The study of Latin and Greek has been a fixture at Catholic University since the 1890s, when Rev. Daniel Quinn came to the University as a professor of Greek.

"In a sense, he was the founder of the department and one of the original faculty at the University," said Professor William Klingshirn, chair of the Department of Greek and Latin.

In those years, Latin was a required subject in most secondary schools and it was assumed students entering university would already have a working knowledge of it.

In recent years, the criticism has given way to a resurgence as more experts point to the benefits of studying Latin. Studies have shown that Latin learners earn higher SAT scores in both the verbal and mathematics portions. The language helps students learn about sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary since 60 percent of all English words are derived from Latin. Learning Latin can also help students pick up other Romance languages as many Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese words are derived from Latin.

In CUA's Latin and Greek department, undergraduate students can choose from three majors: Classics, Classical Humanities, or Classical Civilization. The department also offers two master's programs, a Ph.D. program, and a certificate. It graduated five undergraduate students this year and has a thriving graduate program with more than 15 students. Many more students minor in Greek and Latin or use the classes to fulfill their foreign language requirements.

Klingshirn believes there are many reasons people study the subject. Some enjoy reading source materials in many disciplines from the dawn of Western civilization. Some get into Latin for its practical benefits, like an increased understanding of vocabulary or to meet job demands. Still others are drawn to the puzzle-like work of translating Latin and Greek works.

"The cool thing about Classics and one of the things that kept me in it was I felt like it could open up any world I wanted," Klingshirn said. "To understand the ancient world completely, you have to use every form of knowledge that we have."

By Katie Bahr

Jane Brinley, M.A. 1999, leads a group discussion during a Latin class at School Without Walls, a public magnet school in Washington, D.C., where she teaches.
Recent graduate Shannon Ells, B.A. 2014, of Brick, N.J., was drawn to the Greek and Latin department because of her interest in archeology. A Classical Civilization major, she spent her four years studying the history, culture, and languages of ancient Greece and Rome in order to develop the base of knowledge she will need as an archeologist. During her time at CUA, Ells was able to study abroad and participate in archeological digs in Israel, Rome, and Greece. Next year, she will begin a two-year classical archeology graduate program at the University of Arizona. She believes her background in Greek and Latin has prepared her for a life of study.

“I think I’m a better speaker and a better writer because of this major and I think that it just shows I have very wide-ranging transferable skills that are verbal skills, writing skills, analyzing skills,” she said.

Kevin Oriani of Long Island, N.Y., another Classical Civilization major, poses during an archeological dig in Greece.

“I think that Latin is a lot less stuffy than people think it is and I’m really happy to see that it’s coming back in style,” he said. “There’s a lot to be gained in studying Latin, both in the ways that it’s useful and also in the ways that it’s good for the soul.”

Shannon Ells, B.A. 2014, a Classical Civilization major, poses during an archeological dig in Greece.

Kevin Oriani says that Latin is especially helpful for priests and students interested in philosophical and theological studies of future priests.

Shannon Ells, B.A. 2014, and Irene Murphy smile with their students from St. John’s College High School while participating in a field trip to CUA’s antiquities collection in McMahon Hall.

Students could closely examine each piece’s decorations and texture to figure out how it might have been used.

Murphy believes that by learning about the ancient world students gain a new perspective on the world around them. What starts with memorizing vocabulary and translating sentences can lead to a deeper understanding of history and the cultural remnants of the classical world that still remain today. Students can develop a passion for digging deeper and looking back to see our modern world with new eyes.

While at CUA, Murphy can remember translating Greek papyrus fragments during a class with Sarah Bronn Ferrarini, associate professor of Greek and Latin, and the late Rev. Frank Gagnic, then professor and director of biblical studies in the School of Theology and Religious Studies.

“The ancients ask really interesting questions — questions that everyone should be asking in their day about what it means to be human and what human excellence is,” or...