

2011–12 Annual Report

MLA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession

Submitted by Coppélia Kahn, cochair

Committee Membership: Julie Candler Hayes and Coppélia Kahn (cochairs, 2011–12); Elizabeth Bergman, Monika Shafi, Lisa Surwillo, Carmaletta Williams, Rebecka Rutledge Fisher; MLA staff liaisons Nelly Furman and Maribeth Kraus

Charge: The charge for the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 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.” Among its specific tasks 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.”

The committee’s major work is the organization of events at the annual meeting of the MLA. At the CSWP’s annual October meeting, we completed plans for a roundtable and a panel at the 2012 meeting. The roundtable, “Activism in the Academy: Generational, Historical, and Theoretical Perspectives,” was chaired by Coppélia Kahn, and a panel of three speakers, “Transforming Community Service into Public Scholarship,” was chaired by Carmaletta Williams. Both reflect the CSWP’s current focus on women in academic leadership, including minority women: how women can prepare themselves to be leaders and the challenges of such roles as the academic work force undergoes radical changes. Both events garnered enthusiastic audiences and sparked lively discussion.

In our phone conference meeting in March 2012, we reviewed these two events. At the roundtable on activism in the academy, Catharine Stimpson, representing the first generation of feminists in the academy, stressed the basic competencies women need to effect change: balancing claims of self with those of community, working with diverse constituencies, keeping pace with new theory and new technology. Arlene Keizer urged that antiracism is a critical

component of feminism and seconded Stimpson's emphasis on the need for self care to avoid burn-out. Lisa Surwillo argued that today's activists should sustain and affirm the policy changes, such as child care and stopping the tenure clock for maternity leave, for which earlier feminists had fought. Audience members vigorously raised many concerns: that universities are eroding faculty governance, that women in positions of power don't necessarily make the academy more gender-equal, and that budget cuts and student evaluations might be used to eliminate women's studies and ethnic studies.

On the panel, the three papers on turning community service into public scholarship took strikingly different perspectives. Rosemary Johnsen offered specific strategies for getting intellectual credit for public service, while Carla Kaplan argued that such efforts are blocked by structural problems embedded in the academy, and Joycelyn Moody urged that minority women seek sponsors—those in positions of power, who may be male and white—to help them advance, instead of mentoring junior faculty. Coppélia Kahn submitted these three papers as a group for publication in *Profession*; they were not accepted. Because the journal is changing to online mode, its editor decided to make the next issue a retrospective one, reflecting the journal's thirty-five year history.

Two events are planned for the 2013 MLA convention. The first event will be a three hour preconvention workshop organized by Julie Hayes, "Women's Leadership in Higher Education Administration: Career Choices and Opportunities." The workshop will be led by Carol T. Christ, president of Smith College; Judith White, president and executive director of Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), a nonprofit organization that prepares women for academic leadership; and Joan Hinde Stewart, president of Hamilton College. This workshop encourages women at all career stages to consider leadership roles at the department level and in higher administration. Topics include the changing environment for higher education, preparation for administrative positions, leadership values, career mapping, reframing academic service, working with search consultants, negotiation strategies, department chairing, and balancing work and life. The workshop thus honors the CSWP's charge to "review the professional status of women scholars throughout the academic labor system with regard especially to . . . patterns of professional advancement."

The panel “What Was ‘Women’s Lit’ and Where Is It Now?,” organized by Coppélia Kahn, will assess the past and present currency of courses in literature by women. The speakers are Cheryl Wall, Rutgers University; Ivy Schweitzer, Dartmouth College; and Margaret Stetz, University of Delaware. In the first and second waves of academic feminism, such courses were a mainstay of emergent programs in women’s studies. They worked to establish the value of gender-based literary criticism and helped articulate theoretical issues. This panel will explore the current forms, concerns, and theoretical emphases of such courses today, with a view toward the CWSP’s charge “to propose strategies and policies to encourage the participation and advancement of women at all levels in the fields of languages and literatures.”

Upcoming tasks for the committee include working out liaisons with other committees. In the past, the CWSP has sought liaisons with several other MLA committees on the literatures of people of color, community colleges, academic freedom, faculty rights and responsibilities, contingent labor, disability issues, and gay and lesbian issues. A second major task is deciding how to make use of the rich statistical data presented by David Laurence at the October meeting. In the past, honoring the committee’s charge to “gather and review information and sponsor publications about the status of women in the profession,” the CSWP has drawn on such data to publish significant reports: “Women in the Profession” (2000) and “Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey” (2007). We might wish to do so again.