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Annual Report of the MLA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession

Committee Membership: Rosemary Johnsen and Carmaletta Williams (cochairs); Elizabeth Bergman, Coppélia Kahn, Dory Nason, Christine Probes, Monika Shafi, Lisa Surwillo

MLA staff liaisons: Nelly Furman and Maribeth Kraus

The charge for the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) urges the committee to “act as an advocate for women’s interests and as a catalyst for promoting the status of women in the profession.” More specifically, the committee will “gather and review information and sponsor publications about the status of women in the profession, giving special attention to conditions of employment and to issues such as race, ethnicity, sexuality class, age, and disability; review the professional status of women scholars throughout the academic labor system with regard especially to part-time employment, differential salary levels, and patterns of professional advancement; propose strategies and policies to encourage the participation and advancement of women at all levels in the fields of languages and literatures; build coalitions with MLA committees and allied organizations that share the CSWP’s interests; make available to the profession the results of the CSWP’s studies; organize programs for the MLA Annual Convention.”

After the multiyear project that culminated in the associate professor report, which was published in *Profession* along with a series of responses solicited by the CSWP, the committee decided to work on discrete projects that will build to a cluster of related results over several years. The 2010–11 CSWP worked to continue the two main foci selected by the 2009–10 committee: women in academic leadership (how women can be prepared for such a role and how they can balance the demands of such posts with the exigencies of teaching, research, and family life) and the CSWP’s continuing commitment to studying the role of women and particularly underrepresented minority women in the changing academic workforce. Responses received by CSWP members suggest that there is considerable ongoing interest in the topic of preparation for academic leadership and also that the MLA membership welcomes practical sessions, those offering techniques and skills that members can take back to their institutions.

These emphases are reflected in the programming organized for the 2011 and 2012 annual conventions (see below). They also inform the medium-range plan of the committee to generate a series of “products” over the next few years that revolve around the idea of public scholarship, something that the committee sees as closely connected to the challenges surrounding service in the academy. Who provides service? How is that service recognized or rewarded? One of the sessions planned for MLA 2012 engages this issue, and the committee is considering organizing a workshop for MLA 2013 along with a more traditional session (papers or roundtable). These events would generate material that could, perhaps, be published as a cluster in *Profession* or otherwise and thus be disseminated beyond convention attendees.

In October 2010, the committee met at MLA headquarters and finalized plans for the CSWP-organized sessions for the 2011 MLA convention in Los Angeles. At this meeting, the committee elected Coppélia Kahn as incoming cochair to succeed Rosemary Johnsen. The CSWP organized two sessions for the Los Angeles convention. The first was a traditional paper-reading session entitled “Languages of Leadership: Strategies for Women,” and the second was a roundtable entitled “Staking Your Claim: Are You Represented in Your Institution’s Strategic Plan?” This second session was linked to the MLA special focus on “The Academy in Hard Times.” Attendance at the first session was sparse but enthusiastic. Some attendees shared their observation that more practical advice on language had been expected, not the more theoretical approaches that some presenters took. One committee member summarized these comments by saying that perhaps in the future we should encourage panelists to take a more a practical approach in order to benefit all attendees. In the other CSWP session, roundtable panelists discussed

how important it is, especially in a period of financial retrenchment, to be part of long-range planning exercises that establish an institution's priorities for fundraising and academic development and discussed how one becomes part of such strategic planning exercises. The CSWP's cochairs put together a handout with information about each panelist, his or her institution, and contact information. The panelists were very diverse (including a university president), and they spoke from differing institutional and professional perspectives. Audience responses indicated that they liked learning about the goals and objectives of the differing institutions and particularly appreciated hearing about strategies that others had found successful.

In March 2011, the CSWP held its spring meeting by conference call. This meeting was the final one for Rosemary Johnsen, Dory Nason, and Christine Probes, who rotated off the committee. After a debriefing on the success of its 2011 convention sessions, the committee discussed its future agenda and planned for MLA 2012 in Seattle, for which the CSWP has organized two sessions. CSWP cochair Coppélia Kahn will moderate a roundtable, "Activism in the Academy: Generational, Historical, and Theoretical Perspectives," and cochair Carmaletta Williams will chair a paper-reading session on "Transforming Community Service into Public Scholarship: Strategies for Women." The committee strategized extensively about how to gather an excellent, diverse slate of participants and found success by working through the designated point person for each proposed session: many names were gathered, priorities were set, and then the session moderator served as a gatekeeper to ensure that the session would have broad representation while maintaining a viable size.

The CSWP does serve a useful role for MLA members, and it seems appropriate to close this report by discussing some of the committee's interactions with the broader MLA membership. When the convention child-care arrangements were changed a couple of years ago, concerned MLA members contacted the MLA staff but also e-mailed CSWP members. After getting inquiries relating to the Philadelphia convention, the committee educated itself on the reasons behind the change, and we were able to relay information from the MLA staff liaisons to concerned members. Additional feedback received by committee members led to a statement being sent to MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal in March 2011 expressing CSWP support for a reconsideration of the issue. Committee members can now share information about the logistics of child care with those who inquire and explain the MLA's efforts to respond to the membership on this important issue. More broadly, the CSWP feels that while it is important to continue addressing relevant issues at the intellectual and systemic level, it is vital to include more pragmatic aspects. Feedback from participants at the 2011 sessions, described above, underscores MLA members' expectations that the CSWP-organized programming will help them better navigate the academy.