

Classical and Near Eastern Studies at BU & the Power of SUNY

Summary

Specializing in the languages, literatures, and cultures of the Arabic-speaking and ancient Greek and Roman worlds, Binghamton University's **Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies (CNES)** responds to the marketplace while remaining grounded in the traditions of its constituent disciplines.

We do that through:

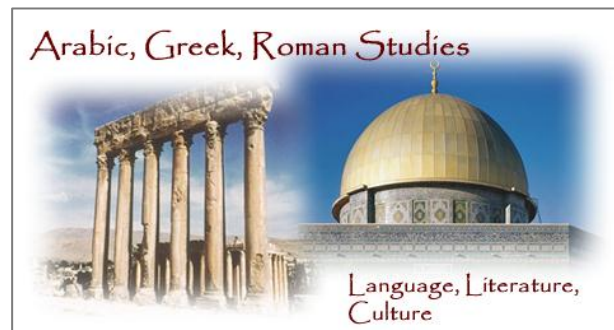
Language instruction providing a leg up for students seeking an international career (Arabic) as well for aspiring professionals in fields like law and medicine (Latin, ancient Greek)

Cultural instruction focused on the Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern worlds of today and yesterday.

Writing, speaking, and critical-thinking instruction for tomorrow's leaders.

How does that relate to SUNY's Strategic Plan? CNES contributes significantly in several areas outlined in "The Power of SUNY":

- **Learn, Search, Serve.** These three imperatives preface the SUNY Strategic Plan and explicitly ground it. But they also summarize the mission of CNES: its dedication to teaching and learning, to the search for meaning, to service on campus and beyond
- **The Entrepreneurial Century.** New York State, long an international center, needs a workforce educated in critical languages and critical-thinking. Within SUNY, CNES uniquely responds to those needs by offering the BA and Arabic and Classics
- **The Seamless Educational Pipeline.** Entering students receive ample attention from a faculty committed to optimizing the fit between prior work and departmental requirements. Arabic Studies at CNES and at Broome County College have much in common and keep in touch. Classics and Arabic tailor curricula toward timely graduation and the maintaining of standards
- **The Vibrant Community.** Our teaching staff and students continue to reach out to the community in a variety of ways, including local collaborations, volunteering, and classroom appearances in local schools
- **The World.** Whether interfacing between students and study-abroad programs, or guiding instruction overseas, or introducing students to unfamiliar, challenging realities, our teaching staff prepares students for a world of work that is in fact the world



Our Programs: An Overview

Classical and Near Eastern Studies (CNES) comprises two programs:

- **Arabic Studies**, i.e., the study of Arabic and of Arab and Islamic culture, thought, etc. Note that the study of Arabic involves coursework in both Modern Standard Arabic, used in writing and official communication throughout the Arabic-speaking world, and Egyptian dialect, the prevalent form of Arabic in daily use in Egypt, but also a dialect widely understood outside Egypt through the popularity of Egyptian entertainment and media. Apart from **the intellectual value-added afforded by a BA in Arabic Studies**, there is also **the centrality of the Middle East** in the world today, a theme to which the present document will return below
- **Classical Studies**, i.e., study of the ancient Greek, Roman, and Mediterranean worlds through
 - Language and literature (ancient Greek, ancient and Medieval Latin, ancient Egyptian)
 - Civilization and culture

Majors in Classical Studies, while they receive a well-rounded education in a variety of areas, choose one of **three major tracks** leading to the BA

- Classical Civilization (culture-focused)
- Classics, Greek and Latin (language-literature-focused)
- Latin

While classical studies has traditionally been viewed as a quintessentially “Western” discipline, **Classics at BU strives to move toward a global and inclusive perspective**, one engaged with cross-cultural connections as they relate both to the ancient world and to connections between that and today’s world

Terminological note: In what follows, the term “Arabic,” when not referring to the language itself, refers to the Program in Arabic Studies. “Classics” refers either to Classical studies as a discipline or to the Program in Classical Studies within CNES — not to the department as a whole.

To Learn, To Search, To Serve



“While our plan is outwardly focused, our vision remains grounded in the three imperatives on the SUNY seal.” That sentence, quoted directly from the preface to the SUNY Strategic Plan, neatly summarizes what CNES is all about. Grounding all that we do in the scholarly and pedagogical traditions of our respective disciplines, we cleave to the tried and true even as we experiment and innovate.

Take our commitment to **excellence in language pedagogy**. Whether it’s Arabic, ancient Greek, or Latin, a student wishing to learn one of those languages can expect to work closely with instructors focused on helping her or him achieve all that is within that student’s power.

But it can be seen as well in our commitment to the teaching of **critical thinking** and **oral and written communication**, skills central to SUNY’s requirements for General Education. Just note

the number of our courses fulfilling “C”-writing and “O”-oral communication requirements. Note as well the focus on critical thinking in offerings like “Persuasion in Ancient Greece” (CLAS 382A) and “Ancient Gender and Sexuality” (CLAS 381A).

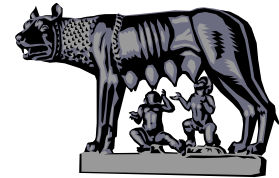
To Search. Dedicated to teaching, our department is equally dedicated to research. Whether breaking new ground in the study of ancient women and theater, or in the study of ancient identity and its social and rhetorical consequences, our research creatively synergizes with our instruction for the benefit of students.

Then there is SUNY’s commitment to **diversity**. Likewise committed to diversity, CNES seeks out students from backgrounds underrepresented in post-secondary education, and offers all students a curriculum seeking break free of traditional constraints. Take, for example, a course like “Race and Ethnicity in Ancient North Africa.” Cross-listed with Africana Studies and Anthropology, this Classics offering examines ancient Roman racial attitudes, which it examines in counterpoint to those of the modern world.

CNES and SUNY’s Big Ideas

No academic unit can be all things to all people. Still, a department like CNES can justly boast not simply of its drive for excellence, but also of its dedication to students and to the population those students will serve:

New York State citizens. We therefore feel it important to point out four of the six initiatives — the six “Big Ideas” — where CNES contributes substantially to the Power of SUNY.



CNES and the Entrepreneurial Century

To understand the role of CNES in the Entrepreneurial Century, keep in mind three facts:

1. More than ever, today’s workforce needs to be multilingual and culturally literate.
2. Arabic speaking countries have now taken center stage in world affairs.
3. Employers demand top-notch writing, speaking, and critical-thinking.

New York State, being the international business hub it is, feels those needs acutely. If SUNY must respond, CNES already has. Here we see our role as one of providing crucial support:

- ***Uniquely within SUNY***, CNES offers students the chance to pursue a BA in Arabic studies. Our curriculum is rigorous, expansive, and geared toward placement in Arabic-related careers and graduate programs. We help, in other words, put New York to work
- ***Distinctive to the program in Classical Studies at BU*** (soon to become one of only two such programs within the SUNY) is its emphasis on mastery of *writing, speaking, and critical thinking*. So while language study remains central to all we do, communication *in English* plays an ever increasing part in the Classics-specific curriculum

Purely in economic terms, those roles count for a lot. Employers increasingly seek out the skill sets we teach. Demand for well-trained Arabists in areas like education, social services, defense, and commerce continues to outpace supply. Similar can said for writing, speaking, and critical-thinking, which increasingly draw comment from employers seeking to convey to educators what today’s student needs from a liberal-arts education.

That supporting role should, however, be viewed alongside **proactive, entrepreneurial efforts undertaken by CNES itself**. Thus in both programs, efforts by faculty members to cultivate relationships with potential donors have paid off in terms of faculty and curricular development.

Of a piece with that is the \$8,500 CAAS (Classical Association of the Atlantic States) Presidential Initiative Grant awarded to faculty member John Starks and BU senior and Classics major Santino DeAngelo for *The Ghoul Next Door*, an original musical based on Plautus' *Mostellaria*. (See also below, "[CNES and the Vibrant Community](#).") That award will, it is hoped, be supplemented through additional outside grants and awards.

Finally, a smarter faculty means better educated students. Note should, therefore, be taken of revenues stemming from online Classical Civilization course offerings and invested in our faculty's intellectual and professional development.

CNES and the Seamless Educational Pipeline

Blazing a path to "student success . . . from cradle through career," the Power of SUNY seeks to "close gaps along the educational pipeline." And so does CNES. This is an important consideration for our department. Take, for instance, Arabic. While CNES offers the only Arabic BA in the state, feeder institutions for BU have begun offering courses in the language. Sharing teaching staff with Broome, the CNES Program in Arabic is well situated to optimize the fit between past and future work of Broome transfers entering CNES.



Indeed, the program in Arabic Studies has a proven track record of accommodating transfers to Binghamton who come specifically for the Arabic major. This fact has been especially in evidence in recent years, and especially as the teaching of Arabic in the USA, even at community college level, involves more and more the use of the *al-Kitaab* series of textbooks.

As for the Program in Classics, its teaching staff has undertaken a revision of requirements with a view to timely completion of degree. That matters because a number of students come to the Program from community colleges around the state. Also favorable to timely completion of degree is the flexibility afforded advanced students in Greek and Latin. Able to choose from wide variety of 300-level offerings, they benefit from a curriculum designed to adapt itself to their needs.

Finally, both programs take a proactive role in advising, whether that's for courses on campus or off. Indeed, we place a premium on optimizing the fit between the study-abroad programs we send our students to and our major requirements. (See below, "[CNES and the World](#).")

CNES and the Vibrant Community

CNES seeks to maintain vibrant connections with the local community. On one level, that is curricular. So, for instance, one of our students is currently working very closely with John Starks, Assistant Professor Classics, on an honors project whose interdisciplinary aspect, which combines classics with drama, involves the Know Theatre, an organization quite prominent in the local arts scene. On one level, the aforementioned project has paid off in purely financial terms, insofar as it has been awarded a CAAS (Classical Association of the Atlantic States) Presidential Initiative Grant. But it has paid off as well in terms of town and gown. The student in question, Santino DeAngelo, is very active in the arts locally and beyond, and has been quite up front

about his satisfaction at being able to work with a program as flexible and interdisciplinary as Classics. At the same time, Classics at Binghamton is working on other partnerships, including one with the Binghamton Senators having to do with their Roman soldier, hockey-playing, mascot, as well as with the Classical Association of the Empire State.

Similar can be said of the Department's Arabic side, in that it keeps in touch with local communities and organizations that are specially interested with the Middle East (e.g., the Middle Eastern Cultural Association), to announce and publicize events/developments/initiatives (e.g., fund raising) of mutual interests.

CNES and the World

Simply in terms of its BA in Arabic, CNES finds no parallel within the SUNY system. Classed as a critical language by the US Department of State, and as one of the top four languages in the world today, CNES Arabic is well served by a faculty including three native speakers. Then there are courses offered by CNES in the politics and civilization of the Arabic-speaking and Islamic worlds. That breadth of curriculum helps strengthen international ties on campus, which hosts upwards of three hundred students each year. But our faculty has also been instrumental in developing programs of study abroad, for instance, at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, and more recently at Alexandria University's TAFL program in Egypt.

So, too, on the Classics side, we regard it as an opportunity not to be missed to study abroad, not just for the sake of Classics itself but also for the international experience. Some of the programs we send our undergraduates to are SUNY-sponsored, others are not. But our faculty carefully vets them all. At the same time, we are in discussion regarding the establishment of a study-abroad program of our own, one suited to curricular needs of the program as well as to the international initiatives of the University.

