

Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities Annual Report to the MLA Executive Council, 2011–12

June Howard
26 September 2012

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, 2011–12

June Howard, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (Chair)
Susan C. Anderson, University of Oregon
Clorinda Donato, California State University, Long Beach
David B. Downing, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Erin Skye Mackie, Syracuse University
John Mowitt, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Elliott Visconsi, University of Notre Dame

Staff liaisons: Nelly Furman and David Goldberg

2011–12 Activities

The committee's activities each year fall into two categories: tasks that are repeated each year and particular projects—this year, a cluster of activities (continuing on from 2010–11) on the topic of shared governance.

Each year we engage in a considerable amount of capacity-building for the group. For example, it has long been the practice of the committee to take time, early in the fall meeting in New York, for comments from each member on "hot topics" at his or her particular campus. This allows committee members to get acquainted and helps to identify issues that need

discussion. The committee also talks with Executive Director Rosemary Feal about her view of current issues and any other topics members wish to raise; with David Laurence, the MLA's director of research; and with other staff members as needed. We had scheduled our fall meeting for the same dates as the Committee on Information Technology in order to hold a joint meeting with them. This was a generally interesting and informative discussion, which also led concretely to our collaboration in reviewing the new ADFL statement on best practices for telephone and video interviews. We felt especially fortunate to have the participation of Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who had just taken up her new position as director of scholarly communication at the MLA.

We devoted a substantial amount of time—at the fall meeting, individually, and then in our telephone conversations—to the review of statements on professional issues that are available on the committee's Web page (for example, "Advice to Jobseekers"). This is an ongoing responsibility; the staff liaisons have full records of which documents have been updated and which are due for review. As chair I also visited all the links on the Web page to identify ones that no longer worked; I would recommend that this review continue in some form.

The committee made its an annual recommendation on compensation for entry-level and per-course instructors, as always with the advice of David Laurence. At each meeting the committee reviewed and answered letters from MLA members, again with the indispensable assistance of the MLA staff—here, Nelly Furman and David Goldberg.

Another of the committee's ongoing responsibilities is to organize MLA convention sessions on important professional issues. For the January 2012 convention, these were both on the topic of shared governance and thus aligned with our focus for the year. The sessions were:

- "Shared Governance: Who's Running This Place?," which included panelists who had served in administration, as union leaders, and as elected representatives, in a range of institutional types
- "Keeping the Lights On: Shared Governance in the Corporate University," a roundtable discussion on closures and restructuring in the humanities and how these compromise academic freedom and threaten higher education

Both sessions were well attended and lively. The committee undertook an effort to further disseminate these discussions by organizing a cluster of submissions to Profession, which unfortunately was not successful.

The sessions for the January 2013 convention will be:

- “The Monolingual International,” a roundtable that will address the contradiction between institutional enthusiasm for “internationalization” and the closing of language departments and study-abroad programs at colleges and universities
- “Professional Responsibility in the Age of Privatization,” a panel presenting talks by Stanley Aronowitz, Sophia A. McClennen, and John W. Mowitt

Our particular project during 2011–12 was the development of concise statements and short bibliographies on academic freedom, shared governance, and intellectual property. We have observed that many members of the profession have a somewhat vague understanding of the distinctive principles on which academic institutions are based. For example, like the general public, many of us conflate free speech and academic freedom. We feel that it would be helpful to have these statements posted on the Web site as prompts for discussion in many settings. Developing these “toolkits” was not easy, but we now have drafts. It will be up to this year’s committee to refine them if necessary, to get MLA approval for posting them, and to develop additional ways of getting them attended to. They might, for example, be the focus of sessions in graduate courses that focus on professionalization.

During the committee’s fall meeting we discussed and altered our usual pattern of consultation in the spring. We had previously held long telephone meetings on two consecutive days in the spring—a model clearly derived from the era in which committee members travelled to New York for a second face-to-face meeting. Instead, we held three shorter telephone meetings in January, February, and March. This had both advantages and disadvantages—we did move our collaborative work forward consistently, but members also experienced frequent logistical difficulties, and participation was inconsistent. It seems worth asking two questions: Have CAFPRR and other MLA committees become less effective since the number of face-to-face meetings was reduced? Could the MLA facilitate the use of videoconferencing technology for remote meetings? This is not an urgent topic, but in the long run it is an important one.