Essay #4: The Classical Curriculum, by Wilfred F. Bunge

The earliest curriculum of Luther College was a fixed curriculum. All students took the same courses. This pattern was fairly typical of colleges and universities well into the 19th century. However, the elective curriculum—choice of courses and major concentrations—was gaining ground about the time Luther College opened.

Schools of higher education in the 19th century often provided a bridge to college-level education by offering two to four years of what later became high school-level education. Early on Luther offered a six-year program. The first two years expanded to three in 1889 and became the Preparatory Department. President Larsen described the six-year program in the first catalog of the college, published in Norwegian in 1872.

This was the classical curriculum, the most common fixed curriculum in schools that prepared students for professional education in law, medicine, theology, etc.—classical because it focused on the languages, literature, and history of Ancient “Classical” Rome and Greece. The greatest emphasis was on mastery of the Latin language—Larsen called the school a “Latin School.” Students studied Latin six years and Greek four. Additional subjects included German, Norwegian, English, and Hebrew languages; substantial attention to mathematics, history, music, and Christianity (catechism); logic; and geography, natural history, penmanship, and Bible history the first two years only.

The persistence of the classical curriculum until 1932—primarily Latin and Greek languages; electives, including the natural sciences, were increasingly available beginning in the late 19th century—was largely due to the primary purpose of the school, the basic education of potential pastors for the church. However, the college was open from the beginning to any young man seeking a liberal education. Consistent with this, Larsen argued that the study of the languages and culture of Ancient Rome and Greece was the best way for students “to develop their intellectual powers.”

Statistics compiled for the 60th anniversary of the college in 1921 reveal the inclusion of students with varied professional goals. Among the 801 graduates are 304 clergymen, 163 professors and teachers, 77 merchants and businessmen, 44 bankers, 44 physicians and dentists, 38 farmers, 27 lawyers, 25 public officials, and 14 editors and authors.