

Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities Report to the MLA Executive Council

June Howard

24 September 2011

Brief Review of the Committee's Charge

CAFPRR addresses the general conditions of MLA members' professional lives as teachers and scholars, whether in universities, colleges, or schools, or as independent scholars. The committee is concerned with the rights and responsibilities of scholars and teachers in the fields of language, literature, and writing, specifically the right of academic freedom and the responsibility of ethical conduct toward colleagues and students. The committee monitors activities connected with the recruitment and promotion of faculty members, especially the Job Information Center at the association's annual convention, and receives comments and recommends actions to ensure fairness. The committee is charged with initiating relevant projects and publications but is not empowered to hear individual grievances.

Committee Membership, 2010–11

June Howard, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (chair)
Clorinda Donato, California State University, Long Beach
Stacey Lee Donohue, Central Oregon Community College
Erin Skye Mackie, Syracuse University
Reinhard Mayer, Skidmore College
John Mowitt, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Elliott Visconsi, University of Notre Dame

2010–11 Activities and Plans for 2011–12

The committee's activities during the past academic year consisted of performing the various annual tasks that fall to this committee, including the capacity-building necessary for the group to work together; continuing discussions begun the previous year and initiating discussions of some new issues; and the formulation of and initial work on a project on shared governance that is envisioned as continuing over (at least) two years.

The committee's responsibilities include updating a group of MLA documents relevant to our charge, such as the "Advice to Search Committees and Job Seekers on Entry-Level Recruitment and Hiring" that appears with the *Job Information List*. Given the rapid changes in the procedures of the job market, we have asked the staff liaisons to compile a list of policies in need of review during fall 2011. We also make an annual recommendation on compensation for entry-level and per-course instructors, always with the advice of David Laurence, the MLA's director of research; that topic was the focus of

considerable discussion in 2009–10 and was more routine this year. The committee decided to undertake a review of our Web site and links; that was completed by the chair during the spring.

The committee also reviews and answers letters from MLA members at each meeting, again with the indispensable assistance of the MLA staff—here, Nelly Furman and David Goldberg. In some cases these letters raise issues for further discussion.

The practice of the committee is to take time, early in each two-day session, for comments from each member about the current situation and any particular “hot topics” at their particular institution. Again, these perspectives contribute to shaping the ensuing discussions. For example, John Mowitt reported on efforts at the University of Minnesota to develop language about academic freedom for inclusion on course syllabi. That initiative links to the Committee’s effort to track the impact of the Garcetti decision and to encourage all institutions of higher education to affirm the principles of academic freedom. This is an ongoing discussion. During the spring telephone meeting, after hearing the chair’s report on an MLA convention session, we began to engage the question of graduate students and academic freedom; that discussion will continue next year. We concluded our discussion of academic freedom in the service academies, and asked Elliott Visconsi—who has an ongoing interest in this issue—to keep us informed about new developments.

This year we felt that many topics arising recently have involved information technology. We pursued some of them in conversation; the most significant result was the decision to arrange our fall 2011 schedule so that we will be at the MLA offices during the same days as the Committee on Information Technology and will hold a joint meeting. Of particular concern for CAFPRR is the impact of technology on the job search and interviewing process, but we also wish to discuss open access, the evaluation of digital scholarship, changes in publishing—and generally think together about the impact of information technology on academic freedom and professional life.

The members of the committee have seen, in our own observations and discussions and broadly in the profession, a strong interest in the topic of shared governance. We might say there is concern—or even alarm—about current trends. MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal, in our discussions with her during the fall, confirmed our sense that this is an important issue for the committee to consider. Beginning with intensive discussions in the fall meeting, we identified a number of key themes. One member, Erin Skye Mackie, generously took time to attend the AAUP conference on shared governance in November 2010 and reported to the committee in our spring telephone conversations. We do not, however, want to try produce any policy statement without broader discussion. The committee therefore put a considerable amount of effort into organizing two sessions for the January 2012 MLA convention; we envision these sessions as both disseminating and gathering information.

- “Shared Governance: Who’s Running This Place?” will present panelists who have served in administration, as union leaders, and as elected representatives in

a range of institutional types. Speakers will be Susan Ashley, Colorado Coll.; Stacey Lee Donohue, Central Oregon Community Coll.; John W. Mowitt, Univ. of Minnesota, Twin Cities; Elliott Visconsi, Univ. of Notre Dame; Teri Yamada, California State Univ., Long Beach. The session will be moderated by June Howard, Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

- “Keeping the Lights On: Shared Governance in the Corporate University” will be a roundtable discussion on closures and restructuring in the humanities and how these compromise academic freedom and threaten higher education. Speakers will be Michael Bérubé, Penn State Univ., University Park; Thomas Harrison, Univ. of California, Los Angeles; Erin Skye Mackie, Syracuse Univ.; Cary Nelson, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana; David Wills, Univ. at Albany, State Univ. of New York. Reinhard Albert Mayer, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana, will chair.