apply only to students of Greek ancestry. How can I look my non-Greek students in the eye when fellowships disqualify them before they even apply? It's hard to witness their sense of exclusion.

So I would like to take this opportunity to make a plea to Greek American leaders: Make excellence in Greek letters, not Greek ancestry, the criterion for fellowship and cultural travel qualification. It is to our best interest, as Greek American expansion and strength hinge upon embracing, not estranging, this population.



There is yet another population we could support. This is a population of incredibly talented young PhDs in MGS who face a terrible job market. Many languish in overworked and underpaid adjunct positions.



Others experience uncertainty in non-tenure track positions. Without our support this generation may be lost to MGS. We can harness the talents of this demographic in a variety of ways. Postdoctoral fellowships are vital, as they provide time to turn a manuscript into a book and foster a career.

But we could also think outside the box. Young scholars could enhance the cultural and intellectual life of the community through public outreach. They could contribute commentaries and book reviews to the Greek American media, conduct ethnographies and oral history projects in our communities, collaborate with museums, or work with language schools to enhance bilingualism. They could work with directors to produce documentaries or develop creative and accessible Web sites that popularize Greek American scholarship. But they cannot afford to do so for

free. Financing these projects will produce tangible results for all to see and will contribute to our self-understanding as a community. Our neighbors, the Jewish Americans, have been pursuing this policy for over a century now. Italian Americans are active in this cultural business too. The Irish excel in it. Our support will represent an investment to our cultural vitality.

By now, you've probably recognized what I'm talking about here. I'm advocating the bridge of the divide between MGS scholarship and the cultural life of the community. This is not an easy task. I'll be the first to admit that academic books have often failed to reach out to the Greek American community. Our writing is dense, too theoretical, and often inaccessible. There is a reason for this. Our quest for acceptance as equals in the American academy requires that we adopt the conventions of the University. One might see this as a form of assimilation. What we have gained is relevance and distinction. MGS is not an insular, introverted field. It participates at the very cutting edge of American scholarship. In the process, however, we may have alienated our immediate publics, Greek Americans.

The good news is that things are changing. We are conscious of the divide and we take measures to bridge it. We write in blogs; we publish in the media; we contribute essays to community publications; we review films and novels in a language that the public will find meaningful and a joy to read. Many of us in MGS make a genuine effort to reach out to Greek America. Still, I am often preoccupied by the following question: Do Greek

Americans read our work? Is the young generation interested in what we have to say, as we strive to reach out to them?

We envision an inclusive and democratic dialogue from which to learn from each other. In a period of crisis; in a period of contracting resources, building bridges among ourselves may be one way for mutual growth. It seems to me, this direction is worthy of further reflection.

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