Statement on Proposed Elimination of the Classical Studies Major at Michigan State University:

On October 30, Michigan State University Provost Kim Wilcox recommended the elimination of the Classical Studies Major as well as several other programs as part of a budget reduction plan that he presented to the Board of Trustees. The budget challenges facing the University are indeed severe, but cutting Classics will not result in any budget savings, and it is detrimental to our students, our faculty and to the reputation of the University itself.

Provost Wilcox admitted on October 30 that he did not know what, if anything, would be saved by cutting programs, and our Dean, Karin Wurst, has only referred vaguely to the “current economic climate” as justification for eliminating the program. This is disturbing given the urgency of realizing actual savings in the budget, because nothing is saved by eliminating Classical Studies. There are no administrative costs for Classical Studies, no dedicated support staff, no graduate students, no temporary instructors, no lab or material costs, and the current faculty will remain on staff.

In a recent e-mail to our current majors, the Dean claims that in the last five years we have had only a total of 11 majors. Our current major did not exist five years ago. It was first offered in January of 2006 and students did not begin enrolling in significant numbers until fall of that year. In fact, we have had an average of 24 majors enrolled each of the past three years, and we have graduated six majors in each of the past two years. These numbers are above average for other programs of comparable size in our College.

The Dean has also claimed that our courses are too specialized and that we do not reach a broad student audience. This reflects a profound misunderstanding of the nature of our program and the typical enrollments in our courses. For example, CLA 160, which is offered this semester, has 160 students with 47 different majors represented from across the University. This would seem, by any definition, to be a “broad” audience. We offer three or more civilization courses each semester and enrollments typically range from 30 to 200, with only a small minority in Classical Studies. All of the courses that support our major attract a diverse student audience and have strong enrollments, as shown by the fact that we have an average of 34 students per class (including the upper-level language) in the current academic year.

The Dean has told us that after the elimination of our program we will all be assigned full-time to general education. This means that of all the faculty in programs that may be affected by proposed cuts we will be only ones who will not be allowed to teach in our discipline.

The elimination of the Classics program along with all Greek, Latin and Classical Civilization courses not only makes no sense in budgetary terms, it also strikes at the heart of the mission of MSU as a land grant institution.
In 1855, the Michigan legislature passed Article 13, Section 11, which founded the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan. Article 13 became the model for the Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1862, which established MSU and other Land Grant institutions. Section 4 of the Morrill Act authorized the sale of public land to create endowments for states to establish colleges of agriculture and the mechanic arts “without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics.”

“Classical studies” in this context can only refer to Latin and Greek and related fields, and it is the only discipline in the humanities named in the act. This wording was part of an addition to original version of the Morrill Act that had been vetoed by President Buchanan in 1859, and it shows that Lincoln and other supporters of the Act recognized that the discipline of classical studies is essential part of the educational goals the public land grant schools, and this continues to be recognized by land grant universities across the country.

Cutting Classics clearly contradicts the Morrill Act, and it would give MSU, “The Pioneer Land Grant University,” the embarrassing distinction of being the only Land Grant university in the Big Ten and in the CIC that does not offer Classics.

Michigan State University is a premier land-grant university, but it is also preeminently an AAU university, one of only a handful of public universities that have such distinction. To cut Classics is to negate our intellectual heritage and to deny generations of students training in the core discipline of liberal arts education.

The economy poses serious challenges to universities across the country, especially so in Michigan. In the case of Classical Studies, however, MSU seems to have lost sight of budgetary goals as well as educational values. The hasty and unnecessary elimination of Classical Studies undermines the University’s claim to be a center of learning and a leader in global education. There is nothing to be saved by cutting Classical Studies, but much to be lost by our students, by our faculty, and by the University itself, all for no reason.

We urge colleagues in the profession and in the liberal arts in general, as well as informed and concerned citizens across the state and county, to write letters to our chief academic officers, President Lou Anna Simon, Provost Kim Wilcox, and dean of the College of Arts and Letters Karin Wurst in support of retaining and indeed fostering the study of Classics at Michigan State.

Sincerely
The Faculty in Classical Studies
Michigan State University

contact information for MSU administration:
Lou Anna K. Simon, President  presmail@msu.edu
Kim Wilcox, Provost  
kwilcox@msu.edu

Karin A. Wurst, Dean, Arts and Letters:  
wurst@msu.edu

320 LINTON HALL  
EAST LANSING MI 48824-1044  
517-355-4597