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# Modern Greek Studies at the University Level: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Artemis Leontis

For the past two years, we have seen the fate of Europe and even the world economy tied to what is happening in Greece. For better or worse, people have revived the phrase uttered almost 200 years ago by Percy Bysshe Shelly, “We are all Greeks.”

I would like to start by making the point that Greece matters today more than ever. This is both an “opportunity” and a “challenge” for Modern Greek Studies. It is an opportunity because student interest is high. Greece is in the news almost every day. In early November, it was the first piece of news constantly. Students want to understand, “What is *really* going on?” We need to have instructors and classes in Modern Greek supported and in place, situated within the institutional structures of the finest universities and colleges in North America in order to give good students the tools they need to answer their questions about contemporary Greece with rigor and historical depth.

Recently, I heard from a graduate of the University of Michigan with an Economics concentration—someone with no personal connection to Greece—who took just one course from me in Modern Greek Studies on “Athens Present and Past,” with a two-week study tour extending that course in Athens. Now a Masters student in a Graduate Program in International Political Economy in a prestigious university on the East Coast, she found herself at an unexpected advantage in her course of graduate study by way of the knowledge and perspective she had gained in my class. She wrote me the following explaining the importance of her studies in the University of Michigan’s Modern Greek Program:

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I feel like all I study these days is the Euro Crisis and Greece. I actually did a project on Greece last year in an international finance class.... The current class I am taking is called Crisis, Adjustment, and Poverty. It is an economics class that is supposed to discuss how developing countries handle crises. However because of current events we have been mainly focused on the Euro region, and most particularly Greece.... My midterm exam question [asked for analytical an answer using a 'typed + diagrams approach' to the question, "Should] Greece...default?" I feel so very lucky to have had the opportunity to visit the country and now picture Athens every time we discuss the crisis. I have such a soft spot for the country and truly believe all of these politicians and economists with such strong opinions need to take a little trip to Greece to gain a better perspective of the people and culture before deciding what measures may actually work.<sup>1</sup>

My key point is that Modern Greek Studies at the University level does important work for Greece and Greeks, and it requires systematic support. We must be clear about what we mean when we talk about "Modern Greek Studies." My qualifications for speaking about this subject are nearly thirty years of working "in the trenches," so to speak. I have been a partner in building two Modern Greek programs from the ground up, one at Ohio State University from 1983 to 1999, the other at the University of Michigan from 1999 to the present. I have developed curricula, taught classes, advised students, supervised honors and graduate students, developed cross-disciplinary study groups, organized lectures and conferences, curated exhibits, written teaching materials, developed websites, created on-line exercises, and published books for scholarly and broader reading publics. I have driven thousands of miles to collect valuable archives of Greek Americans and deliver them to the university library. I have also taken on numerous roles working to develop an academic field with a professional association providing the structure for scholarly exchange. And I have answered journalists' questions repeatedly—as I did just ten days ago in an effort to resist the framing of Greece that comes with incomplete or superficial knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In sum, I have been a part of the development of a new exciting, inter-disciplinary field of study that barely existed when I attended college in the 1970s and today serves more than two hundred students each academic year just in my program.

So what do we mean when we say "Modern Greek Studies"? At its most basic level, let us call it "zero stage," Modern Greek study exists where Greece, the Greek language, or some dimension of an ethnic Greek presence in the modern era occupy a substantial part of a college or university course. The course offering depends on the

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<sup>1</sup>E-mail communication of 11/14/11 used with author's permission).

<sup>2</sup> Palash R. Ghosh, "Are Greeks Really European?" IBTIMES.com 11/9/11 8:09 AM ET).

presence of an instructor who happens to know something about the subject. In the “zero stage” manifestation, the institution of higher learning has not made an investment in Modern Greek Studies but in the discipline in which the instructor has expertise. Modern Greek has an ad hoc presence, and the continuity of Modern Greek as a subject of study is not guaranteed.

This ad hoc situation should not be confused with Modern Greek Studies, which exists only where at least one faculty position is dedicated to teaching a course of study, with the instruction of the Modern Greek language at its core, and other undergraduate courses on Modern Greece and Greeks clustered around that core. Let us call “stage one,” then, the systematic offering of Modern Greek classes where an institution of higher learning has dedicated enough resources to hire an academically trained instructor to teach some aspect of Modern Greek. At a more developed, “stage two,” a Modern Greek program takes shape where there are enough dedicated faculty members to offer a full sequence of language courses combined with clusters of courses in literature, history, anthropology, political science, or cultural studies. Finally, at “stage three” a Modern Greek program has the resources and the institutional savvy to integrate its courses in the broader undergraduate curriculum, drawing students from many different areas of study, and offering opportunities for an undergraduate minor or major and some form of graduate supervision.

For the past six years, I have been collecting statistics from Modern Greek Studies programs in the United States and Canada for the Modern Greek Studies Association. The results, submitted to the MGSA last year, which covered the period from 2004 to 2010, can be found in the appendix to this article. Twenty-eight universities responded to my request for information, which I sent out as both an open request on the Modern Greek Studies Association e-mail listserv and an e-mail to individual instructors or administrators listed as contacts for about 41 university “Modern Greek Programs” on the MGSA website. The survey gives a sense of the numbers and kinds of Modern Greek study out there, with some room for statistical error. There are at least 20 Modern Greek Studies programs at what I have called “stage 1,” offering at least two years of language instruction, and 10 at “stage 2 or 3,” with a three-year language sequence, non-language courses with Modern Greek as a subject, and in some cases a certificate or a degree in Modern Greek. In most of the programs reporting, Modern Greek Studies involves the work of a single faculty member or a faculty and a Graduate teaching instructor or part-time lecturer.

We can interpret these statistics with both optimism or pessimism. On the one hand, Modern Greek has observed a pattern of growth even over the short period of 6 years. There are Modern Greek programs in a range of Ivy League and flagship state universities, large and small colleges. Almost 1,500 students in these institutions study

the Modern Greek language each year, even though Modern Greek is a language spoken by only 13 million people worldwide, as compared to Mandarin Chinese's 1 billion, or English and Spanish's 300,000 million, or Hindi's 250,000 million, Arabic's 200,000 million, Portuguese's 180,000 million, and French and German's 100,000 million. Another 1800 students learn about Greece in a range of other courses. They are developing knowledge and analytical tools to think about Greek, Greece, and Greeks in contexts that extend beyond the study of Greek. They are adding modern Greece as a point of reference in the world. They are developing expertise to incorporate Modern Greek examples in comparative studies of literature, history, media, and politics. They are bringing modern Greece into contemporary debates taking place on American university campuses. They are sorting through biases in the media, developing sympathy for perspectives that are not their own.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic view of the statistics emerges (and my experience collecting the statistics from the handful of specialists who comprise the few Modern Greek Studies confirms this) when we consider the thin institutional support of existing programs. Modern Greek Studies is in a very vulnerable position in institutions of higher learning. Modern Greek instructors are hardworking, agile players. Most of them have managed to build curricula without endowments. A few individuals are teaching a lot of courses. Many of them are in underpaid, temporary or part-time positions. Some are nearing retirement age, and there is no guarantee that they will be replaced, especially in today's economic environment. A number of important questions need to be asked. When existing instructional positions are lost, who will take over the important role they play in student life on campus? Who will advise students, some of them the first in their families to attend college? Who will organize academic events introducing Greece to faculty and students and the broader community in a range of contexts? Who will direct students to study abroad programs in Greece, offering them the opportunity to improve their language skills and exposure to a country they have never visited? Who will place students in internships in Greek diplomatic and political offices, businesses, research labs, the Greek American lobby, and other interesting projects? Who will supervise honors and graduate students writing their thesis on Modern Greek subjects? Who will help Greek American students in their search for employment or further study after graduation? Who will encourage them to develop networks to support one another? Who on American campuses will be in the position to make Modern Greek Studies a catalyst for students to open their horizons, investigate the world more closely, and, as my former student put it so succinctly, "feel a soft spot...and gain a better perspective of the people and culture before deciding what measures may actually work"?

On November 5, 2011, the NBC television show "Saturday Night Live" featured two skits making fun of Greeks. In one, the gods of Olympus were trying to solve the

Greek financial crisis; but they discovered that whereas the Greeks have gods for orgies and sex and two for war they have none for finance. In the end Zeus brought in Klaus, the German god of prudence, to find a solution. The second skit made fun of "lazy" Greeks, including Greek-Americans running diners. The skit asked, "Who thought lending the Greeks money was a good idea? You don't even have to go to Europe to see that Greeks are bad with money." Right now, nothing is off limits, not even hard-working Greek Americans. We Greeks have completely lost total control of our image. Our "brand" has value only for the derision it inspires.

Modern Greek Studies programs in institutions of higher learning are places where such representations of Greeks do not go unchallenged. Every week, every day for hours on end, inside the classroom and beyond it, Modern Greek Studies courses are bringing forward for students scrutiny examples such as the NBC SNL skits, giving students the historical background and analytical tools to challenge radically simplified representations of a very complicated world moment. Less than half of our student audience consists of Greek Americans, now mostly of the third and fourth generations. They are now in the minority, while the majority are young women and men from all over the world who want to know more about a country with an ancient history and a tangled present. Today, their minds are still fresh and wide open. Very soon, when they become leaders in the fields of banking, diplomacy, law, medicine, education, advertising, and media, and they will be much harder, if not impossible to reach. Our work is to make known to them Modern Greek worlds in their many dimensions.

The opportunity of Modern Greek Studies today lies in continuing the work begun with the previous generation, building on the academic field's formation as it grew out of a few individuals' enlightened vision some three decades ago. 1974 was a decisive turning point, a moment of crisis that spawned the creation of Modern Greek programs together with the Greek American lobby. We are witnessing another moment of crisis today. Opportunities usually come together with crisis, but this opportunity requires real vigilance. Members of the Greek American community outside the university must recognize how vital the work is of Modern Greek programs in higher education, and also how vulnerable it is to dismantling. The time has never been more urgent to support Modern Greek Studies programs in the best public and private universities in this country.

Let me close by suggesting ways that people can lend a helping hand. Support can and must take a variety of forms, and there is something in this list for everyone:

1. On the level of grand giving, endowments ensure the perpetuity of Modern Greek Studies programs. We must find ways to endow existing positions and to create new Chairs and programs. Additionally endowments can be made for student internships, scholarships, research positions, and prizes, and for annual lectures for the

entire community. There is no better way to memorialize a relative who cared to perpetuate the Greek language.

2. At a more modest level, we can contribute expendable gifts for prizes, study abroad, lectures, and other events. Small amounts may go a long way in these directions.

3. With little effort on our part and with great benefits to our minds, we can put our names on mailing lists, visit a program's website, keep track of what Modern Greek Studies programs are doing, and discover what a remarkable resource they can be for the present and the future.

4. We must take the trouble to encourage young people to take Modern Greek classes. Deep knowledge about Greek and Greece is not something we are born with. It is a valuable asset that takes work to acquire.

Above all, we need to cherish Greek learning. Greek is a remarkable language, with a continuous written legacy that can only be compared with Chinese for its longevity and with the sacred status of Hebrew and Arabic and a few other languages worldwide. Through a love of learning, we set an example for the entire world to behold, of a creative relationship with a heritage that is not ruined or dead but alive on our tongues and in our hands.

## *Appendix*

### MGSA Undergraduate Enrollment Survey for Modern Greek 2004-2010

Report submitted by Artemis Leontis 3-5-11

Published in the MGSA Bulletin 2010-11

The MGSA Undergraduate Committee annually collects detailed enrollment figures for undergraduate courses in Modern Greek taught at American colleges and universities. Data exists from Fall 2004 through Spring 2010. The Executive Director maintains the list and will make it available to MGSA members who wish to draw on the statistics for developing programs in Modern Greek.

The focus of the survey is on undergraduate enrollments in Modern Greek language courses. As a rule, the survey collects statistics only from Programs that teach Modern Greek. From these programs, it also collects figures for non-language undergraduate courses whose primary focus is on Greece, Greeks, and Greek since 1821. Programs may include courses in which Greek subjects are part of a larger topic, e.g., Mediterranean Anthropology or Ottoman History, but these figures are not included in the summary of enrollments for core courses in language, literature, history, culture. The focus is on Modern Greek language programs and their courses.

Twenty-eight programs reported statistics for 2009-11. Programs reporting were Boston College, Brown, \*UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, Columbia, Cornell, Drexel, Florida, Harvard, Hellenic College, \*U-Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Indiana, Loyola Marymount, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, New York University, Ohio State, U Pennsylvania, \*Portland State, Princeton, CUNY Queens, San Francisco State, U-South Florida, Stanford, Temple, Wayne State, Yale. (The asterisk \* indicates that the school appears for the first time on this list. Three reported statistics for the first time this year). Programs reporting in the past but not this year were U-South Alabama, Arizona, Boston University, Kent State, Illinois-Chicago, Minnesota, U Missouri-Saint Louis, and York.

Here is a summary of the main features of the survey showing numbers from 2004-2010:

	2004-5	2005-6	2006-7	2007-8	2008-9	2009-10
Number of Colleges and Universities w/ MG programs reporting	21	21	25	28	26	28
How many offered at least one year Modern Greek (MG)	20	21	24	26	26	27
How many offered first and second year MG	19	20	23	25	24	20
How many offer first, second, and third year MG	7	7	7	8	10	10
How many offer history of Modern Greece	9	11	9	8	9	10
How many offer course in MG literature	10	11	10	10	13	14
How many offer course in MG culture (including theatre, film, music)	7	6	8	11	10	15
How many offer course in MG anthropology / folklore	2	4	3	2	4	3

How many offer course in Greek-Americans	3	5	7	3	3	4
Total number of students enrolled in all language classes	1175	1275	1398	1575	1265	1457
Total in first year first semester/quarter modern Greek language	409	420	435	460	488	430
Total first year						815
Total in MG history, culture, anthropology, folklore classes	608	528	913	675	828	1325
Total in Modern Greek Literature	158	207	253	304	291	444
Total Greek American (culture, literature, identity, history)	111	69	173	98	67	85

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