

The California Mentoring Project¹

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PREFACE (ROBINSON)

I have always enjoyed teaching and have long sensed the importance of connecting and sharing with other teachers on a regular basis. Over the years, I have acquired many new methods, activities, and resources from colleagues whom I have met at meetings, conferences, and less formal gatherings. I quickly realized that this sharing and mentoring went both ways and was not dependent upon the person's age, longevity, or even the specific language they taught. I learned that if I stayed open to new ideas and, more recently, to emerging technologies, I could bring new energy and more effective methodologies into my classroom. Lately, as I have been approaching retirement age and have become quite intent upon finding a skilled, enthusiastic, and energetic teacher to take over my program, it has become even more clear to me that California would benefit greatly from two things: a way to encourage more Classics graduates to become teachers, and a mentoring program with sufficient breadth and depth to support these new teachers, as well as our current Latin and Greek teachers and their programs. I wanted to become involved in achieving these worthy goals.

Last year, when Dr. Mary Pendergraft spearheaded the [Tirones website](#) as an initiative of the National Committee for Latin and Greek, I watched with interest. This year, she challenged me, "Katie, I know you are worried about the future.

¹ Katie Robinson presented an earlier version of this report at the American Classical League's 2015 Institute at the University of Connecticut, as part of a panel on mentoring led by Dr. Mary Pendergraft, Chair of the National Committee for Latin and Greek. Katie Robinson is a sub-committee chair on the NCLG and her colleague Dr. Kathryn Chew is a Professor of Classics at California State University, Long Beach, where she has been directly involved in their Latin teacher credentialing program for many years.

Why don't you see if you can help develop a mentoring program in California?" So I pitched a basic plan for mentoring newly credentialed teachers to Dr. Kathryn Chew to see if she would be interested in collaborating. I knew that she would be a strong partner and would bring many years of experience in teacher training to the project. Not surprisingly, her immediate response was, "Thumbs up! Yes, I think we should do that!" From that point, our project has been met with support and assistance from many in the greater California Classics community, and our goals have broadened considerably. As Dr. Conrad Barrett, current President of CCA-South, put it, "I doubt (there is) a more timely and vital topic."

THE CALIFORNIA MENTORING PROJECT PLAN (ROBINSON & CHEW)

There are several models for mentoring, each with strong points and drawbacks. For our demographic, the California Mentoring Project needed to quickly connect new teachers in California with mentors, provide appropriate and specific advice effectively, and conduct everything within a safe environment. Potentially, a new teacher might suddenly need help finding a new angle on a current lesson, as well as want some advice in planning for a long-term project or field trip. These needs would certainly change many times over the course of the year, and so we wanted to design a system that would allow maximum flexibility. We needed a means by which new teachers could request advice at any time about any topic and get fairly immediate feedback from a knowledgeable mentor. Thus we initially decided upon scripting a web-based electronic request form. Teachers could send a separate request for each need, and the program would provide them with the best mentor for each particular situation. In this way, new teachers would have the benefit of a large pool of mentors with a wide range of expertise.

With the assistance and support of the California Classical Association, both North and South, we sent out an email blast to their combined membership. In this way, we were able to quickly spread the word about the California Mentoring Project and make an initial call for volunteer mentors from around the state. Within this email, we also included a long list of typical areas in which teachers might want advice from a mentor. Within one week we had 16 volunteers from all levels of education and more followed later. We also knew precisely what the interests and skills of each mentor were. From this information we created a spreadsheet of mentors, areas, and contact emails. The response to this initial call for mentors was much

more than we expected, and we were certainly encouraged by all of the supportive remarks of the volunteers.

We discussed alternative types of request forms, but decided to post a Google Form on an existing Classics website. Through submitting this form, any Latin or Greek teacher in California will check off the topic they need advice about, give a few additional details, and provide their preferred contact email. The data coming from the Google Form will be automatically collected in a spreadsheet shared only with the Mentoring Project monitors. These monitors will then forward the request on directly to appropriate mentors. The mentor will contact the teacher at their earliest convenience (hopefully, in less than 24 hours) with a brief reply and follow up later with more advice, or plan as needed. After this point, the mentor and teacher can communicate in whatever manner they see fit, depending on the need and their relationship.

Potentially, some teachers might develop ongoing conversations and keep in touch with a single mentor teacher over a period of years. It is also conceivable that younger teachers might begin to share in return with their mentors from their own expertise in areas such as new technology. These are both beneficial forms of professional networking that we hope and imagine will eventually occur. The goal of our specific program, however, is to support those teachers who are new to the field or who are teaching a brand new course or grade level with immediate, specific advice, from the best mentors we have in the program.

Both the type of message forwarding we have chosen and the necessary oversight by personal monitors should maintain a certain level of privacy and a safe environment for mentors and mentees. We feel that this privacy is critically important. Within discussion groups and fora, a participant's questions and comments are public. For many new teachers, this vulnerability can be intimidating. Despite the caliber of participants within these groups and their expertise in many areas, the volume and variety of responses can be overwhelming for someone posing a question. Many new teachers have told us that they would prefer a more private and tailored approach to getting advice when they are dealing with such things as differentiated instruction, aligning with standards, student recruitment, or relationships with administrators. In the end, we decided to opt out of using any kind of social media as a part of the California Mentoring Project. No mentoring program can be successful if teachers are reluctant to use it.

Now, with a request system and a pool of mentors in place, the final piece will be advertising the mentoring program to new teachers. First, we plan to contact anyone receiving a California teaching credential in Classical Languages. We realize, however, that many who become Latin and Greek teachers in California do not go through any credentialing program. We will therefore try to reach all students graduating with Classics degrees by contacting university departments and through consulting the membership rolls of Eta Sigma Phi chapters in California. We also hope to personally announce the program at regional meetings. Brief announcements will be sent out which could be included in various university department newsletters.

It must be emphasized that the position of Monitor is a key role in our Mentoring Project. Although the authors of the program will take on this responsibility initially, it would seem wise that for the long term the California Classical Associations, North and South might consider taking on general oversight. This could be accomplished by having two Members at Large associated with or included in the Board who would volunteer to be Champions or Liaisons for the Mentoring Project. They could monitor the mentoring requests themselves, or ensure that two Monitors are always in place. Moreover, as Champions or Liaisons, they would become the face of the program. They would promote mentoring by making announcements at meetings, by communicating with university departments, and by making sure that all new teachers are aware of the mentoring resources available to them in California.

This is a brief introduction to the program. We will certainly learn a great deal as this first year progresses. We will be working to fine-tune the whole process and will be eager for feedback from all of those teachers and mentors involved.