

MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession
Annual Report 2010–11

Committee Members

Dan Colson, University of Illinois, Urbana, 2010–13; Monica F. Jacobe, Princeton University, 2009–12, 2010–12 (Coch.); Jens Kugele, Georgetown University, 2008–11; Giovanna Montenegro, University of California, Davis, 2009–12; Luziris Pineda Turi, Rice University, 2008–11, 2009–11 (Coch.); Atia Sattar, Pennsylvania State University, 2010–13; Heather Steffen, Carnegie Mellon University, 2010–13; Tyechia Thompson, Howard University, 2010–12

Committee Charge

The Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession is charged with considering a range of curricular, intellectual, and professional issues that affect both MA- and PhD-seeking graduate students studying language and literature at different types of academic institutions. The committee should organize convention sessions and consider association publications and other projects that will assist students while they pursue their education, gain experience as teachers, seek employment, and make a transition to the workplace. The committee is also charged with bringing issues that concern graduate students to the attention of the staff, the Executive Council, and other MLA committees that deal with activities that affect graduate students (e.g., the Job Information Service.)

2011 Convention

In this first year of the MLA's altered convention schedule, the committee sponsored two roundtables and a workshop, with this third program cosponsored with the Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada. All three of the sessions organized by the committee were well attended and successful. Our panel "Now What? After the

MLA Convention,” for example, filled a sizeable room on the final afternoon of the convention and resulted in several participants publishing their comments with *Inside Higher Ed*.

Panels Sponsored by the Committee

1. “Graduate Students of Color: Strategies for Success” Collaboration with the CLPC (Luziris Pineda Turi and Giovanna Montenegro, coordinating)

This workshop consisted of three parts: one, an introduction to the data (which show low PhD completion rates but offer provocative information on faculty satisfaction and salary); two, glosses on the data from the perspectives of faculty members and graduate students (the relation of these numbers to lived experience); and three, a discussion of strategies for success that grad students can deploy as they matriculate into academic jobs.

2. “Now What? After the MLA Convention” (Monica Jacobe, presiding)

This session explored what job seekers can and should do in the weeks after the convention, covering such topics as campus visits, continuing the search, and shaping a career trajectory.

Participants: Alain-Phillippe Durand, University of Rhode Island; Anna Faktorovich, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College; Tobias Gregory, Catholic University of America

3. “International Students and Junior Faculty: Shaping the Professional Landscape” (Jens Kugele and Giovanna Montenegro, presiding)

This roundtable dealt with the ways international students and younger scholars raise important questions for the academic community beyond questions of cultural displacement and identity.

Participants: Emily Hicks, San Diego State University; Irene Sywenky, University of Alberta; Fei Shih, University of California, Davis

Graduate Student Lounge

The committee continued its sponsorship of a graduate student lounge, open for the length of the convention. The lounge provides a social space for graduate students to meet each other and the

committee during the convention. For those facing the pressures of the job market or the tension of presenting their work, the lounge often serves as a calm port with light refreshments. The committee also uses the lounge to disseminate information about some of the MLA's other projects and initiatives, including career advice documents produced by other MLA committees. For all graduate students, the lounge offers a central place to relax, socialize, and find help navigating the convention. Committee members take turns staffing the lounge to make sure that friendly faces are present and the MLA is effectively represented. This year, the committee also attempted to gather data by means of a brief survey distributed in paper form in the lounge, but the response was not significant.

Cash Bar

This year, the committee chose not to continue with the recent tradition of a work-focused breakfast, which in past years has involved inviting both graduate students and graduate program directors for discussion. Instead, the committee chose to sponsor an evening cash bar, which took place on the Friday of the convention. This event was well attended and filled the room assigned it. At the end of this event, several committee members continued discussion and social outreach by travelling to dinner with a group of attendees. This successful new addition to the committee's work extended the social function of the lounge into an evening venue.

Postconvention Survey

The committee continued its recent practice of gathering data on the convention from graduate students by means of an electronic survey distributed after the convention via e-mail. This data has been shared with other MLA bodies and has been valuable to the committee in targeting the graduate student population that is active in the organization. Respondents are asked about years of convention attendance and sessions attended while at the convention among other items useful in gauging graduate student interest in the MLA and in the convention itself.

2012 Convention

For the 2012 convention, the committee proposed three sessions and will present two of them. A collaborative session, proposed with the Division on Teaching as a Profession and dealing with the dynamics of mentoring between faculty members and graduate students, was not selected in the newly created competitive process for MLA groups to sponsor additional sessions beyond the guaranteed number.

Panels Sponsored by the Committee

1. “‘An Injury to One’: Fighting the Exploitation of Graduate Student Labor” (Dan Colson, presiding)

While graduate students have long been a source of cheap labor, recent attacks on organized labor, along with the scapegoating of educators, demonstrate the renewed need for a discussion of the experiences—both commonplace and novel—of graduate student exploitation. This roundtable includes narratives from those combating exploitative practices on the ground and explores strategies for fighting these practices at the local, state, national, and global levels.

Speakers: Royal Bonde-Griggs, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Dan Colson; Robert Henn, University of Illinois, Urbana; MaryAnne Laurico, Queen’s University; James H. S. Searle, University at Albany, State University of New York; Ariel Wetzal, University of Washington, Seattle

2. “Any ‘Volunteers’?: Graduate Student Service Work” (Heather Steffen, presiding)

The work graduate students do in service positions is crucial to the functioning of colleges, universities, and professional organizations, but it is rarely recognized or compensated, and it has yet to be analyzed as a kind of academic labor. How might we begin to critically examine the ways this work shapes graduate student experiences, universities, and the profession?

Speakers: Maureen Gallagher, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Michelle A. Massé, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; Svetlana Tyutina, Florida International University; Mary Unger, University of Illinois, Urbana

Additional Projects

- The committee began work on and has neared completion of “A Graduate Student Guide to the MLA Convention,” a brief document designed to help students both navigate the annual calendar of convention-related deadlines and make the most of the convention experience. During the 2011 convention in Los Angeles, committee members canvassed graduate students in attendance about the kinds of advice they would like to have had in advance of attending. We hope to have a final draft ready for approval and publication by the MLA in the coming months.
- This year, the committee also took initial steps to investigate the need for compensation guidelines for graduate student work, as the association does not currently have such guidelines. To begin, committee members coordinated with the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities to verify that the project was not already under way or of interest to that committee. We then examined existing data on graduate student work and spoke with researchers working on the recent survey of academic labor undertaken by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce. Based on this initial research, the committee expects the creation of these guidelines to become a key project in the coming years.
- The committee continued an ongoing project related to the MLA Web site, with members finding and suggesting static links to be added to certain pages containing items of interest to graduate students as well as suggesting a reordering of links on certain pages to better connect graduate students to the information that they need. These suggestions were submitted to the staff liaisons for internal MLA consideration by the appropriate bodies.