

**MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession**  
**Annual Report, 2012–13**

Committee Members

Dan Colson, University of Illinois, Urbana, 2010–13; Sarah Kremen-Hicks, University of Washington, Seattle, 2012–15; Shane Peterson, Washington University in St. Louis, 2011–14, 2012–14 (Coch.); Atia Sattar, Penn State University, University Park, 2010–13, 2011–13 (Coch.); Heather Steffen, Carnegie Mellon University, 2010–13; Douglas Smith, Concordia University, 2011–14; Svetlana Tyutina, Florida International University, 2012–15; Alexandra Valint, University of Southern Mississippi, 2012–15.

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).

2013 Convention

The committee sponsored two panels. Both of the sessions organized by the committee paid special attention to 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 of the topics at hand.

*Panels Sponsored by the Committee*

1. “Terminal: Examining Master’s Degrees” (Shane Peterson and Giovanna Montenegro, coordinating and presiding). Panelists examined the value of and expectations for the MA as a teaching degree in higher education in response to the 2011 report by the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the Master’s Degree. What types of coursework and training are most relevant for MA students who will go on to teach postdegree? What academic and career expectations do students and graduate programs have? Participants: Stacey Amo, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge; Eric William Devlin, Tarrant County Coll., Northeast Campus, TX; Gregory Eiselein, Kansas State Univ.; Yolanda Gamboa, Florida Atlantic Univ.; Linda Weinhouse, Community Coll. of Baltimore County, MD; Karin E. Westman, Kansas State Univ.
2. “Redefining Mentorship, Redefining the Professional” (Atia Sattar, coordinating and presiding). This roundtable addressed 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? Participants: Debra Ann Castillo, Cornell University; Monica F. Jacobs, Coll. of New Jersey; Judith A. Roof, Rice Univ.; Eileen E. Schell, Syracuse Univ.; Tyechia Thompson, Howard Univ.

*Graduate Student Lounge and Meet and Greet*

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. 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.

In addition to staffing the lounge, committee members decided to organize a Meet and Greet for the first time this year. The Meet and Greet was held on Friday, 4 January, from 5:15–6:30 p.m. Refreshments were provided by the MLA. The committee agreed that the Meet and Greet was a success, as graduate students were able to interact with students from other universities and network in a relaxed environment. In coming years, the committee plans to continue this event and also to publicize it more prominently.

## 2014 Convention

For the 2014 convention, the committee proposed two sessions, one in the form of a traditional panel and the other in a roundtable format.

### **656. Time to Degree: Is a Faster PhD a Better PhD?**

*Presiding:* Shane Peterson, Washington Univ. in St. Louis

1. “‘As Long as It Takes’: How Forced Shortening of Time to Degree Threatens Research and Teaching in the Humanities,” David R. Shumway, Carnegie Mellon Univ.
2. “Increasing Disciplinary Connections, Decreasing Time to Degree: A Consideration of Time to Degree in Relation to Interdisciplinary Research,” Amy Lueck, Univ. of Louisville
3. “Conditions of Completion: Policy Reform and Graduate Student Wellness,” Cara Fabre, Queen’s Univ.; Jessica Roberts, Queen’s Univ.
4. “Time to Degree and the Impossibility of Failure,” Heather Steffen, Carnegie Mellon Univ.

In this session, panelists will theorize or analyze the effects of pressure to decrease time to degree (often without reducing requirements) on PhD students, their scholarship, their teaching, or the profession at large. Instead of offering ways to decrease time to degree, we are hoping to begin a discussion about what it means to do so.

### **218. Rethinking the Seminar Paper**

*Presiding:* Alexandra Valint, Univ. of Southern Mississippi

*Speakers:* Jonathan P. Eburne, Penn State Univ., University Park; A. Robin Hoffman, Yale Univ.; Judith A. Roof, Rice Univ.; Atia Sattar, Univ. of Southern California; Liana Silva-Ford, Houston, TX; Sidonie Ann Smith, Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor

This roundtable addresses the graduate seminar paper’s purpose, forms, and effectiveness. What does and should the seminar paper prepare students to do? How can graduate students and teachers best approach the assignment? Are there alternative ways of imagining the standard seminar paper?

## Completed Projects

- The committee successfully completed its task to develop a series of recommended guidelines for improving the institutional circumstances of graduate students in languages and literatures. This effort, led by cochair Atia Sattar and member Heather Steffen, resulted in a document reviewed by the larger committee and the Executive Council earlier this year. The completed

document, *Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations for Best Practices and Evaluative Questions*, is now available on the MLA's Web site.

- A request for renewal of the committee's charge was submitted in January 2013. The request was approved by the Executive Council at its February meeting, granting the committee a fourth five-year (2013–18) period of activity. The committee's charge has been renewed without alteration.
- The committee completed its revision of the committee's history. A final draft of the document was submitted by Heather Steffen and Tyechia Thompson and revised further by Carol Zuses, coordinator of governance. It is now available on the committee's MLA Web page.

### **Ongoing Projects**

- The committee is in the process of redesigning its poster, entitled "Graduate Studies and the MLA," that has been sent for several years to directors of graduate studies at various institutions. This effort is being led by Shane Peterson and Douglas Smith.
- Based on the suggestion of the committee's staff liaisons, members are drafting a membership letter to be sent to graduate students when they become MLA members. The letter will introduce graduate students to the committee and its various documents and resources. The task, coordinated by Svetlana Tyutina and Alexandra Valint, has resulted in several drafts being circulated to the committee for commentary and review.
- The committee is in the early stages of drafting a document on service work. Svetlana Tyutina and Shane Peterson are gathering information on service opportunities for graduate students at both the regional and national levels.
- Committee members Sarah Kremen-Hicks and Douglas Smith are compiling resources on alt-ac careers. Ultimately, members hope to collaborate with other committees on a project to assist graduate students and remove the stigma of alt-ac careers.