

The Classical Diploma at Phillips Exeter Academy – Classical Diploma an der Phillips Exeter Academy – Il Classical Diploma presso la Phillips Exeter Academy [Muchnick]

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Phillips Exeter Academy (also known as “PEA,” “Phillips Exeter,” or simply “Exeter”) is a college-preparatory boarding school located in the town of Exeter, New Hampshire, USA—about 100 kilometers north of Boston, Massachusetts. The school was founded in 1781, within a transitional and transformative era of American educational history known as “the age of the academies.”¹ During this period, the traditional model of the classical grammar school—typified by English antecedents like St. Paul’s School of London as well as colonial institutions like the Boston Latin School—was supplanted by a new breed of secondary schools promoting, at least in theory, a more broad-based curriculum. In practice, though, Exeter’s curricular balance was hotly contested from the outset, with generations of schoolmasters, schoolchildren, trustees, and other institutional stakeholders debating how much time and emphasis to allot to the classics (Latin and ancient Greek) versus other academic subjects (English, modern languages, the sciences, etc.).

The Exeter of the present day, as one might expect, has changed greatly since its eighteenth-century origins. In stark contrast to the inaugural class of fifty-six boys drawn primarily from a nearby circle of New Hampshire and Massachusetts towns, Exeter’s current student body is coeducational and consists of roughly 1100 students, who between them represent an expansive collection of US states and other nationalities. The school’s program of study is built around a loose core of requirements, while also offering significant room—particularly within the upper-level coursework—for electives and additional forms of individual choice. The typical Exeter student who enters in ninth grade and continues through the entire four-year academic program must fulfill a prescribed number of terms in the following subject areas:

English (literature): eleven terms (i.e., four years total, less one term)
Languages (classical and/or modern): nine terms (i.e., three years total)
Mathematics: nine terms (i.e., three years total)
Physical education (interscholastic athletics and/or intradepartmental classes): nine terms (i.e., three years total)
History: six terms (i.e., two years total)
Science: six terms (i.e., two years total)
Arts (studio and/or performance): three terms (i.e., one year total)
Religion, ethics, and philosophy: two terms (i.e., two-thirds of a year total)
Computer science: one term

¹ Theodore R.Sizer., *The Age of the Academies* (Teachers College, 1964), 1.

Health and Human Development: one sequence of five partial-credit courses²

As is evident from this curricular overview, the classical languages of Latin and Greek are *not* required components of the Exeter course of study. Today, there are very few secondary schools in America that maintain any form of a classical language requirement. (Among these rare classical diehards are a pair of well-regarded Massachusetts preparatory schools—the Roxbury Latin School and the Groton School—that are both considered, in a general sense, peer institutions to Exeter.)³ In line with most schools that continue to offer Latin or Greek in any capacity, Exeter affords its students a choice between the classics and a variety of modern languages; in Exeter’s case, these modern languages are Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.⁴

Within this marketplace of linguistic options, the classics at Exeter must therefore compete for student attention and enrollment—and, for all the perpetual talk of “dead languages” and the attendant narratives of “decline and fall,” Exeter’s classics department manages to fare moderately well. The department consists of five full-time faculty members and has recently moved into its own newly renovated building on campus.⁵ Even more substantively, about a hundred students (9% of the student body) take Latin at Exeter. (A much smaller subset of these students also continues on to take Greek.)

Students at Exeter opt to study the classics for many of the standard reasons: personal interest, teacher reputation, the advice of a friend, the desire to broaden their English vocabulary. However, the school also dangles one added inducement to potential classicists. At Exeter, students who commit themselves to the classics—by achieving advanced reading proficiency in one of the classical languages and basic reading proficiency in the other—are awarded what is known as a “Classical Diploma.” The exact pathways toward receiving this Classical Diploma are somewhat convoluted because they are coded to Exeter’s peculiar course numbering system, but essentially, there are two main tracks a student can take. The far more common one is the “Latin Concentration,” in which a student completes the equivalent of fourth-year Latin as well as an accelerated one-year Greek sequence. The other pathway, elected only in rare circumstances, is the “Greek Concentration,” which inverts the requirements to encompass extensive coursework in Greek and an accelerated supplement in Latin. (The overwhelming popularity of the Latin Concentration compared to the Greek Concentration reflects the priority of Latin over Greek in

² Phillips Exeter Academy, *2025–26 Courses of Instruction*, 2, <https://exeter.edu/app/uploads/2025/07/PEA-COI-25-26-Web-7.28.25.pdf>. Exeter is on the trimester calendar system, with the school year divided into Fall, Winter, and Spring Terms of equal length.

³ Groton School, *Academic Policies and Course Catalogue 2026–27*, 4, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1780926149/grotonorg/tz9apcqliwlsbcl287w9/6626Coursecatalog.pdf>; Roxbury Latin School, *Catalogue 2025–26*, 19–21, https://issuu.com/roxburylatin/docs/2025-2026_course_catalogue.

⁴ Phillips Exeter Academy, *2025–26 Courses of Instruction*, 41–50. Exeter also provides accelerated one-year sequences in Arabic and Italian, but these courses do not fulfill the language requirement and must be taken as senior-level electives.

⁵ For a promotional piece on Davis Hall, Exeter’s new classics building, see Debbie Kane, “Preserved in Stone, Reimagined in Spirit,” *Exeter Bulletin* 130, no. 1 (Fall 2025): 44–50, https://issuu.com/exeterbulletin/docs/the_exeter_bulletin_fall_2025.

American classical education writ large, as well the pedagogical balance of Exeter's classical languages department in particular.)

Each year at Exeter, roughly twenty students (2% of the student body) are awarded a Classical Diploma. But what exactly is it that these students receive? The most evident distinction is in the physical "piece of paper" handed to them on Commencement Day. Students who graduate with a Classical Diploma are given a diploma with Latin text, as opposed to the typical Exeter diploma, which is written in English. In addition, Classical Diploma awardees are positioned at the front of the graduation procession and thus are first in line to receive their diplomas, and they are entitled to wear a laurel wreath during the ceremony. As a more private honor, there is also a Classical Diploma Dinner—open only to Classical Diploma awardees and the classical languages faculty—that is held on one of the evenings leading up to graduation.

Within the broader community of New England preparatory schools, Exeter is uncommon but not unique in according some type of "special" distinction to a subgroup of students who complete a predefined academic program beyond the standard course of study. The Hotchkiss School also offers its own "Classics Diploma," while St. Paul's School offers a "Classical Honors Diploma" as well as a STEM-related counterpart, the "Applied Science and Engineering Program."⁶ Among all of Exeter's peer institutions, Choate Rosemary Hall—which does not itself offer a Classical Diploma of any sort—may nonetheless be the school that has gone the farthest to develop the idea of specialized academic concentrations, allowing its students to choose from eight "Signature Programs" that range from robotics to environmental studies to public service.⁷

Schools such as Hotchkiss, St. Paul's, and Choate possess their own institutional histories and sets of priorities that have led them to establish and maintain these forms of diploma-related distinctions. In the specific case of Exeter, the Classical Diploma traces its roots to the curricular debates that had affected the school from its earliest years, when the traditional idea of classical education was defended by some and called into question by others. For much of the nineteenth century, Exeter essentially operated as two parallel schools housed under the same institutional roof: a "Department of Languages" and an "English Department." In the Department of Languages, students followed a curriculum dominated by Latin, Greek, and mathematics—the subjects required for admission to Harvard and other northeastern colleges. Meanwhile, Exeter's English Department offered instruction not in the classical languages, but rather in a wide range of practical and even downright vocational subjects including English grammar, chemistry, astronomy, moral and political philosophy, surveying, and navigation.⁸ Students in the English

⁶ Hotchkiss School, *Almanac: Community Life Guidelines, School Year 2025–26*, 57, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1756320228/hotchkiss/dnfce9cjekftoog0ojvp/2025-26-Almanac-082625.pdf>; St. Paul's School, *Courses: 2024–25 Offerings*, 32, 46, https://issuu.com/stpaulsschool/docs/course_catalog_2024-25_web. This St. Paul's School, located in Concord, New Hampshire, should not be confused with the similarly named but unaffiliated St. Paul's School in London, UK—or indeed with any of the numerous other St. Paul's Schools that exist worldwide.

⁷ Choate Rosemary Hall, *2025–2026 Course Catalogue*, 13–18, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1741789384/choate/j6zwjfc6fmfrwof05dq/Choate-Rosemary-Hall--Course-Catalogue-25-26--optimized.pdf>.

⁸ The foregoing description paraphrases Benjamin Abbot, Phillips Exeter Academy course of study, 1833, box 1, folder C976, Exoniana Collection, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives.

Department were not preparing for college; instead, they sought an education that would enable them to immediately enter into business, the trades, or analogous middle-class careers.

These separate departments ceased to exist in 1895, when—following an external review by Harvard’s Schools Examination Board—Exeter was restructured as a single-tracked, exclusively college-preparatory institution.⁹ Concurrently, within the world of higher education, the classical languages were being demoted from their longstanding position of preeminence in college admission requirements: Harvard dropped Greek as a prerequisite in 1887, and Yale followed suit in 1903.¹⁰ That same year, Exeter—ever-attentive to these changing curricular winds—eliminated its own Greek requirement, allowing students to forego the study of Greek by taking a modern foreign language (German or French) instead. This new direction proved controversial among Exeter’s vocal and influential corps of alumni, one of whom delivered a spirited address declaring unequivocally that “Phillips Exeter Academy is, above all else, and always has been, a school of the classics. It has believed in Greek and Latin as the best training for the mind.”¹¹ Notwithstanding this impassioned orator’s disregard for the history of Exeter’s decidedly non-classical English Department, his sentiment reflected a deep anxiety about whether even the slightest shift away from the classical curriculum would strip the school of its innate character.

There is no evidence in the Exeter Archives to suggest that alumni pressure directly led to the creation of the Classical Diploma, but it is perhaps not entirely coincidental that a set of special Classical Diploma requirements first appeared in Exeter’s 1903–04 curricular catalogue—the first academic year that Greek was no longer a required component of the curriculum. Either to mollify disgruntled alumni or to make a more general compromise between the old ways and the new, Exeter’s Classical Diploma provided formal recognition of those students who continued to walk the well-hewn classical path even in an age of ever-greater curricular choice. “A candidate for a Classical Diploma,” read the 1903–04 catalogue, “must have had at least five years of Latin and Greek, by any combination.”¹²

Although the exact parameters have grown a bit more complicated since 1903–04, the spirit of the Classical Diploma has remained intact for well over a century. Amidst every successive wave of institutional change at Exeter—the dropping of mandatory Latin in 1946, the coeducation of the student body in 1970, and so many generations of administrative and faculty turnover—the Classical Diploma has continued to serve as a means of enticing students to pursue the classics

⁹ See James McLachlan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Study* (Scribner’s, 1970), 219–241, for a thorough account of this restructuring and, more broadly, the transitional late-nineteenth-century period of Exeter’s institutional history.

¹⁰ The factors behind these decisions at the college level are thoroughly examined by Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹¹ Francis Rawle, “Oration”, in *Exercises incident to the General Reunion of the Alumni of the Phillips Exeter Academy on the occasion of the opening of the new Alumni Hall, 1903* (Plimpton Press, 1904), 19, box 3, folder R44, Exoniana Collection, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives.

¹² *Catalogue of The Phillips Exeter Academy, 1903–1904* (News-Letter Press, 1904), 21, Phillips Exeter Academy Catalogues, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives. The typical length of an Exeter education, then as now, was four years, so this five-year requirement meant that a student pursuing a Classical Diploma would have had to “double up” on Latin and Greek for at least one year.

and distinguishing them for doing so. Students who are drawn to the Classical Diploma have a variety of individual motivations, though one hint to the Classical Diploma's enduring allure can be found in a remarkably candid promotional pamphlet put together by Exeter's classical languages department in the 1990s. Explicitly linking the Classical Diploma to the competitive college admission landscape, this pamphlet advertised that "the Classical Diploma gives evidence that a student has a serious interest in pursuing a given body of knowledge that is exemplary in the training of the mind," meaning that "colleges and universities look favorably upon applicants who present it as part of their application."¹³ Whether the Classical Diploma does—or ever did—tangibly improve a student's college admission outcomes is an open question, and one that would require access to a great deal more quantitative data than Exeter would likely be willing to share. Another open question, of a more sociological nature, is whether this awarding of a special diploma to 2% of the student body perpetuates an elitist (as in *classicus*) conception of the classics that many practitioners of the discipline have been trying to shake.¹⁴ Nonetheless, whatever its broader implications may be, the Classical Diploma has proven an effective recruitment and branding strategy for Exeter's classical languages department, as well as a durable tradition within Exeter's institutional history.

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¹³ "Classical Languages at Exeter," n.d., Classics Department Records, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives. The department chair—Allan Wooley—listed on the pamphlet dates it to the 1990s.

¹⁴ This question extends beyond the classics and into the institutional form of Exeter and its peer institutions. For two scintillating sociological interrogations of elites and elitism at New England prep schools, see Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School* (Harvard University Press, 2009) and Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

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