

## Report of the Task Force against Campus Bigotry

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# *Report*



## MLA TASK FORCE AGAINST CAMPUS BIGOTRY

### WHAT WAS THE CHARGE TO THE TASK FORCE?

The Task Force against Campus Bigotry was established to

assist the MLA, MLA members, and the academic community to oppose bigotry on campus and promote a campus environment of mutual respect and toleration. Toward this general end, the task force will articulate questions, issues, and problems raised by campus struggles over bigotry, putative or actual. It will identify and/or develop informational materials it judges can be helpful to MLA members and other members of the academic community on campuses. The task force will not take up individual cases or investigate complaints. The report from the task force and related materials will be delivered to the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities, which in turn will make them available to MLA standing committees that deal with these problems in an ongoing way.

In carrying out this charge, the task force defined a process by which we clarified basic issues; established a network for communication and consultation with MLA committees, commissions, and members; identified resources within the MLA for defining the problem from multiple points of view and posing solutions to it; and developed a list of recommendations for ongoing action.

This process included the following activities:

We communicated with MLA committees and commissions:

to solicit their views on and experiences with issues related to bigotry  
to solicit their support in identifying resources and materials to address the issues  
to solicit their ideas about ways to make materials available to MLA members and others

to invite their participation in a forum at the 1998 MLA Annual Convention for leaders in the organization to engage in a focused dialogue about appropriate actions

We reported to the membership through the *MLA Newsletter* about the activities of the task force and invited members to share their views.

We arranged two panels at the 1998 MLA Annual Convention to raise relevant issues and to share information. They were “Teaching Tolerance: Combating Bigotry in the College Classroom” and “Excitable Speech: Bigotry, Tolerance, and Censorship.”

We held an open forum at the 1998 convention for MLA members to discuss their concerns about these issues directly with the task force.

We prepared papers from both MLA convention sessions for submission to the *ADFL Bulletin* and the *ADE Bulletin*. The group of essays was accepted for publication, which ensures a wide distribution among the membership of a written discussion of pertinent issues.

#### WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT FOR OUR DELIBERATIONS?

Each member of the task force came to our first meeting on 22–23 January 1998 with a sense of urgency. We were aware of the many blatant acts of hostility, aggression, and violence that were being reported on campuses across the nation and that were being attributed to racism, sexism, and heterosexism. We were equally aware of rising incidents of other less blatant but no less negative acts of exclusion, discrimination, and disrespect that have been undermining the sense of colleges and universities as free and open spaces for intellectual engagement and that have been contributing increasingly to an atmosphere of discomfort and chaos. In addition, on our various campuses each of us was involved in what we came to term “millennial talk,” about the extent to which increasing access to the Internet as a freewheeling forum for interaction is providing new occasions for displays of language use that are easily subject to misinterpretation, insensitive across multiple levels of engagement, and sometimes openly hostile and incendiary. Moreover, we were certainly knowledgeable about changing demographics in the nation, as manifested especially by the desire for access and equity in colleges and universities by students, faculty members, and staff members from a wide range of ethnic and class backgrounds, personal identities, and alliances. We were also very much informed about concerted efforts to dismantle affirmative action policies and procedures that seek to monitor and balance various configurations of difference on campuses and in classrooms. This framework raised for us a critical question.

## WHY SHOULD BIGOTRY BE AN ISSUE FOR THE MLA?

From a general point of view, all of us acknowledged the ways in which teaching, learning, and scholarly production in the humanities are particularly implicated in both problems and solutions related to issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry. The humanistic disciplines articulate variously a commitment to the preservation, development, celebration, and critical exploration of language, literature, and culture; interests in ongoing cultural production; and concerns for the human mind, body, heart, and soul. They direct attention toward considerations of worth and quality in expressiveness; issues of identity, alliance, and relationship; the complexities of representation and presentation; and so forth. Our focal points, in fact, are the very territory through which acts of bigotry are definable and gain momentum, and our theories and critical practices are a means by which transgressive behaviors can be minimized, mediated, understood, and rethought.

In addition, departments of English and foreign languages occupy a critical position in terms of our capacity to address issues with campus-wide impact. First, we teach a large number of required courses in the general education curriculum, which underscores two strengths: we teach most of the students in colleges and universities, and since students are enrolled generally by curricular mandate rather than self-selection, our classes are likely to be among the most diverse on a campus, with diversity being defined by multiple parameters (intended majors, personal identity, ideological viewpoints, etc.). Second, through research and scholarship we have developed curricular structures, pedagogical practices, and assessment practices that are designed to help students operate well: as critical and creative thinkers who exhibit a capacity to think reflectively and reflexively; as problem posers and solvers; as speakers, critical readers, and writers; as people capable of interrogating values and behavior and making qualitative judgments of various sorts. Third, in encouraging critical thinking and effective expression (in speaking and writing), our courses constitute obvious places where ideally students can gain knowledge and critical practice in the very areas that will prove beneficial to them as they are called upon to face difficult situations responsibly and well.

Fourth in the list of capabilities is a point particularly relevant for universities. In these sites, the large numbers of students whom we teach are also an indicator of the large numbers of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) whom we train to teach them. This group, we emphasize, is a centrally important constituency in our arena in that, in the main, we expect GTAs to join the professoriat ultimately as full-fledged colleagues in disciplinary enterprises. Also, as colleagues in professional training who are

assigned to courses in the general education curriculum, they constitute, in effect, the front line in addressing the challenges and issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry. Often, if not typically, they are entwined in issues and concerns that go beyond the teaching and learning of disciplinary content (literature, language, literacy, and culture). Contextual factors, especially as they are mirrored in the textual materials of the courses (in their focus on the study of literature, language, literacy, and culture), magnify additionally a need: to engender respect in classrooms as public spaces; to encourage courtesy as students and teachers in all their diversity use their critical abilities as thinkers, speakers, and writers to engage in classroom enterprises; and to mediate potentially transgressive behaviors at what are likely to be inevitable moments of challenge and conflict. To be emphasized, as indicated by the first three of the four points in this section, is that the sites at which GTAs teach are prime sites for direct engagement with complex issues in terms of both content (i.e., the study of literature, language, literacy, and culture) and context (i.e., the multidimensional interactions of personal and social identities within institutional environments). These courses constitute, therefore, areas of critical obligation for departments of English and foreign languages, who are responsible for preparing their GTAs to face classroom challenges well.

These four features of departments of English and foreign languages indicate our particular capacity and obligation to address issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry. In turn, these features also indicate that the Modern Language Association, as a major professional organization for these disciplines, should participate actively in these processes as well in ways that are in keeping with the mission of the organization, a mission that includes supporting research and scholarship, offering guidance in identifying available resources and strategies, and providing opportunities for members and others to participate in informed professional discourse. In other words, the task force members came to the first meeting with complex views of why bigotry should be an issue for the MLA. In seeking to understand the landscape against which bigotry operates, we recognized an obligation for the MLA and its members to see ourselves as participating actively in the creation and implementation of positive models of humane engagement and interaction and particularly in the critical interrogation of the uses and misuses of language, spoken and written. As professionals whose chief concerns are language, literature, literacy, and culture, we deemed it essential that we reaffirm the equational relationships between the free exchange of ideas and a free society, recognizing that whenever free exchange is compromised, the quality of teaching and learning in our disciplines is also compromised. Important also is the need to reaffirm the

view that when conflicts arise, the principle of academic freedom obliges all to renounce coercion or intimidation and to address conflict peaceably, through discursive acts of analysis, persuasion, and knowledge seeking conducted in a spirit of intellectual honesty. Most of all, we acknowledged that engendering respect and courtesy in language and actions and guarding against language and actions that are not respectful and courteous are very hard work, work that never ends. This last point underscores the importance of vigilance for the MLA and others in establishing and implementing policies and procedures that oppose bigotry on campuses and promote environments of mutual respect and toleration for all.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO US IN THE FIRST MEETING?

Despite how prepared we thought we were for the work of this task force, our views of the problem shifted as we talked intensely with one another about issues of bigotry, diversity, and tolerance from our differing perspectives and interests. This shifting of our own understanding amid dialogue revealed for us the critical role that thoughtful discussion must play in understanding and mediating difficulties—the sharing of experiences across a variable terrain; the critical interrogation of viewpoints; the garnering of evidence; the weighing of the nature, impact, and consequences of infringement; a commitment to speaking openly and articulately, listening carefully, and responding courteously; and so forth. With a renewed understanding of the role of dialogue, we recognized that a central and ongoing challenge for colleges and universities is to create and maintain a space, or several spaces, in which difficult dialogues on highly contentious issues can productively take place.

Further, we experienced a growing discomfort with the title of the task force, that is, the Task Force against Campus Bigotry. In short order, we realized that we were much more concerned about conceptualizing issues, problems, and solutions in positive rather than negative terms, that is, in terms of what we are trying to accomplish rather than just what we are trying to prevent. We preferred to be a task force focused less on keeping bigotry out than on keeping tolerance in. We affirmed that our interests were not in suppressing bigotry, as it were, but in establishing an environment in which acts of bigotry can neither thrive nor survive. The imperative was to be *against* bigotry by clarifying what it is and how it operates and by finding ways to counteract such operations through structures, systems, and processes appropriate to our disciplines that encourage *tolerance, respect, and the application of critical practices and principles* in solving contentious problems.

## WHAT IS BIGOTRY?

We began our deliberations by trying to articulate exactly what those of us in the room thought that we were against when we asserted that we were against bigotry. By the end of our first meeting we had drafted a working definition of this term, but the process of doing so made us realize the limitations of labeling a concept that is so significantly a moving target. There are always subtleties, competing interests, and both obvious and inadvertent flash points that consistently carry with them the potential for explosion. We needed, however, a specific place to anchor our deliberations, and we developed the following statement:

Bigotry is an attitude resulting from unexamined stereotypes by which certain groups are stigmatized on the basis of ascribed common characteristics and leading to words and/or actions that create a hostile or intimidating environment. The consequences of bigotry are to impede the free exchange of ideas and the application of scholarly standards to the discussion of controverted issues, to erode the mutual respect for differences that should undergird academic discourse, and to exclude members of the academic community from full participation in campus life.

As we worked over the next year, we thought more about the adequacies and inadequacies of this working definition, and by our next meeting on 21–22 January 1999, we were quite clear about two imperatives. One was the importance of reaffirming the need for fluidity in drawing lines that might suggest in an absolute way when the range of tolerance in personal behavior or experience has been violated. We were cautioned by questions of subtlety: the extent to which bigotry as a variable concept moves easily toward complex issues of community values, ethics, and morality; how it begs distinctions among naïveté, insensitivity, and blatant and conscious acts of cruelty and intimidation; how it pushes us to consider more thoughtfully the meaning of respect, courtesy, and propriety in public arenas; how it clarifies the need to think of classrooms and other sites on college and university campuses as arenas of public discourse rather than private discourse; how such rethinking highlights the need to make visible all acts of disrespect, discourtesy, and impropriety so that vital and vibrant dialogues about what constitutes transgressive behavior can take place in ways that are useful and productive in keeping campus environments safe and intellectually free and open. We came to realize that the acknowledgment, interrogation, and clarification of subtleties through sustained dialogue critically affect our ability to keep our views of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry concrete rather than just abstract. We also came to realize that

these types of sustained dialogue also serve to keep subtle actions and experiences from drifting into invisible actions and experiences. The imperative, then, for the task force was to acknowledge, even at moments of definition, the need to be ever vigilant about the possibility of harm—systemic exclusion, intimidation, discrimination, physical danger, and so forth.

A second imperative was the need to unshackle bigotry as unexamined acts from bigotry as litigable acts. We came to recognize that the territory of our work was largely not in the enforcement of laws that have been specified (e.g., the sexual harassment policies that most campuses now have in place and can be invoked in harmful situations). Our territory was in helping MLA members and others make excellent use of opportunities for intervention and even prevention before questionable acts emerge and in facilitating the development of appropriate responses whenever occasional acts (both intentional and inadvertent) occur. We perceived our attention to be well directed toward how the MLA can help members, department chairs, academic institutions, academic disciplines, and others to identify and implement solutions designed to have an influence (short-term and long-term) on the engendering of an academic environment that is safe, inclusive, and supportive of peaceable dialogue, analysis, persuasion, knowledge seeking, and knowledge making.

## WHAT WERE THE GOALS OF THE TASK FORCE?

From this working definition, we were able ultimately to specify some goals for our work:

- to complicate rather than simplify the thinking of the MLA about issues surrounding bigotry in order to make clearer the intricacies of problems and issues and to facilitate the identification of specific solutions that are appropriate for the MLA as a professional organization
- to encourage the creation of an environment in colleges and universities in which we recognize and respect individuals and their potential to be both similar among human beings and also different and in which members of the campus community feel free to engage in meaningful dialogues on difficult issues in a courteous manner, with the opportunity to express their own points of view, with the obligation to respect points of view that are likely to be different or opposing, and with the expectation that all viewpoints will be and should be critically interrogated in an academic environment
- to encourage MLA members and others to be consciously aware of the possibility of bigotry from unexpected sources, including our own attitudes and behavior; the speed with which the ignition of a spark of indignation can escalate into a flame; the need for sites, structures, and systems to address both intentional and inadvertent incidents of bigotry

to urge MLA members and others to identify resources on their campuses (or the lack of them) and elsewhere to address actively challenges to tolerance, respect, and the application of critical principles and practices whenever they arise

### WHAT SITES OF ENGAGEMENT SEEM MOST RELEVANT FOR THE WORK OF THE MLA?

In addition to these goals, we also identified four main sites of engagement that seemed particularly relevant for the MLA as a professional organization in addressing the charge of the task force:

*classroom environments*, where teachers and students pursue the study of writing, language, literature, and other cultural forms and processes

*departmental environments*, in recognition of the multiple roles of department chairs and program directors in dealing in a multilayered way with issues related to tolerance and diversity—for example, in terms of departmental governance; faculty hiring, retention, promotion, and tenure; the training of staff; student recruitment and retention; the training of GTAs; and faculty development

*curricula*, with regard to the definition, shape, and direction of both graduate and undergraduate programs in terms of course content, pedagogy, and assessment, as well as career advice and preparation

*scholarly production*, in recognition of the systems and structures by which we orchestrate the making, valuing, and dissemination of research and knowledge in the fields and subfields of our disciplines, English and foreign languages

### WHAT BASIC QUESTIONS EMERGE?

These sites of engagement became a springboard for acknowledging the obvious. Since the content of studies in literature, language, literacy, and culture center so directly on human expression, representation, presentation, communication, and so on, departments of English and foreign languages are quickly implicated in both the challenges and solutions of promoting respect and toleration. Several basic questions emerge:

The classroom, like the nation and the university in general, shows evidence of demographic change. What should the MLA be doing to clarify what these changes are and to adjust or respond to them in meaningful ways?

How should undergraduate programs, graduate programs, and training programs for GTAs responsibly address issues of diversity, respect, and tolerance?

How should departments take into account the multiple roles that faculty members are expected to play as teachers and advisers both in and beyond the classroom?

- How do faculty members continue to develop their understanding of tolerance and diversity in a complex world and to enhance their abilities to function responsibly in the face of various and sundry challenges throughout their careers?
- How should faculty members who are involved in teacher education (i.e., K–12 teacher preparation) incorporate these issues in English and foreign language programs?
- What special sorts of expertise do MLA members possess that might help colleges and universities create and implement policies and practices that support a safe and inclusive environment and that simultaneously exhibit our long-held commitments to academic freedom?
- What departmental policies need to be in place in support of tolerance, respect, and the application of critical practices and principles?
- Given issues of tolerance and diversity on campuses, what are the implications for faculty hiring, retention, tenure, and promotion, as well as for student recruitment and retention?
- How do our changing technologies affect arenas for language use and various practices within these arenas?
- Who else is looking at these questions?
- What can the MLA most usefully and effectively do to address this array of questions in a manner that is well-informed, substantive, meaningful, and sustainable?

As our deliberations continued, we did not seek to answer each of these questions in discrete ways. Our work on the task force and our direct experiences had convinced us that the tensions between local problems and global issues, between concrete experiences and abstract concepts are much too complicated to presume that a task force could neatly resolve them across varying educational sites in such a regimented manner. Instead, we took the questions and our general goals as touchstones from which to conceptualize pathways for the articulation of a range of appropriate actions and to recommend policies and practices by which to anchor the responses of a professional disciplinary organization in a dynamic and instructive way. We used these basic questions, therefore, to remind ourselves of the nature and mission of the MLA as a disciplinary organization, of the ways in which such an organization can hold itself accountable for promoting mutual respect and toleration, and of the ways in which it can also help its members and others understand problems dynamically as these sites engage responsibly in doing the hard work of identifying and implementing solutions.

## HOW CAN WE LEARN?

One of the most productive activities in which we engaged as a deliberating group was to gather and talk through as many incidents as we could

manage in which bigotry, respect, courtesy, and tolerance seemed to be a concern. We anchored our discussion in concrete examples from our own knowledge and from experiences reported to us by colleagues across the nation. We discussed the details of these incidents at length, and we determined that our understanding of the charge and our ability to make recommendations that are capable of counteracting bigotry had to be forged amid the specificity of such incidents. This process clarified for us the need to incorporate specific scenarios of infringement into the task force report itself. The intent of doing so is twofold. The first goal is to provide a direct means of illustrating the problem and laying out in a dramatic way the complexities of this terrain. It should be emphasized that all the scenarios cited are reality-based rather than real. We took details from various sources and created scenes that illustrate problems from a variety of perspectives. Some of the scenarios illustrate the subtleties of respect and disrespect, others illustrate more persistent problems that are not so subtle, still others illustrate concerns that are provocative in other ways that we thought helped complicate rather than simplify our visions.

A common thread among all the scenes is that they betray to some extent what we came to label in a general way “atmospheric weaknesses.” We used this term to signal places in the system where problems are likely to arise and harm to result. We noticed the persistence, for example, of incidents where participants do not get an appropriate hearing; where there is little or no opportunity for learning, negotiation, or redress; where perpetrators are inexperienced, acting with poor judgment, untrained, unsupervised, uninformed, and, more important, not likely to be primed by the system to take into account the consequences or impact of a particular action or set of actions. The scenes highlight occasions where those offended feel frustrated and powerless to respond; where the pathways for response are unclear and inadequate; where a rush to judgment is not mediated by a system for evaluating claims; where the systems are perceived as functioning to submerge incidents in the interest of management and control rather than to make a serious effort to mediate problems. The scenes also illustrate the potential for nonproductive behaviors to be relearned and reinscribed in the absence of effective intervention. All the scenarios suggest the layers of reform across our classrooms, departments, and campuses that need to be set in motion in order to engender environments that are safe, inclusive, and supportive of intellectual engagement. We present these scenarios, therefore, in as straightforward a manner as we can in order to facilitate awareness but without attempting to perform the close analyses of them that might take place more productively in specific local contexts and conversations.

Our second goal in including the scenarios, we reemphasize, is not to analyze them within the report itself but to raise questions about bigotry, tolerance, and respect using such scenes as backdrop. In doing so, we acknowledge that the process of analysis and discussion helped us chart the direction from which we articulated the recommendations for the MLA at the end of this report. We acknowledge also that, as we reflected on our deliberations and their results, we concluded that such inquiries are not simply beneficial for us as an MLA task force but offer to others a resource for local dialogues and deliberations as specific institutional sites establish and maintain their own systems of action and response. We present the scenarios, therefore, as concrete illustrations of persistent and recurrent problems, and we present the questions as a mechanism for using such illustrations in dialogues designed to make clearer the complexities of this terrain. Given the scenes cited below, we ask:

What constitutes a claim of bigotry, taking into account the ill effects of incidents that result from both consciously held attitudes and inadvertent actions?

Who are the primary and secondary stakeholders in a given case?

What is the point of view of each stakeholder?

To what extent might we need to find ways for other members of the community to see the value of and find meaningful their own investments in resolving conflicts and issues that may on the surface seem not to be of interest to them?

What are the potential areas for misunderstanding, tension, or discontent?

What are the potential areas for cooperation, learning, or negotiation?

What options are available for each stakeholder to have his or her interests heard and considered?

What needs to be weighed and judged in the process of decision making?

What steps, short-term and long-term, seem appropriate in alleviating the tensions involved and in identifying positive solutions?

## WHAT ARE SOME SCENARIOS THAT CAN HELP US DEFINE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS?

The questions above are one point of departure for interrogating incidents that potentially hinder the ability of college and university campuses to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and toleration. As explained earlier, the scenarios below focus in various ways on persistent and recurrent problems in classrooms and various other arenas of academic engagement. We suggest that these questions and scenes provide a springboard for identifying in specific and concrete ways sites and concerns relevant to issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry and for identifying strategies for addressing them.

1. As part of a first-year writing course, a graduate teaching assistant downloads from the Internet racist jokes targeted at African Americans to exemplify how language can hurt. The handout that he develops includes the usual information about the course, but at the top of the page he writes, "Enjoy!" Several students in the course file a complaint with the department chair, with copies to the dean and the president, charging the TA with being racially insensitive. The TA insists that his comment was intended to be ironic, not incendiary. The administration uses the occasion to tell the department chair that TAs are inadequately supervised by faculty members and appoints an assistant dean, whose field is not English, to revamp the first-year curriculum and TA training program. The teaching contract of the offending TA is not renewed the next term.

2. A student approaches an instructor to inform him that he will be absent from class because of a Jewish holiday (Rosh Hashanah). The instructor asks the student to bring him proof that he is Jewish.

3. An assistant professor of Spanish, who is of Hispanic origin, comes up for tenure and is strongly supported by her department. The dean's office turns her down. The chair hears that the dean said, "She's just a bilingual, not a real scholar."

4. The selection committee for the first-year program at a college removes from consideration all candidates whose SAT scores indicate an "untimed" testing situation.

5. The graduate committee at a university submits an annual list of interviews and job offers of the department's recently minted PhDs to the dean and to the campus student newspaper. The committee members think that it is unnecessary to include on the list offers from community colleges.

6. Students are enrolled in a course in lesbian and gay studies. Generally, they do very well in applying feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories to the required readings and in demonstrating their abilities to think critically and write well. At the end of the course some of the students have one concern that they have not thought to raise before, that the title of the course will appear on their transcripts.

7. A student introduces her friend to a fellow student, "This is Mohammed; he has a weird way of talking, but at least you always know who he is."

8. On the first day of class, a student asks his adviser to be transferred to another section because the professor, who has multiple sclerosis, makes him feel uncomfortable.

9. A student refuses to read an assigned text in a literature course because her church has renounced it as a work of the devil. She asks the professor to assign an alternative text. The professor responds that the assigned text is absolutely essential to understanding the themes of the course.

10. A female assistant professor, a woman of color, is overweight. She is teaching a popular course that is normally taught by another professor, who is on leave. There are thirty students enrolled, including a small group of white male students who are friends. The professor has designed the course to be very student-centered and problem-based, using small groups and other collaborative techniques. On several occasions during the course she has to stop class to admonish the white male students about snickering, disruptive comments, and other vexatious behavior. During one class, as she is walking around monitoring the groups, she notices that the persistently disruptive students are drawing cartoons of her that emphasize her weight. She says nothing. The students continue their disruptive behavior, and during another class later in the term the professor gets angry and asks the students in no uncertain terms to leave the room and not to return if they cannot participate more courteously. The next day, the professor gets a call from the ombudsman's office. The white male students have filed a complaint against her indicating that she has treated them unfairly and that her teaching methods are just busywork.

11. The monthly faculty newsletter of a department routinely notes professional activities of tenured and tenure-track faculty members but makes no mention of similar accomplishments by part-time faculty members.

12. A student reports to her professor in a lesbian and gay studies course that the books for the course are not on the shelf in the campus bookstore. The professor goes to the bookstore and sees that this is indeed the case. When she asks at the counter when the books will be available, a staff member whispers with some indignation to her that the books are in, but, because of the images on the covers, students need to ask for them at the desk.

13. A graduate student from Puerto Rico, who speaks both Spanish and English fluently, is told by the department chair, a peninsular scholar, that he cannot teach in the department unless he improves his Spanish.

14. A female assistant professor of color is recruited by a department to teach literature of the British Renaissance. Within a year of her employment, she is asked and agrees to teach two courses focused on twentieth-century American literature and ethnicity, and she also serves on several committees where the work is particularly relevant to faculty members and students of color. When she proposes to teach a new course on British literature, she is told that she must cover the courses in ethnic literature that she was hired to teach.

15. A major speaker is invited to address the incoming class of first-year students about issues of identity and national or professional leadership. After the speech the student body is divided into discussion groups led by faculty facilitators, who have varying experience with these types of activi-

ties. The event is considered part of opening events for the year. There is no expectation for the small groups to continue or for discussions to be addressed again in particular courses. In one group, a young white male opens the discussion by stating, "I'm really sick of talking about all of this race stuff, and the women's stuff is just as bad. When are we just gonna get on with what we're supposed to be in college for?"

16. A student tells the office of the Department of Mathematics that he has a learning disability requiring his exemption from the university mathematics requirement for graduation. The faculty adviser to whom he is referred accuses him of malingering in order to get out of fulfilling a burdensome requirement.

17. A first-year writing student is troubled when her instructor's opening requirement is an autobiographical essay. She explains to a friend that, as a member of her native tribe, she would be violating her culture. By tribal practice, autobiography is reserved for the elders of the tribe and not appropriate for her. She also explains to her friend that she is the only Native American in her class, and she doesn't want her teacher to think that she's uncooperative or lazy. The next day, she does not have a draft for her peer group. Her instructor lectures her about preparing all assignments on time and the importance of good classroom citizenship.

18. An assistant professor asks his class the word for a man who dresses as a woman. Instead of the word *transvestite*, which is what she is hoping for, someone in the class yells, "A faggot."

19. In a first-year writing course, a graduate teaching assistant has set up an electronic mailing list for the class to discuss in greater depth the assigned readings. Each student is obligated to make one entry in response to the readings and one in response to the ideas of a fellow class member. After three weeks, the TA checks the list for participation and makes two discoveries. A female student who rarely speaks in class has never received a response to her entries, and two male students, one white and one African American, seem to be carrying their hostilities toward each other in the classroom onto the list and polarizing the rest of the class.

20. A female student of Hispanic descent, who came to college after raising a family and spending many years working in nonacademic jobs, expects to complete all the requirements for a BA degree with honors. She hopes to enter graduate school, but she is worried about her possibilities. She asks her academic adviser for advice about the application process and various other questions about graduate school life. He listens for a while and then says to her that she should be particularly pleased that she has made it as far as she has, given her late start and the fact that so few women like her even think about anything other than having babies and going to

church, but that she should not expect too many more miracles. He recommends that she apply instead to the local school board.

21. A panel has been organized on women of color in the profession, and no women of Native American descent are represented. The organizers “can’t locate” an appropriate speaker.

22. A college chaplain has been invited to attend a meeting of the college admissions committee to help with a problem that has become more significant over the last few years. Potential students are asked to write two essays for the application process: one academic, the other personal. The committee has noticed that the personal essays are focused increasingly on religious experiences as the pivotal moment in their lives. While in the past students who wrote such essays were considered extreme and immediately rejected, there are now too many applicants in this category to use religious fervor as a criterion for rejection.

23. A graduate student who is legally blind has just received a prestigious university award for research. Many well-wishers speak to her about how brave and courageous she is, how proud they are of her, and how much she has overcome to be in the university. One person talks about how lucky she is to be at the university during an era when there are laws that guarantee her support. No one talks seriously with her about the high quality of her work or about the potential of her theories and ideas to enrich the scholarly base of the field.

24. At a professional meeting, a member who is Jewish and old enough to have experienced the Holocaust attends a session sponsored by Germanists on Nazi culture. She feels that some of the panelists presented anti-Semitic material without framing it in an appropriately grounded critical context. During the question-and-answer period, the member expresses her general support of academic freedom in teaching and scholarship, but she also raises the issue of presenting scholarship on obviously sensitive topics with no attention to the historical and political baggage that is so thoroughly embedded in them. She admonishes the group for not specifying the ethical dimensions of their work and charges the organization with a careless disregard for the inflammatory nature of the subject matter. Emphasizing the legitimacy of the field, the chair of the panel apologizes for any offense of which they were inadvertently guilty. There is no further discussion of the member’s comment. She takes her complaint to the organizational leadership, demanding that in the future they monitor session panels with such potentially inflammatory topics.

Using these scenarios as specific and concrete examples of incidents in which bigotry, intolerance, or disrespect are issues and using other re-

sources that informed and directed its deliberations, the task force engaged in its work and articulated the recommendations for the MLA that are listed below.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout its deliberations, the Task Force against Campus Bigotry has been mindful that in today's world, given the wide variations in personal histories and the many ways in which people form identities and alliances, those of us in academic environments should actually expect the possibility of bigotry rather than be surprised by it. Such challenges to tolerance and peaceful interaction are both an outgrowth of the privilege of having an open and inclusive environment where differences exist and a sign of the educational process at work, in that we are encouraging a critical engagement with ideas. We perceive, however, that colleges and universities have moved beyond the need simply to tolerate others to the need to accept the challenges of tolerance as normal and to meet these challenges directly, thoughtfully, and steadfastly whenever and wherever they arise.

We have operated, therefore, from the viewpoint that departments of English and foreign languages are academic communities within larger academic communities and are obligated to function as vibrant and active participants in sustaining a campus environment that is safe, inclusive, and supportive of well-deliberated, multilayered intellectual engagement across multiple arenas of interaction, including those for teaching, learning, research, and scholarship. We have taken into account that the members of this community are multiple, including faculty members, teaching assistants, students, administrative and clerical staff members, and others who must work together, despite their similarities and differences, in order to sustain an atmosphere in which bigotry can neither thrive nor survive.

Guided by a review of many allegations of bigotry, intolerance, and disrespect from our own direct knowledge of cases and from others reported to us; by the materials that we accumulated; and by the feedback from MLA committees, commissions, and members, the Task Force against Campus Bigotry makes the following recommendations:

*For the MLA Executive Council and MLA Committees and Commissions*

that the MLA encourage actively a commitment throughout the academic community to thoughtful and ongoing dialogue as a vital part of a systematic effort to ensure an academic atmosphere that supports the full participation of all members of the community in academic life

- that the MLA establish, or make clearer to its members and others, the specific mechanisms that demonstrate its commitment to academic freedom and to encouraging its members and others to support the free and unimpeded participation of all members of a campus community in academic life
- that the MLA form alliances with other professional organizations that share concerns about issues related to bigotry in order to share information and perhaps to establish a common ground for collaborative actions
- that the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities develop a brochure that offers advice to departments and campuses about
  - maintaining a systematic and continuous stance of vigilance against acts of bigotry
  - sustaining an environment that is safe, inclusive, and supportive of the free and open exchange of ideas
  - applying the values that the MLA holds in scholarship to the discussion of controverted issues in the classroom and in other venues
  - sustaining an environment of respect and courtesy for all members of the community
  - upholding the rights and privileges of all members of the community
  - making information available to all members of the community about departmental and other related facilities and the services provided by them (learning centers, ethnic centers, disability support centers, and other special services)
- that the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities develop a brochure that offers advice to graduate teaching assistants and new faculty members about teaching in an inclusive environment that is supportive of a free and open exchange of ideas and that offers advice also about teaching with materials that have a potential to reveal ideological sensitivities and other differences
- that the advisory committees of *Profession*, the *ADFL Bulletin*, and the *ADE Bulletin* search out articles that address tolerance in teaching and learning and in the profession, the different forms that intolerance can take, best-case scenarios that offer strategies for resolving conflicts and misunderstandings productively, and so forth
- that the Publications Committee, the advisory committees for MLA journals, and the Committee on Computers and Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Research encourage the submission of articles and manuscripts that suggest the use of technology in ways that support inclusiveness and tolerance, that interrogate the complex interactions of language use and technology, and so on
- that other committees and commissions actively participate in ensuring that the MLA and its members are appropriately informed, given their various points of interest, in these types of issues

*For the MLA Annual Convention and Other MLA Meetings*

- that the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities and the divisions on teaching continue to sponsor sessions at

- the convention focused on issues related to bigotry on campus and focused especially on the implications of such incidents for teaching
- that the MLA make clearer to divisions, other session proposers, and speakers the importance of being consciously and specifically aware of the potential for session attendees to be both inside and outside a scholarly area; that therefore these proposers and speakers should
  - make clearer the context and intent of their scholarly work, particularly in instances where sensitive ethical, historical, social, political, cultural, and other issues are evoked, whether directly or indirectly
  - be prepared to respond to a range of issues and concerns that might emerge when audiences are likely to be both inside and outside a particular scholarly area
- that the MLA highlight more boldly on the instruction sheet for panel procedures that discussion time in panel presentations should be preserved so that the audience is permitted an opportunity to voice feedback and to express alternative views and opinions

### *For Departments*

- that departments of English and foreign languages
  - provide a training program for GTAs that addresses issues of bigotry, insensitivity, respect, and courtesy in the classroom
  - connect with other training programs on the campus (including methods courses in schools, colleges, or departments and programs of education and centers for teaching and learning), creating a broader context for attention to issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry and creating a more comprehensive mechanism for responding to systemic problems as well as to individual offenses
  - establish specific resources to support teachers, such as providing opportunities to talk with others in and across departments about issues of teaching and learning
- that the departments establish faculty development programs (which include tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty members) that are designed to increase faculty awareness of the need for vigilance in support of the full participation of all in campus life; offer specific strategies for treating colleagues, staff members, GTAs, students, and others with courtesy and respect; increase staff awareness of how misunderstandings and conflicts arise through both verbal and nonverbal actions and offer strategies for responding with sensitivity and professionalism even when the behavior of others is problematic
- that the departments establish staff development programs that are designed to increase staff awareness of the need for vigilance in support of the full participation of all in campus life; offer specific strategies for treating colleagues, faculty members, students, and others with courtesy and respect; increase staff awareness of how misunderstandings and conflicts arise through both verbal and nonverbal actions and offer strategies for responding with sensitivity and professionalism even when the behavior of others is problematic

- that the MLA encourage departments of English and foreign languages to review both undergraduate and graduate curricula in order to determine and to make operative principles of inclusion and representation in required and elective courses, in instructional practices and materials, and so forth set up processes and mechanisms in the review and monitoring of courses in the general education curriculum by which tenured faculty members take responsibility for what happens in these classrooms, whether the faculty members are teaching themselves or serving as mentors, advisers, or resources for the graduate students who are teaching such courses
- recognize the full idiomatic variability of American English usage, the variability of usage in other languages that we teach, and the variability of usage in American diasporic communities, as well as the extent to which usage in general is inflected by region, race, ethnicity, class, caste, generation, and other factors
- critically examine policies, practices, criteria, and attitudes that place students in performance categories related to language abilities and that track them based on the variety of English that they speak and write
- that the MLA encourage departments of English and foreign languages to evaluate and perhaps reform advising systems to take into account issues of tolerance, diversity, and bigotry
- that the MLA encourage departments of English and foreign languages to establish policies and procedures for responding to both intentional and inadvertent incidents of bigotry and insensitivity in the classroom, in the department, and in other venues, policies, and procedures that are deemed appropriate by the department in order to facilitate the recognition, hearing, and mediation of problems; in order to make expressions of bigotry occasions for a productive educational experience; and in order to demonstrate across all campus arenas a specific commitment to the enactment of respect, courtesy, and tolerance
- be prepared to determine what constitutes an appropriate accommodation for various special needs in the interest of access, inclusion, and the full participation of all constituents in the departmental and college or university community
- that the MLA encourage departments of English and foreign languages to build lines of communication between the campus and the surrounding communities with the intent of helping facilitate mutual understanding and undermine the possibility of incidents of bigotry in these arenas as well

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