

MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession
Annual Report 2011–12

Committee Members

Dan Colson, University of Illinois, Urbana, 2010–13; Monica F. Jacobe, College of New Jersey, 2009–12, 2010–12 (Coch.); Giovanna Montenegro, University of California, Davis, 2009–12; Shane Peterson, Washington University in St. Louis, 2011–14; Atia Sattar, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 2010–13, 2011–13 (Coch.); Heather Steffen, Carnegie Mellon University, 2010–13; Douglas Smith, Concordia University, 2011–14; 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.)

2012 Convention

In this second year of the MLA's altered convention schedule, the committee sponsored two panels. Both of the sessions organized by the committee paid special attention to having graduate students speak at the convention about issues of concern to graduate students. Panel organizers gathered speakers from a variety of institutional contexts and backgrounds, representing the diversity of graduate students who are represented by the MLA and this committee. Both sessions resulted in good and extended discussions on the topics at hand.

Panels Sponsored by the Committee

- a. “An Injury to One”: Fighting the Exploitation of Graduate Student Labor (Dan Colson, coordinating and chairing) While graduate students have long been a source of cheap labor, recent attacks on organized labor, along with scapegoating of educators, demonstrates the renewed need for a discussion of the experiences—both commonplace and novel—of graduate student exploitation. This roundtable included narratives from those combating practices on the ground and explored strategies for fighting them at the local, state, national, and global levels. Participants: Robert Henn, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana; MaryAnne Laurico, Queen’s Univ.; James S. H. Searle, Univ. at Albany, State Univ. of New York; Royal Bond-Griggs, Univ. of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Ariel Wetzell, Univ. of Washington, Seattle
- b. Any “Volunteers”? Graduate Student Service Work (Heather Steffen, coordinating and chairing) 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? Participants: Michelle Massé, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge; Maureen Gallagher, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst; Svetlana Tyutina, Florida International Univ.; Mary Unger, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana

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 one another and members of 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, no paper-based surveys were collected in the lounge, as online feedback has been more statistically viable and more valuable to the committee.

2013 Convention

For the 2013 convention, the committee proposed two sessions and opted not to pursue collaborative convention sessions to make time for additional work beyond the scope of the convention. Both sessions will be held in a roundtable format, allowing for the maximum amount of discussion among panelists themselves and with attendees.

- a. Terminal: Examining Master's Degrees (Giovanna Montenegro and Shane Peterson, chairs)
Panelists will examine the value of and expectations for the MA as a teaching degree in higher education in response to the 2011 ADE ad hoc committee report on the master's degree in English. What types of coursework and training are most relevant for MA students who will go on to teach post-degree? What academic and career expectations do students and graduate programs have? *Speakers:* Stacey Amo, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge; Linda Weinhouse, Community Coll. of Baltimore County, MD; Eric William Devlin, Tarrant County Coll., Northeast Campus, TX; Yolanda Gamboa, Florida Atlantic Univ.; Karin E. Westman, Kansas State Univ.; Gregory Eiselein, Kansas State Univ.
- b. Redefining Mentorship, Redefining the Professional (Atia Sattar, chair) This roundtable addresses the need to redefine or change practices in graduate student mentorship and professionalization to include a more strategic education about the prospects of one's postgraduate career. How should faculty members mentor graduate students? How should graduate students self-direct? *Speakers:* Debra Ann Castillo, Cornell Univ.; Monica F. Jacobs; Judith A. Roof, Rice Univ.; Eileen Schell, Syracuse Univ.; Tyechia Thompson

Additional Projects

- Drawing on feedback received at the 2011 MLA convention, the committee decided to develop a short *Graduate Student Guide to the MLA Convention*. This effort, led by cochair Atia Sattar, resulted in a document reviewed by the larger committee and MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal earlier this year. The completed guide is now available on the MLA's Web site.
- As part of an effort to expand information available about the CSGSP online, the committee decided to add a committee history to its page on the MLA's Web site. This effort, led by Heather Steffen and Tyechia Thompson, resulted in several drafts made available for comment and review by the committee electronically over several months. A finalized version of the document has been submitted to the MLA for final review.

- Looking to gather data on the changing job market, the committee decided not only to continue its recent efforts to survey graduate students after the convention but to include questions about Skype, phone, and face-to-face interviews. Feedback on all responses, including the newly added questions, was gathered and disseminated to the CSGSP by Doug Steward during spring 2012.
- After initial conversations with Rosemary Feal and MLA President Michael Bérubé, the committee undertook its largest project of the year: to begin work on recommended guidelines for graduate student compensation in languages and literatures. This effort, led by Atia Sattar and Heather Steffen, is in its early stages of development and is ongoing. Sattar and Steffen shared a draft of a document titled “Best Practices for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions” with the committee in the summer of 2012 for initial feedback.
- In considering new venues for outreach and building awareness of the work of the CSGSP, the committee chose to initiate a redesign of the poster, entitled “Graduate Studies and the MLA,” that has been sent for several years to directors of graduate studies (DGSs) at various institutions. This effort is being led by Giovanna Montenegro and Shane Peterson and is ongoing.