

# Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature

---

## MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature

Web publication, May 2014

© 2014 by The Modern Language Association of America

*All material published by the Modern Language Association in any medium is protected by copyright. Users may link to the MLA Web page freely and may quote from MLA publications as allowed by the doctrine of fair use. Written permission is required for any other reproduction of material from any MLA publication.*

*Send requests for permission to reprint material to the MLA permissions manager by mail (26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789) or e-mail ([permissions@mla.org](mailto:permissions@mla.org)).*

# Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

CONCERN about the future of humanistic study motivated the Modern Language Association (MLA) Executive Council to charge a distinguished task force of members with recommending changes to doctoral education. Funded in part by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the work of the task force involved conversations with directors of graduate studies, department chairs, and other administrators; graduate students; employers outside the academy; and the membership at large. Through presentations on individual campuses, at the annual conventions of the MLA and the American Historical Association, and at summer seminars for department chairs, members of the task force refined their thinking and finalized their recommendations. The Executive Council approved the report of the task force in February 2014. The report includes an appendix of examples of departments that have modified their programs in ways consistent with the task force's recommendations.

In the light of persistent criticism from within the academy and from a larger public, the legitimacy of doctoral study needs reformulation if we expect to meet the challenges and opportunities of the moment. We are faced with an unsustainable reality: a median time to degree of around nine years for language and literature doctoral recipients and a long-term academic job market that provides tenure-track employment for only around sixty percent of doctorate recipients. We as members of the scholarly community must insist on maintaining excellence in our research and teaching by recognizing the wide range of intellectual paths through which we produce new knowledge. We must also validate the wide range of career possibilities that doctoral students can pursue. The success of doctoral programs requires their drawing on the resources of the whole university and on professional associations to achieve goals in these four areas:

*Pursue and maintain academic excellence.* High intellectual standards can be sustained through creative flexibility (of the curriculum, the dissertation, and career preparation). Adaptable doctoral programs can deliver the desired depth, expertise, scope, and credentials.

*Preserve accessibility.* We need a more capacious view of the humanities' benefit to individuals and society. Reducing graduate program size denies access to qualified students who want to study the humanities and who will make contributions to academic and public life in their work.

*Broaden career paths.* Departments must recognize the validity of the diverse careers that students might follow within and beyond the campus and ensure that appropriate orienting and mentoring takes place.

**Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature**

*Focus on graduate students' needs.* The profession would do well to endorse a shift from a narrative of replication, in which students imitate their mentors, to one of transformation, since graduate programs should be centered on students' diverse learning and career development needs.

The task force offers the following recommendations:

*Redesign the doctoral program.* Departments should review their programs to align them with the learning needs and career goals of students and to bring degree requirements in line with the evolving character of our fields. Non-course-based activities are essential in today's career environment.

*Engage more deeply with technology.* Doctoral programs should support technology training and provide ways for students to develop and use new tools and techniques for the study and teaching of languages and literatures.

*Reimagine the dissertation.* An extended research project should remain the defining feature of doctoral education. Departments should expand the spectrum of forms the dissertation may take and ensure that students receive mentoring from professionals beyond the department as appropriate.

*Reduce time to degree.* Departments should design programs that can be completed in five years. Individual trajectories vary, and some students' programs may take longer, especially those that require specialized linguistic, archival, or technological knowledge.

*Strengthen teaching preparation.* As a central component of doctoral education, preparation for teaching should include course work, practical experience, and mentoring. Pedagogic training should introduce students to the diverse missions, histories, and demographics of a wide range of institutions.

*Expand professionalization opportunities.* Departments should provide students with ways to acquire skills necessary to scholarship and future employment, such as collaboration, project management, and grant writing. Internships and work with professional associations can provide transformational experiences.

*Use the whole university community.* Professionals in universities who may not be regular faculty members can provide useful mentorship to graduate students. Departments should tap the expertise of librarians, informational technology staff members, museum personnel, and administrators.

*Redefine the roles of faculty advisers.* The director of graduate studies should be a leader of change who helps transform the program to meet the objectives outlined in this report. The placement officer needs to marshal expertise in nonteaching careers, alumni networks, and career development resources.

*Validate diverse career outcomes.* Departments must give students a full understanding of the range of potential career outcomes and support students' choices. Prospective and new students should have information about the program's placements, the academic job market, and the casualization of the academic workforce.

*Rethink admissions practices.* Departments should calibrate admissions to the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities, taking care to build the pipeline of applicants for small fields and subfields and from underrepresented groups.

# Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature

THE goal of the task force is to recommend changes to doctoral education in the modern languages and literatures that are consistent with the core mission of the humanities in general and the study of languages and literatures in particular. In what follows, we propose appropriate steps to address the changing circumstances, issues, and challenges of twenty-first-century doctoral study.

## The Urgent Need to Change

Structural problems threaten the future of humanistic study. Many of these problems have developed over decades, and concern about them is not new. But public attention to them, far beyond the precincts of the profession, has burgeoned since 2008. That timing is not surprising, since a major component of our predicament involves the economics of constrained resources and a changing labor market. Yet we should not lose sight of an equally ominous development: the extent to which doubts about the validity of the humanities in general and about graduate study in languages and literatures in particular have permeated public discourse. The proliferation of responses from leaders in the profession underscores both the difficulty of articulating and the urgent need to articulate a convincing answer to the underlying challenge: why maintain doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures—or the rest of the humanities—at all? The substantive rationales for humanistic study have been discussed many times; this is not the place to reiterate them. This is, however, the place to underscore the fact that doubts about the legitimacy of doctoral study are disturbingly widespread—in the general public, among opinion makers, and in the education press. Even within the academy, faculty members, graduate students, and university administrators have raised questions about the rationale for doctoral education in our fields. These doubts cannot simply be dismissed as anti-intellectualism, anti-aesthetic hostility to literature, antipathy to theory, or nativist animosity to the study of languages other than English, although each of those tendencies surely plays a role. Nor is it useful to view the challenge to doctoral study primarily within the framework of the traditional “two cultures” paradigm by bemoaning today’s technoscientific culture as one exclusively devoted to STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and antagonistic to humanistic knowledge. In contrast, we need an analysis that enables us to face the challenges and opportunities of our historical moment.

## *Nine Years: It Takes Too Long*

The Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) reported a median time to degree for 2012 humanities degree recipients as 9.0 years from entry into graduate school, with foreign

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

languages and literatures at 8.9 years and with letters, which includes English and comparative literature, at 8.7 years (*Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2012*).<sup>1</sup> There are factors specific to study and research in the humanities in general and to the study of languages and literatures in particular that may account for such a long time to degree for students, including the mastery of difficult languages, extended research in archives in other countries, the search for grant support, the necessity of finding jobs to finance one's education, and systemic and economic pressure to maintain an enrolled status. We acknowledge the breadth and depth of knowledge expected of doctoral-level work. Even factoring in these conditions, however, we consider 9.0 years unacceptable, in great part because of the social, economic, and personal costs associated with such a lengthy time to degree. Long periods of study delay full-fledged entry into the workforce, with associated financial sacrifices. For many there is increased indebtedness; for some, delayed family planning. For some students a long time to degree may not be especially disturbing if funding from their universities—through fellowships or research and teaching assistantships—is available. Here, however, there is also a cost at the level of the university itself. Just as colleges and universities are being urged to steward their resources and encourage undergraduates to complete their degrees in a timely fashion, so should they be urged to apply this policy at the graduate level.

Compared with other advanced degrees—the MD, the JD, the MBA—the significantly greater length of time required to complete a humanities PhD can render it a far less attractive alternative, even leaving aside the treacherousness of the job market. We can easily imagine a talented undergraduate's reasonably deciding against doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures when confronted with the time required to complete the degree.<sup>2</sup> For prospective doctoral students who have obligations to provide financial support to family members, lengthy time to degree may make undertaking and completing doctoral study impossible in the absence of adequate funding. In short, time to degree is a significant contributor to issues of equitable access to doctoral study.

A historical perspective is useful here. Today doctoral students in the humanities are taking longer to finish their degrees than they did in the 1960s; then, more than twice as many students finished in six years or less than do today.<sup>3</sup> While much has changed in academic culture during the past half century—the expansion of fields of study, the rising expectations for publication, and a transformed job market—the time to complete the humanities doctorate has expanded dramatically, much more so than for doctorates in other fields of study.

In 2006–10, nearly forty-four percent of doctoral students in the humanities—a striking figure—took more than ten years to complete their degrees. Various factors no doubt contributed to this long time frame: personal circumstances, the difficult job market, insufficient mentorship, choice of dissertation topic. Regardless, if nearly half our degree recipients require more than a decade to complete the doctorate, something is grievously wrong. To maintain doctoral study as an accessible and affordable opportunity, it is incumbent on us to inquire into the structure of our doctoral programs at our individual universities. We must provide consistent and reliable mentoring with benchmarks for completion of the degree and set realistic expectations about the culminating project, the dissertation.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

*The Academic Job Market and Employment Prospects*

The relation between the career expectations of many of our doctoral students in the modern languages and literatures and the reality of the academic job market poses another serious problem. As highly educated professionals, recipients of the PhD find employment; they are not typically part of the long-term unemployed. It has long been the case, however, that not all recipients of PhDs in modern languages and literatures find tenure-track positions, and the significant shrinking of the job market for tenure-track employment after 2008 has exacerbated this situation.

The best measure of opportunities for tenure-track academic employment for holders of language and literature PhDs is the MLA's annual count of jobs advertised in the *MLA Job Information List (JIL)*. Before 2008, the number of tenure-track positions departments advertised appeared to be aligned with the number of new PhD recipients (see *Report*). Between 2004–05 and 2007–08, for example, an average of just over 1,000 ads in the *JIL*'s English edition were tagged for tenure-track assistant professor, while each year from 2005 to 2008 the SED reported an average of just under 1,000 new PhDs in English.<sup>4</sup> But the apparent alignment fails to take subfields into account and ignores graduates from previous years who also competed for tenure-track openings. The problem of a weak job market became only too visible after 2008, when the number of tenure-track listings fell rapidly. Since 2008–09, the English edition of the *JIL* has contained about 600 ads tagged tenure-track assistant professor, on average, while the SED has continued to report close to 1,000 or more new PhD recipients in English each year. Similar discrepancies developed for the other languages. This drop represents a dramatic contraction of the academic job market.<sup>5</sup>

Other fields—including the physical sciences, life sciences, and engineering—also report sharp declines in job openings after 2008; the job market for JD recipients is similarly bleak.<sup>6</sup> There is a specific challenge to the future of doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures, however, since securing a tenure-track academic position remains the primary career goal for a far greater share of doctoral students in modern languages and literatures than it does for those in the sciences or social sciences. The disjunction between the number of new language and literature doctorates and the number of available tenure-track positions is therefore particularly troubling.

*The Casualization of the Academic Workforce*

In addition to the lengthening time to degree and the contraction of tenure-track positions in the academy, a third and related structural problem facing our fields is the changing character of the academic workforce. Doctoral programs are typically structured to train research scholars for tenure-track positions. But since the 1970s the fraction of the faculty holding tenure or in probational appointments leading to tenure has shrunk drastically. In 1975 70% of the faculty held a full-time position, and well over half held tenure or were on the tenure track; today half the faculty hold a part-time appointment, and only 29.8% hold tenure or are on the tenure track (Curtis 4 [fig. 2], 1 [fig. 1]). Many institutions—in particular public universities<sup>7</sup>—rely heavily on graduate students to teach undergraduates, and many institutions

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

employ adjuncts in precarious working conditions. This story is well known (see, e.g., *Issues*; “Academic Workforce”), and we will not rehearse it here. Our point is that the precarious economic circumstances of the large and increasing share of postsecondary faculty members working in contingent positions threatens the viability of the entire enterprise of doctoral study, as doctoral students face the ongoing deterioration of prospects for employment as full-time tenure-track professors. It is therefore in the interest of our fields to advocate vigorously both more tenure-track positions and improved working conditions for non-tenure-track faculty members. At the same time, it is urgent that departments provide mentoring and professionalization for doctoral students that will increase their chances for success in a broad range of opportunities. There is a tension between these two goals—reform of the employment structure of higher education and broadened career preparation for the individual—but both are necessary. Given the current structure of the academic workforce and assuming that in the future more positions in the academy are likely to be teaching-intensive, with relatively less of an emphasis on research, it is clear that many of our doctoral programs should be modified to prepare our students appropriately, placing greater emphasis on the development of skills in teaching.

*The Narratives of Success and Failure*

Among the measures used across the disciplines in the academy to gauge the success of doctoral programs, the placement record of a department’s graduates commonly ranks near the top of the list—for its faculty members, for institutional administrators, and for students themselves, current, prospective, or former. Faculty advisers care deeply about their doctoral students; they are concerned about their progress through their doctoral program and want them to succeed in their careers after the conferral of the degree. For many faculty members, this relationship extends well beyond the years of doctoral study. While placement is primarily a matter of the professional and personal responsibility of faculty members as teachers, we should acknowledge that it also reflects the distribution of recognition within the academy: prestige accrues to the individual faculty member and to the department when their doctoral students succeed according to certain definitions.

The prevailing culture in the modern languages and literatures, however—perhaps more so than in other fields—relies on an exceedingly narrow narrative of success. At its extreme, a successful placement entails a tenure-track position, preferably in another doctorate-granting institution, in particular at a highly ranked research university. Although many doctoral programs have self-consciously articulated different missions and many faculty members would rejoice if their doctoral students chose to work in a liberal arts college, this extreme formulation holds tremendous sway, and it stands at odds with the reality of the academic job market. There are many other kinds of positions in higher education, ranging from tenure-track positions in comprehensive community colleges and lectureships in research universities to nonfaculty, or alternative-academic, positions. Many with doctorates in the modern languages and literatures also go on to indisputably successful careers outside the academy. Yet these diverse routes to satisfying and fulfilling careers do not fit the dominant narrative that centers on the replication of the current faculty. The

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

covert if not overt message that many doctoral students hear is that success can only involve achieving a position comparable with or better than that of their adviser.

We spell out this predicament because in the course of our deliberations for this report and from our own experience we know that this narrow narrative of success places considerable stress on many doctoral students, perhaps especially on those who discover the appeal of other career tracks, including careers in education outside research institutions. Graduate students who, prudently, explore the possibility of nonacademic careers by seeking out advice at university career development centers reportedly express concern that their visit be kept secret, lest their dissertation adviser learn about it. Graduate students have recounted that when they inform their adviser of alternative plans, they are met with negativity; their advisers communicate a sense of disappointment, and students report experiencing feelings of shame and failure. We have no way to determine how often such conflicts transpire, but we do know that such stories circulate widely.

*The Devaluation of Teaching in the Research University*

Doctorate-granting universities confer prestige on research rather than on teaching. A coin of the realm is the reduced teaching load—even the term *load* conveys a perception of burdensomeness—while honor and professional recognition, not to mention greater compensation, are linked largely to research achievements. The replication of the narrative of success incorporates this value hierarchy and projects it as a devaluation of teaching.

Many faculty members take teaching very seriously, and graduate students often dedicate themselves enthusiastically to their teaching, whether as teaching assistants or in independent courses. Some doctoral programs expect their students to move to institutions that expect strong teaching; other programs specifically prepare students for leadership roles in programs that teach writing or second languages. Moreover, teaching has its own professional and personal rewards. Yet doctoral programs sometimes communicate a different message: that the highest professional rewards are to be gained by becoming a research professor whose teaching and service are minimized. This cultural sensibility puts the new PhD at odds with an academic job market where candidates' teaching is receiving greater emphasis and with a postsecondary education policy discussion where teaching is being reconceived in terms of student learning (Bok; Troop).

**Opportunities for New Directions in Doctoral Study**

Several developments are reshaping higher education profoundly, challenging inherited practices and necessitating transformations in the character of doctoral study. We have mentioned some of them, focusing on the negative. Here we focus on some of the auspicious new opportunities for doctoral education in the twenty-first century.

*Changes in Scholarly Inquiry and Communication*

Scholarly culture is undergoing change driven both by models of collaboration in research and teaching and by digital technologies that enable new modes of composition, circulation, dissemination, and preservation of scholarship and research.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

Traditionally, doctoral programs in the humanities have largely been based on the paradigm of the single scholar who strives to reduce teaching obligations through fellowship support, prefers to work alone, and claims exclusive ownership of his or her results. In practice, of course, collaboration always takes place, whether in graduate seminars, at conferences and workshops, or through other exchanges with colleagues, but the model of the individual scholar has long stood at the center of the system. Today, however, models of collaboration in scholarship are emerging, and doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures must equip students with the skills to collaborate effectively.

Collaboration and teamwork are the norm in large swaths of the social and natural sciences. Collaboration is also the mode of many of the arts— theater, film, dance, and music. Humanities scholars can learn from our colleagues in these other fields as well as from colleagues in our own disciplines with a history of collaboration. Meanwhile, collaboration is being enabled by digital technologies, which facilitate more robust forms of scholarly communication. It has become much easier than in the past to share texts, provide comments, and engage in coauthorship. The paradigm of the isolated research scholar is losing its sway.

Similarly, the largely exclusive focus on the full-length print book is being called into question as more attention is paid to publications that are available online and that thus circulate with comparative ease. Although print books may be converted to e-books and traditional dissertations are regularly digitized, the digital environment is nonetheless inducing generic changes in scholarly productivity that reflect the electronic medium. Greater significance will therefore continue to accrue to writing for the Web, including, for example, short essays and middle-state and collaborative writing. New technologies allow work to be freely distributed, both once a work is complete and during the process of peer review. Sites such as *MLA Commons* support modes of communication that enable scholars to partner with distant colleagues. New genres, such as the academic blog, are gaining currency. These exciting developments require new paths of professional training and socialization for doctoral students.

*Digital Scholarship and Teaching*

In a related vein, the advent of new analytic tools and methods—from text mining to visualization, from distant reading to collaborative virtual research environments—has led to the rapid expansion of what is in fact an established community of practice, known today as the digital humanities. In addition, the sudden availability of large research corpora online is transforming how scholars in the modern languages and literatures undertake their research in unprecedented ways. The traditional hermeneutics of the individual work is not endangered; rather, it is augmented by digital technologies. But the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and interprofessional aspects of much digital scholarship do suggest critical transitions ahead for literary fields.

*Bringing Our Work to Publics beyond the Academy*

Today we have the responsibility to engage new publics in our work and to explain what we do—and why what we do is important—to new audiences. For our

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

colleagues in history, the realm of public history is well established and familiar; programs exist that provide training in the field. There is also a well-established tradition in public sociology. The literary humanities do not have an equally visible tradition, although there is no lack of models and possibilities for reaching out to publics: distinct publics are drawn to cultural heritage institutions, libraries, and museums, which can provide vibrant sites for the literary public humanities and for interdisciplinary projects in the study of cultures. Projects in the public humanities frequently combine scholarship, teaching, and creative activity; they are often collaborative, engage with diverse communities, sometimes as cocreators, and consciously articulate their value to their publics. And today, the ability to challenge received notions of authorship and to bring our work to different and larger publics outside the academy is amplified by digital networks and social media; Web sites have become vital repositories for our research—with and for new publics. Many of our doctoral students consider their scholarship a public good and are finding ways to take their work to the public; they require the ability to speak in different scholarly voices to different audiences, including publics outside the academy.

*Innovative Content*

Recent decades have seen dramatic change in the content of study in the modern languages and literatures. That we have expanded the range of texts and authors studied, as well as the questions posed about both new and traditional works, indicates the profound revisions in our fields. Literary study has been enriched by various interdisciplinary openings, and doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures currently takes place in dynamic and intellectually exciting terrains and extends to cultural traditions across the globe. In general, innovative understandings of human experience, past and present, and of the challenges we face are emerging in the work of our scholars. Some of those challenges are pressing global issues—such as climate change and displaced populations—and new scientific developments (in cognitive science and in medicine, for instance), and they call for our consideration in our research, in the classroom, and in public forums. New interdisciplinary fields of study, such as that of affect and the emotions, benefit richly from our research. Scholarship in the modern languages and literatures today participates in and benefits from this wealth of exploration, which guarantees a fertile intellectual terrain for the future of doctoral study. Innovative content can also lead to structural transformations that afford additional opportunities, especially in programs for regional and transnational collaboration.

*Decentered Disciplines*

Doctoral study in the modern languages and literatures has grown rich and dynamic, given the expanding range of objects of study, methods, and interests. Ambiguity about the definition and scope of our disciplinary fields allows for an openness to interdisciplinary borrowings, leading to a rich array of intellectual opportunities.

All modern scholarship necessarily includes ongoing reflection on the fundamental constitution of a discipline; it benefits from reconsidering inherited practices

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

and from posing new questions to generate new insights. The contemporary scholarly culture of our departments can combine radically heterogeneous disciplinary agendas with little consensus concerning disciplinary self-understanding. A single department may simultaneously include colleagues who argue for profound revisions of canons and methods, others who insist on long-held understandings of comprehensive coverage of national literary history, and still others who embrace ethnographic study of language acquisition. This decentering of disciplinary knowledge in our fields—a multiplicity of paradigms—characterizes our scholarship today.

As a result, scholarship in the modern languages and literatures is not constrained by any single and exclusively binding disciplinary vision. Faculty members frequently benefit from the opportunity to participate in interdisciplinary programs; that some have two or three academic homes generates more understandings of what constitutes the production of knowledge. Many doctoral students come to graduate programs having pursued interdisciplinary study and desiring to continue it. In this context of dynamically open fields of study, comprehensive intellectual coverage in the traditional sense is impossible. Instead, the decentered condition of knowledge affords contemporary literary scholarship the opportunity to pose new questions and to explore them with a tool kit enriched through borrowings from other fields and disciplines.

*Increased Attention to Teaching*

This report referred earlier to the general devaluation of teaching in the research university as well as to the precarious situation in which contingent faculty members find themselves at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Yet with the continuing escalation of the cost of education, parents, administrators, and legislators are asking for demonstrable evidence of student learning. While there are valid criticisms of certain strategies of outcomes assessment, the task force believes that we should draw in positive ways on this public energy to recalibrate or rebalance, where needed, the relation of research and teaching in our doctoral programs. Teachers of tomorrow's undergraduates will come from the ranks of today's doctoral graduate students, who need to understand the importance of teaching and to benefit from robust training opportunities.

Many of our doctoral students are drawn to teaching, whether they envision careers at research universities or at liberal arts colleges, regional universities, and two-year schools. In all institutional types, the emphasis on effective teaching will continue to grow, and only those graduate students with strong preparation as teachers will succeed. The tendency to devalue teacher preparation in parts of doctoral education is at odds with the ever-growing national pursuit of effective teaching that can optimize student learning. Dedicated and well-prepared teachers are crucial to the strength of our society. Our doctoral students need to know about the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education in the United States—one that includes online learning—as well as the comprehensive community colleges that serve forty-four percent of undergraduates in the United States and nearly half of all undergraduates of color (*Bridging* 3). In the United States considerable public attention is currently focused on improving education;

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

doctoral programs that prepare scholar-teachers have an opportunity to contribute productively to this effort.

### Toward the Future of Doctoral Education in Language and Literature Fields

Efforts to address four areas of concern are essential for sustaining doctoral study into the future: maintaining excellence, preserving accessibility, broadening career paths, and focusing on doctoral students' learning needs and development.

#### *Maintain Excellence*

Our first concern should be to preserve academic excellence in our doctoral programs. Standards of excellence are strengthened through creative flexibility rather than strict constructions tied to particular forms—flexibility of the curriculum, of the dissertation, of preparation for professional careers. We can demand excellence in course work and in internships, in the seminar paper and in alternatives to the seminar paper, and in whatever form the dissertation takes. The scholarly boldness and imagination needed for a coherent intellectual project can be stimulated and strengthened by students' gaining expertise in projects of all lengths; experimenting with different kinds of scholarly voices; trying different modes of dissemination; working alone and collaboratively. And the deep attention needed to be a humanist in the academy and to turn ideas into book-length projects, however composed, performed, or distributed, can be reinforced through rigorous conceptualization, research, and argumentation. Some scholars dazzle us with their magisterial tomes, some with their blinding insight in the essay, and increasingly some with their imaginative, multidirectional, and interactive multimedia engagement with an important question or cultural formation. There need not be only a single way to gain depth, expertise, scope, and credentials.

#### *Preserve Accessibility*

In the face of the post-2008 contraction of the academic job market, proposals to reduce the size of graduate education in our fields have been heard. The ostensible goal of such a reduction would be to realign the rate of PhD production with the number of tenure-track openings. While the logic of the strategy may seem at first clear, the task force believes it is misguided. Doctoral education is not exclusively for the production of future tenure-track faculty members. Reducing cohort size is tantamount to reducing accessibility. The modern languages and literatures are vital to our culture, to the research university and to higher education, and to the qualified students who have the dedication for graduate work and who ought to be afforded the opportunity to pursue advanced study in their field of choice. Instead of contraction, we argue for a more capacious understanding of our fields and their benefits to society, including the range of career outcomes. The task force's response to the contraction in the academic job market is not a retreat designed to preserve a traditional paradigm. Instead we argue for transforming the paradigm by broadening professional horizons in the interest of preserving accessibility to a humanities PhD.

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

*Broaden Career Paths*

Far from diluting or eroding the status of the modern languages and literatures, the broadening we envision involves asserting the contribution that recipients of the doctorate can make outside the academy. Because career prospects for the doctorate recipient do not lie only within the academy, the focus of mentoring must expand to accommodate the spectrum of possibilities. The changing circumstances of language and literature study provide the profession with an opportunity to articulate clearly and ambitiously the multiple roles our field and our students can play to the benefit of society. It is therefore crucial that the field recognize the validity of the diverse career paths that students follow. A nontraditional career can carry the passions, habits of mind, and skills associated with language and literature study outside the confines of the academy.

The profession must make a strong case to the public at large and especially to prospective employers that our doctoral programs prepare students for career paths throughout society, not only in higher education. The MLA can play a leadership role through expanded advocacy.

*Focus on Graduate Students' Needs*

Ultimately doctoral study is about the development of students, who pursue their intellectual and pedagogical interests while working with faculty members who teach and mentor them and with other graduate students. The structure of programs should facilitate that agenda while also preparing students for the range of career opportunities that may be available inside and outside the academy. In other words, graduate programs are for graduate students' learning needs and career development. It is urgent that departments and faculty members convey their support for the diverse career paths that students choose in a changing job market. The profession should endorse a shift from a narrative of replication to a narrative of transformation.

The factors determining the size of PhD cohorts vary among institutions—sometimes including the budgets of MA programs, sometimes undergraduate staffing needs, and sometimes other considerations altogether—but the primary concern in determining the size of a program should be its ability to provide educational opportunities to the graduate students.

This shift will entail giving up the priority of certain inherited prestige structures that have defined the profession, but it can also mean upholding the mission that is at the heart of the educational enterprise.

**Recommendations**

We propose the following agenda for change in doctoral programs in the modern languages and literatures. We believe our recommendations respond appropriately to the

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

current circumstances of our fields. We also believe they are realistic. As we document in the appendix to this report, many of these recommendations reflect changes in doctoral programs that are already under way. We have been gratified to find that many departments have taken steps to respond to the pressures we describe here, and we have also found that doctoral students are looking for new opportunities both within their programs and in their careers. We view these developments as grounds for optimism.

*Redesign the Doctoral Program*

Departments should review their programs to align them with the learning needs and career goals of current and future students and to bring degree requirements in line with the ever evolving character of our fields. When departments redesign programs, we urge them to consider the following:

- the forms, pacing, and amount of course work (e.g., courses sequenced during the dissertation phase, practica, small-credit modules)
- the possible forms of non-course-based activities designed to expand the repertoire of student competencies, literacies, and experiences (e.g., workshops on turning seminar papers into public presentations or on the methodologies for data mining)
- the modes of evaluation that equip students to participate in scholarly discourse (e.g., alternatives to the traditional seminar paper, portfolios)
- the scope, shape, media, and function of, as well as the audiences for, qualifying exercises such as exams
- the character, purpose, and timing of the prospectus for the dissertation project

Expectations regarding doctoral degree requirements should be adjusted in accordance with the evolving field. Departments should rewrite requirements, abandoning expectations of comprehensive coverage to facilitate alternative modes of knowledge, including interdisciplinary inquiry. Instead of placing primary emphasis on traditional literary-historical coverage, departments should encourage new forms of scholarship and require new models of preparation. In support of this reconfiguring of doctoral education, departmental colleagues will have a variety of experiences to draw on, in areas such as collaboration, innovation in classroom practices, and course requirements. It can also prove invaluable to look beyond the borders of language and literature departments to learn how colleagues in fields outside the humanities undertake doctoral education and to rethink practices in the light of their experience. Second language acquisition, crucial to doctoral education, must be given sufficient support. In addition, the structure of doctoral program requirements should reflect judicious estimations of what doctoral students can complete within a reasonable frame of time.

*Engage More Deeply with Technology*

Doctoral programs should actively encourage students to test and develop new tools and techniques for the study of literature and languages. They should also create opportunities for students to reflect critically on inherited notions of scholarship in the light of digital methods and digitally mediated collaborative work.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

Some doctoral students will benefit from in-depth technological training that builds their capacity to design and develop research software. Some will require familiarity with database structures or with digitization standards to facilitate the representation and critical editing of documents and cultural artifacts online. Still others will need to add statistical literacy to their portfolios. Still others will need to understand the opportunities and implications of methods like distant reading and text mining. Programs should therefore link technology training to student research questions, supporting this training as they would language learning or archival research and partnering where appropriate outside the department to match students with relevant mentors or practicum experiences. Because all doctoral students will need to learn to compose in multimodal online platforms, to evaluate new technologies independently, and to navigate and construct digital research archives, mastery of basic digital humanities tools and techniques should be a goal of the methodological training offered by every department.

This is not solely a matter of the application of new methods to research and writing. At stake is also increasingly sophisticated thinking about the use of technology in teaching. Future undergraduates will bring new technological expectations and levels of social media fluency to the classroom, and their teachers—today's doctoral students—must be prepared to meet them with versatility and confidence. Students who understand the workings of analytic tools and the means of production of scholarly communication in the twenty-first century will be better able to engage technology critically and use it to its fullest scholarly and pedagogical potential.

*Reimagine the Dissertation*

Departments should expand the spectrum of forms the dissertation may take. We believe that an extended research project is and should remain the defining feature of doctoral education and a key contribution to the life of the scholarly community in our fields and in the world. Our recommendation for expanding forms of the dissertation responds to the opportunities for new directions in doctoral study. The dissertation is the pivot point for change in doctoral education. Today alternative modes of scholarly communication challenge the priority of the dissertation as proto-print book; multimodal platforms for e-books are being developed that incorporate still images, audio, and moving images as well as interactive features and text. The crisis in academic publishing in literary studies also calls into question the traditional book-length print dissertation as the exclusive capstone for graduate study. Examples of an expanded repertoire are a suite of essays on a common theme; Web-based projects that give evidence of extensive research; translations, with accompanying theoretical and critical reflection; public humanities projects that include collaboration with people in other cultural institutions and contain an explicit dimension of research; and the treatment of texts in terms of their pedagogical value in classrooms.

We recognize that faculty members have real and important concerns about how what is now considered a nontraditional dissertation will affect the future career of their doctoral students, especially with regard to the first job. Yet we are in a transitional period in terms of the options, modes, and media of scholarly inquiry and

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

communication. Making options available, even encouraging students to imagine alternatives to the proto-book, may, in the words of the MLA Working Group on the Dissertation and Doctoral Study, encourage students to “become responsive to the fit between the topic and the mode of communicating that topic, as well as thoughtful about the consequences of choosing a particular mode of scholarly communication” (Smith). This experience may well advantage students in future job searches and academic careers.

In addition to explicitly expanding the possible forms the dissertation might take, departments should clarify their expectations for the capstone research project, including length as well as the amount of time to be devoted to it. They should guarantee reliable mentoring for students and build structures to integrate advanced students into intellectual and departmental life while those students undertake their research. They should encourage students to propose nontraditional projects, especially where they serve the student’s intellectual objectives or career plans, and they should recognize the legitimacy, and at times the necessity, of mentorship from professionals beyond the faculty of the department and the institution. Departments should advocate the validity of alternatives to the proto–print book dissertation as a basis for initial hire. They should similarly challenge expectations for book publication as the primary criterion for conferral of tenure.

### *Reduce the Time to Degree*

Departments should design programs that can be completed in five years from entry into a doctoral program with a bachelor’s degree as the highest degree attained. If departments change the structure of the curriculum and examinations, articulate and monitor a reasonable scope and time frame for the dissertation project, design a careful mentoring process, and provide sufficient financial support to allow students to progress appropriately, a five-year doctorate ought to be achievable.

Departments should design programs that can normally be completed in five years. Because individual circumstances may vary, some students may take longer, while others will be able to complete more quickly.

### *Strengthen Teaching Preparation*

Departments should provide sufficient teaching opportunities for students and ensure that their teaching experience is designed to enhance their professional development. Teaching opportunities should be accompanied by course work, practical experience, and mentoring. Departments should avoid burdening graduate students with excessive teaching obligations that impede their progress. Preparation for teaching is a central component of doctoral education. Currently, graduate students in private universities that offer fellowships may have too little teaching experience to succeed on the academic job market; in contrast, graduate students in public universities are frequently put in the position of financing their education through extensive teaching assignments.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

This issue is complicated and thorny. Contradictory forces drive the development of programs, their size, and their dependency on teaching assistants for delivering the curriculum. For some institutions, cohort size is geared to teaching needs in the undergraduate program. In most cases, the cost of using graduate students as instructors is now much higher than the cost of hiring contingent faculty members (Cohen). But we underscore the ideal that training for teaching and teaching opportunities should be conceptualized above all in terms of the needs of graduate students' learning.

Opportunities for teaching should enable doctoral students to gain expertise in different kinds of classrooms—in the lecture hall and around the seminar table, in the general education classroom and the classroom of majors—as well as in digital pedagogies, hybrid courses, and online learning. Preparation for teaching includes teaching diverse populations, both domestic and international. Departments should develop a culture of support of doctoral student teaching, creating peer and faculty mentoring programs and recognizing excellence in the classroom through teaching awards.

Further, doctoral programs cannot and should not assume that students will find positions in similar kinds of institutions or will want positions in similar institutions. Pedagogical training should introduce students to the wide range of institutions in higher education, diverse in mission, history, and student demographics. Teaching experience is also valuable for those who may ultimately have nonfaculty careers. The skills acquired through the teaching experience are transferable to other career contexts. Outside the education sector, the ability to teach can be understood as an attribute of leadership, and doctorate recipients can use the pedagogical skills acquired during graduate study to become agents of change.

*Expand Professionalization Opportunities*

Departments should provide students with opportunities to acquire the broad sets of skills, increasingly necessary to their scholarship, that involve experience in collaboration, project management, and grant writing. While the opportunities for expanding the repertoire of skills will no doubt become part of currently established courses, departments should also build partnerships with other units on campus—a humanities center or institute, a digital lab in the library, or the graduate school. On-campus opportunities could take the shape of single events, a series of short credit-bearing courses, or certificate programs. Modules and certificate programs can involve clusters of courses and ad hoc events, and the time devoted to them should count as part of the required course work for the degree. Departments should also support student participation in opportunities outside the university, such as summer institutes that build professional skills. Similarly, professional breadth can be garnered in internships, both in the university and in appropriate external institutions, and through membership and leadership positions in professional associations, such as the MLA. In general, these steps involve moving doctoral programs out of their traditional siloes as a way to strengthen preparation for scholarship and teaching and to provide access to a wider range of career paths.

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

Departments must make it clear that the number of tenure-track positions is limited: there are not enough positions for all new PhD recipients. Graduate students should therefore consider a wide range of career prospects. Graduate programs should evolve to equip students with the ability to thrive in this changing job market—to do so is in the interest not only of the students but also of the faculty members who are committed to the success of their students.

*Use the Whole University Community*

Doctoral programs should look beyond their departmental boundaries and seek out professionals in the university, many of whom may not be regular faculty members, who can provide useful mentorship to graduate students, as a group and individually. Just as graduate learning should not be limited by departmental boundaries, neither should it forgo the expertise of the university's highly trained staff members such as librarians, information technology staff members, museum personnel, administrators, and others who can support graduate students in familiarizing themselves with digital humanities, nonacademic career paths, and other specializations that doctorate recipients pursue.

*Redefine the Roles of the Director of Graduate Studies and the Placement Officer*

We recommend that the director of graduate studies (DGS) role be expanded to include responsibility for the transformation of graduate education. The DGS, in collaboration with other members of the department, should develop plans to move a doctoral program toward reduced time to degree, to restructure curricula and examinations, to redefine the dissertation, and to implement the other agenda points for change discussed in this report. DGSs should become the leading advocates for changing doctoral programs in the modern languages and literatures. Identifying the DGS as the spearhead of this initiative will accelerate change and guarantee that it remains a constant concern in the department. Departments should support the graduate office and the DGS. We also urge DGSs in departments across the modern languages and literatures in the same institution to exchange experiences and collaborate with one another.

Many departments, especially larger ones, already assign to one faculty member the responsibility of supporting and monitoring the progress of those graduate students going on the job market. We urge smaller departments to appoint a faculty member as placement officer or to collaborate with other small departments.

As the range of career profiles expands, both within and outside higher education, the understanding of placement and placement strategies must similarly evolve. Placement officers will need to develop familiarity with the full range of careers in higher education—both teaching and nonteaching—and with matters associated with nonacademic placement. It is particularly important that they be well-informed about relevant on-campus offices and their staff, including institutional placement offices, career development offices, and the alumni office. Because placement, whether academic or nonacademic, can be helped by personal connections, it

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

is crucial for departments to maintain their alumni networks and maintain contact with graduates well into their post-PhD career.

*Validate Diverse Career Outcomes*

Departments should guarantee that graduate students understand the full range of potential career outcomes. They should build cooperation with career development offices while also pursuing internal departmental strategies, such as inviting guest speakers, perhaps alumni, whose humanities doctorates have led them to careers beyond the classroom. All graduate students should gain exposure to different types of teaching institutions, and departments should underscore the value of career paths that lead to different institutional types or to positions outside the education sector. Humanists active throughout society demonstrate the value of advanced humanistic study and the humanistic scholarly enterprise.

An important element of validating a wide range of careers includes candor about employment possibilities. Prospective graduate applicants and incoming graduate students should have access to information about the job market. Departments should tell them about the availability of tenure-track positions as well as about the casualization of the academic job market. In addition, they should provide information, preferably on their Web site, regarding their placement record in different types of positions as well as median time to degree. Staff support will be required to maintain this information and to track individuals as they move out of their initial positions, which implies the need for a systematic maintenance of alumni connections. We recognize that in the posting of these data, privacy concerns must be respected.

*Rethink Admissions Practices*

Departments should develop admissions practices and policies appropriate to the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities. Building the pipeline of applicants for small fields and subfields can be vital. For large fields with high numbers of applicants, programmatic attention to the pipeline can be a way to build enrollments among underrepresented population groups. Some departments already devote considerable effort along these lines, but it is a challenging task, and much remains to be done.

**Conclusions**

It is the intention of this document to contribute to the strengthening of doctoral education in the modern languages and literatures. Our disciplines face many challenges that have made change urgently needed, but we also have identified opportunities for innovation. Implementing these recommendations can facilitate the development of doctoral education. We know that some departments are already undertaking steps consistent with these recommendations; there is much experimentation under way, and that is for the good. For our fields to thrive into the future, doctoral study will have to evolve, even as it maintains a core commitment to the fundamental values of humanistic learning.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

The specific recommendations in this report build on the overriding concerns that we believe are crucial for the future of doctoral study. The scholarly community must insist on maintaining excellence in our research and teaching, in particular by recognizing the wide range of intellectual paths through which we produce new knowledge. Similarly, we must be vigilant in maintaining and expanding access to advanced study in the language and literature fields; broad access to higher education infuses our fields with creativity while maximizing the contribution humanistic study can make throughout society. Many doctoral students will contribute to society through careers as teachers—throughout the education sector—but many will pursue career paths where the skills they acquired during graduate education will be used in other ways. It is very important to communicate endorsement for all career outcomes, both because we need to support our graduates and because the broad dispersion of humanistic values benefits society as a whole. Supporting graduate students means that the touchstone for a successful doctoral program is the recognition of the priority of graduate students' learning needs in terms of their intellectual goals and their professional development.

To address all these concerns—maintaining excellence, guaranteeing access, validating diverse career outcomes, and focusing on student learning—requires drawing on resources beyond the borders of one department. The traditional view of the delivery of doctoral education as the purview of one department operating largely in isolation no longer applies. The quality of doctoral study requires drawing on the resources of the whole university through collaborations with scholars from other disciplines and with professional staff members often outside departments. The future of doctoral study also depends on recognizing the many publics, including those beyond the university and the traditional scholarly community, with which our scholarship and our students' scholarship are already engaging productively. Therefore, although today's graduate programs face severe challenges, we believe that the recommendations proposed here represent a program to achieve an intellectually exciting future for doctoral education in the modern languages and literatures.

Committee Members

*Carlos J. Alonso, Columbia University*  
*Russell A. Berman (chair), Stanford University*  
*Sylvie Debevec Henning, East Carolina University*  
*Lanisa Kitchiner, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art*  
*Bethany Nowvieskie, University of Virginia*  
*Elizabeth Schwartz Crane, San Joaquin Delta College, CA*  
*Sidonie Ann Smith, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*  
*Kathleen Woodward, University of Washington, Seattle*

Staff Liaisons

*Kathleen Fitzpatrick, director, MLA Office of Scholarly Communication*  
*David Laurence, director, MLA Office of Research and ADE*

**Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature**

## Notes

1. History is comparable at 9.2 years for 2012 graduates (*Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2012*). In 2012, the median age of the doctorate recipient in the humanities is 33.9 (34.3 for men and 33.7 for women [table 66]).

2. The JD and MBA are typically three-year degrees, and the MD takes four years, followed by residency training. The PhD in the humanities is also followed by increasingly common postdoctoral years, and for those fortunate enough to find a tenure-track position, there is a seven-year probationary period of limited job security. More appropriate than these comparisons with explicitly professional degrees is a consideration of time to degree in other doctoral programs: earning a PhD in the life sciences takes 6.9 years; in the physical sciences, 6.7; in the social sciences, 7.7; and in engineering, 6.7—all considerably less than the 9.0 years in the humanities. Only the PhD in education, at 11.8, takes longer, presumably because of the pattern of teachers working in the field while pursuing the advanced degree (*Doctorate Recipients in U.S. Universities, 2012* [table 31]).

3. These historical time-to-degree figures are drawn from a custom data run of the SED for the MLA by the independent research organization NORC, at the University of Chicago. Looking at PhD completion rates in six years or less is instructive. In 1961–65, 24.5% of humanities doctoral students completed their degrees in six years or less, and in 1966–70 that number rose to a high of 26.7%. The rate fell until the mid-1980s, when in 1986–90 only 10.0% of humanities doctoral students completed their degrees in six years or less, and in 2006–10 it was 10.4%. In contrast, the percentages of doctoral students in other fields who completed their degrees in six years or less are considerably higher than in the humanities: around 30% in the life sciences and social sciences, and 40% in the physical sciences, in contrast to the humanities' 10%.

4. The total for English given here represents the sum of the SED subfields English language and literature, American literature, and creative writing. The *MLA Job Information List* does not typically capture those institutions in the higher-education sector not pursuing a national job search.

5. Beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing until 2008, the annual number of PhDs awarded in English hovered around 1,000, and in languages other than English around 600. Each of these numbers is about one-third lower than the high of 1973 for English (1,412) and 1974 for other languages (886). The number of national searches advertised—for all types of positions—has varied, but before 2008 the count was well above 1,500 positions in English and above 1,300 for other languages, both figures that compared positively with the number of new PhD holders. Yet it is crucial to remember that, as noted, these national searches involved all types of positions (e.g., term visiting positions) and by no means only tenure-track openings.

6. The report on the 2011 SED describes sharp post-2008 declines in all fields in the percentage of doctorate recipients with definite employment or postdoctoral positions at the point of graduation (*Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2011*). This job market contraction is not solely a humanities problem, although during most of the two decades analyzed (1999–2011), the humanities showed the lowest percentage of recipients with employment or postdoctoral placements of all fields. Yet the twenty-year linear trend for the humanities has been slightly positive, whereas the prospects for employment in the life sciences have been declining. (In the life sciences, the absolute number of postgraduate commitments has been growing, but the number of new PhDs has been growing even faster.) In general, the physical sciences, the life sciences, and engineering all show patterns of decline (accelerating after 2008) in the percentage of new PhDs with postgraduation commitments since a peak of 2001, possibly reflecting ongoing reductions in federal research support, concurrent with growing PhD production.

7. Graduate assistants with teaching responsibilities made up 31.7% of the academic workforce in public Carnegie doctoral institutions compared with 16.7% in private Carnegie doctoral institutions, according to the IPEDS 2012 Employees by Assigned Position survey (custom query).

## Works Cited

- “Academic Workforce Advocacy Kit.” *Modern Language Association*. MLA, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014. <[http://www.mla.org/advocacy\\_kit](http://www.mla.org/advocacy_kit)>.
- Bok, Derek. “We Must Prepare Ph.D. Students for the Complicated Art of Teaching.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Chronicle of Higher Educ., 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
- Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream*. The Century Foundation. Century Foundation, 2013. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.
- Cohen, Walter. “The Economics of Doctoral Education in Literature.” *PMLA* 155.5 (2000): 1164–87. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
- Curtis, John W. *The Employment Status of Instructional Staff Members in Higher Education, Fall 2011*. American Association of University Professors. AAUP, Apr. 2014. Web. 8 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/files/AAUP-InstrStaff2011-April2014.pdf>>.

**Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature**

- Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2011. National Science Foundation.* Natl. Science Foundation, Dec. 2012. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.
- Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2012. National Science Foundation.* Natl. Science Foundation, Jan. 2014. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.
- Issues and Directions: Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members in English and Other Modern Languages. ADE Bulletin 53–ADFL Bulletin 42.3 (2013): 1–97.* Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
- Report on the MLA Job Information List, 2012–13. Modern Language Association.* MLA, Oct. 2013. Web. 22 Apr. 2014.
- Smith, Sidonie. Report to the MLA Executive Council from the Working Group on the Dissertation and Doctoral Education. 22 May 2010. TS.
- Troop, Don. “Research Universities Are Praised for Returning Focus to Undergrad Education.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Chronicle of Higher Educ., 12 Nov. 2013. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

## Appendix

### The Changing Character of PhD Programs in the Modern Languages and Literatures

The task force report is part of a broad discussion that is taking place across North America about the future of doctoral studies in the humanities. Individual institutions have been rethinking and changing the structure of doctoral programs with various aims: to train students for various careers; to expand options for the dissertation; to establish better benchmarking procedures; to ensure productive mentoring; to enhance graduate student preparation for teaching careers; and to design programs that can be completed in a reasonable amount of time. Many of the recommendations in this report echo changes already being undertaken in some institutions in response to the challenges and the opportunities it identifies. We present these examples as evidence that the field is undergoing transformation and to demonstrate some of the diversity of solutions that departments are devising. The list of examples that follows is not intended in any way to represent a comprehensive census of revisions in doctoral study. Instead, these are samples that demonstrate the emerging new character of doctoral programs. They may serve as models for those who wish to pursue change. The task force collected these examples through the ADE and the ADFL and on the basis of task force members' knowledge of specific innovation under way in higher education. The task force did not attempt to evaluate these examples; we are grateful to the colleagues who shared them with us.

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

Idaho State University, Department of English and Philosophy

*Jessica Winston*

The PhD in English and the teaching of English (<http://www.isu.edu/english/EnglishGrad/PhD.shtml>) is a distinctive program that combines training in British and American literatures with theoretical and practical work in teaching literature and composition. The primary aim of the degree is to train graduates for teaching careers at two- and four-year schools, especially community colleges. The degree is designed to respond to a need among two- and four-year colleges for knowledgeable, skilled faculty members who can teach a wide variety of classes in composition and literature.

ISU has a long tradition of doctoral training in English, having offered doctoral degrees since 1971; the rationale for the PhD program grows out of this tradition. In 1971, the ISU English doctoral degree was a DA (doctor of arts). Conceived in the late 1960s at Carnegie-Mellon University and originally funded by the Carnegie Foundation, DA programs were established across the country and in multiple fields to address a perceived shortage of teachers for community and small liberal arts colleges. The DA, or “teaching doctorate” as it was (and still is) called, provided broad rather than specialized training in various fields, as well as theoretical and practical work in discipline-specific pedagogy. Over time, the DA became less visible and viable as a degree. In the mid-1970s, at the height of interest in the DA, at least twelve institutions offered the degree in English, but today only one institution does.<sup>1</sup> In response to the decline of the DA, in 2009 ISU replaced its DA program with a PhD in English and the teaching of English. The department reconceived the structure and philosophy of the curriculum in this process, but it chose to maintain the distinctive, long-time emphasis and mission of its doctoral degree in literary and pedagogical training for university-level teaching faculty members. The department also adopted a name for the degree that highlights the program’s emphasis in teaching.

The curriculum integrates historical, theoretical, and practical work in the teaching of English into the program at every level. Alongside course work in literature and literary theory, students take two seminars in composition and literature pedagogy. Working closely with faculty mentors, students also undertake two teaching internships, where they design and teach a course that explores some aspect of pedagogical theory in the literature or composition classroom. One part of the qualifying exam focuses on a field in the teaching of English, usually connected with the student’s dissertation research. While the dissertations are usually literary, students must also write a chapter-length essay that discusses the implications of the dissertation research for teaching. Thus the program trains conscientious, reflective, and versatile scholar-teachers whose primary career goals lie in college-level teaching.

**Note**

1. Paul Dressel and Mary Thompson, “The Doctor of Arts: A Decade of Development, 1967–1977,” *Journal of Higher Education* 49.4 (1978): 329–36, print. See also, “Phases of Development and Discontinuation of the D.A. by Institution, Field, and Year, 1967–1990,” Idaho State University Graduate School, 1991 (DA programs archive, uncataloged misc. MS). The remaining institution offering the English DA is Saint John’s University, in Queens, NY. Several universities, including ISU, continue to offer the DA in other disciplines, such as biology and political science.

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

## Indiana University, English Department

*Ellen MacKay*

As a consequence of our participation in the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (2002–05), IU's English PhD program (<http://www.indiana.edu/~engweb/gradStudies/index.shtml>) launched a new curriculum (2009) and exam structure (2006). The ambition of the department was twofold: to shorten the time to degree and to train graduate students to succeed in a discipline increasingly structured by shared methods and practices and untethered to a predetermined set of objects. Both changes, curricular and exam-based, resulted in the revitalization of a largely disused course format: the practicum or workshop.

The old exam structure required students to elaborate a critical problem during their comprehensive exams, thus laying the groundwork for the intervention of the dissertation, but research revealed students were not proceeding efficiently to the prospectus stage. To prevent this slowdown, the new exam has two parts, across a fairly strict time line: students now take the first leg of the comprehensive exam, an oral coverage exam, in the September following the completion of course work. If they pass, they proceed in January to a semester-long prospectus workshop, which walks them through the process of writing and revising the dissertation prospectus. In May, students defend the prospectus in a second oral exam and begin drafting the dissertation during the summer. The workshop, led by the director of graduate studies, is an opportunity to discuss disciplinary norms (particularly as they relate to publication and productivity), as well as to survey the range of intellectual activities that can comprise the dissertation and the field more largely. It is therefore a vital site of professionalization. It is also an enhancement to efficiency; preliminary data analysis show that this new system has reduced time to degree by eight months.

The curricular changes are best expressed in the preamble to the revised course structure:

Rather than define our curriculum in terms of content and coverage, we organize it in terms of practices. The teaching of literary history remains a central component of what we do, but our newly revised curriculum re-reflects each level of course-work according to the wide range of practices we currently perform as academics. The set of courses offered at the 500-level are characterized by their hands-on focus on various practical and technical skills needed for a successful professional career. Our 600-level offerings are focused on various practices of reading in various fields (literary-historical period, theoretical approach, form and genre). Our 700-level seminars are focused on the practice of advanced research in the discipline.

The 500-level offerings thus far include a course on archival research and curation (in IU's rare book and manuscript library), cultural research methods and the digital turn, the art of the review, writing about performance, and "how to write an article for a scholarly journal," the last a smash success—three-fourths of the students enrolled have successfully placed an essay in their top-ranked journal. At a moment in which tenure-track jobs are dwindling and students are looking beyond traditional employment options, these courses offer students training that is translatable into a wider market, while simultaneously enhancing their readiness for the academic job market.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

## San José State University and Stanford University

*Jennifer Summit*

Graduate students at elite institutions are often at a disadvantage when applying for jobs in public universities, particularly at comprehensive institutions like those in the California State University system, because such students are seen to have less teaching experience and commitment to the access mission than their counterparts from public institutions. Special effort to broaden these graduate students' professional perspective and experience is required—not only because the narrowed job market requires more broadly prepared candidates but also because many Stanford PhDs would find work in the comprehensive sector to be rewarding and fulfilling. Further, faculty members at comprehensive institutions possess a breadth of expertise from which our graduate students stand to learn a great deal: not only planning and delivering successful courses on a demanding schedule but also reaching out to and addressing the needs of students with a diverse range of backgrounds, preparations, and life experiences and goals. The opportunity to watch and learn from these faculty members is invaluable for the professional development of Stanford graduate students.

This year saw the pilot of a graduate mentoring program that was run through the partnership of Stanford University and San José State University (SJSU). With the support of Stanford's Center for Teaching and Learning, the vice provost of graduate education, and the School of Humanities and Sciences, and with the generous participation of administrators and faculty colleagues from SJSU, six Stanford graduate students were matched with SJSU mentors from their fields, whom they shadowed for one quarter while meeting weekly as a cohort in a practicum seminar. The graduate students' weekly and hourly commitments during the quarter varied, according to the individual learning contracts developed with their mentors, but their experience was significant: as well as regularly attending class meetings, the graduate students met individually with their mentors to discuss the design of the syllabus and plans for individual class meetings, observed office hours, delivered occasional guest lectures or labs, and even attended department meetings at the invitation of the department faculty members. In reflective journals and end-of-term assessments, the graduate students agreed that the experience had exceeded their expectations and offered them a richly illuminating perspective on, and preparation for, the next stage of their academic careers.

The assessment of the program revealed that students were granted extraordinarily full access to their mentors' professional lives, in which they witnessed unexpected challenges as well as equally unexpected rewards. For example, one graduate student, who shadowed her mentor in office hours, observed the daily struggles of students who were parents, veterans, or, in one case, newly homeless; she was moved to observe that her experience at SJSU exposed her to levels of diversity that she had never witnessed at Stanford but were more representative of American higher education in general. Another student, who worked to develop his own comfort in the classroom, took inspiration from his mentor's warm but authoritative demeanor with her students and observed how effectively they were motivated as a result.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

Reviewing the assessments, we were impressed not only with the range of experiences to which the graduate students were exposed but also the depth of learning that they took away. As a side benefit, we noted that the participating students shared their experiences with graduate students in their home departments, thus enriching their cohort's shared professional perspectives.

### Note

---

Jennifer Summit (Stanford) collaborates on this project with Amy Strage (San José State University) and Rick Reis (Stanford).

## Stanford University, Humanities and Graduate School of Education

*Debra Satz*

Not all PhD students can find or ultimately want a career in higher education. Our high schools need teachers with talent and passion in humanities subject areas. Given that Stanford has top-ranked programs in the humanities and given that STEP, the Stanford Teacher Education Program, is a national leader in preparing teachers, we have an unbeatable formula for making a difference in the lives of young adults.

Other countries—such as Finland, France, and Switzerland—have long seen value in placing teachers with advanced degrees in secondary school classrooms. The United States lags behind this trend in improving access to high-quality subject knowledge at the secondary school level. Our new fellowship opportunity, H-STEP (<https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/grants-awards/h-step-fellowship>), aims to change this. Stanford PhDs in the humanities and arts who are awarded the H-STEP fellowship will join a community of scholar-teachers whose rare combination of pedagogical skills and content knowledge will improve student learning. We also hope that this program will help raise the professional profile of high school teaching in the United States.

A nonfunded teacher certification program would not be a feasible financial commitment for a graduating PhD. The H-STEP fellowship relieves this pressure by providing tuition, a living stipend, and health insurance for our PhD students who are admitted to the STEP program. All students who have completed or will complete a PhD in a humanities subject are eligible for this fellowship (the fellowship is conditional on finishing the PhD). Through this fellowship we intend not only to provide a new career opportunity for our PhD students but also to underscore the university's commitment to improving the quality of education available to young students in North America.

H-STEP fellows will embark on a twelve-month full-time program to ensure that they enter the secondary classroom well versed in teaching and learning theories as well as in practical classroom management. STEP alumni readily find employment and are respected members of the California teaching community, and we expect that our H-STEP fellows will also have no difficulty in finding high school placements. The combination of a humanities PhD and a STEP MA in education will open new doors to scholars committed to working with young people.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

University of Alberta, Department of English and Film Studies

*Corrinne Harol*

The Department of English and Film Studies at University of Alberta undertook a major review of its PhD program beginning in 2005 (<http://www.efs.ualberta.ca/en/GraduateProgram/PhDProgram.aspx>). Over the course of four years, the graduate committee reviewed all aspects of our program, researched studies of doctoral programs in the humanities, and consulted extensively with the department. We established a set of principles to guide the development of the new program, which included streamlining the program to facilitate timely completion of the degree (within four or at most five years); increasing the extent, quality, and diversity of the intellectual community and research culture for graduate students; enhancing teacher training; and integrating the program as much as possible, so students experience it as ongoing training, not a series of atomized activities. After considering a number of possible program changes and an extensive consultation process, the department approved the new program in spring 2008, and the first class of students began in 2010.

The key innovations in the program are reduced course work (so that all requirements except those directly related to the thesis would be completed in the first year), increased mentoring for both teaching and thesis writing, and a candidacy exam structured around the thesis proposal. Our main innovations were to the second-year curriculum, which is designed to move students from course work through the candidacy exams with structured support and to help them learn to balance teaching and research. At the end of the first year, students do a short statement of research plan, which is designed to help them decide on the research needed for the long thesis proposal; hence they should begin the second year with a formulated thesis topic. The second year has three components: mentored teaching, the PhD colloquium, and an optional thesis proposal writing workshop. The teaching mentor groups, led by a faculty member, are designed to improve teacher training and to help students manage their time so that they can do research. The PhD colloquium, facilitated by two faculty members, goes beyond the more specialized introduction to specific areas of inquiry offered in graduate courses to a consideration of issues and debates that engage people working in a number of fields and that animate the discipline as a whole; it is designed to help students consider the epistemological, analytical, ethical, and rhetorical choices they must make to do their research. The thesis proposal writing workshop, facilitated by one faculty member, helps students draft each section of the thesis proposal, both by setting deadlines and by discussing strategies for research and writing. The goal is to have a draft of the thesis proposal by March of the second year so that students can complete their candidacy by May. Our research about success in doctoral programs indicated two things that drove this second-year curriculum: time to candidacy determined time to completion and completion rates, and isolation is a key problem facing doctoral students in the humanities. The second-year curriculum is thus designed to offer a variety of professional, intellectual, and social supports, in lab-like atmospheres, to students transitioning to independent research. It is also designed to build momentum on the thesis writing, as they finish their candidacy with a substantial (25–40 page) proposal.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

University of California, Berkeley, Graduate Division and Berkeley Language Center

*Linda von Hoene and Rick Kern*

Several units outside departments provide a rich array of professionalization opportunities for graduate students to supplement their degree programs. For example, the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Teaching and Resource Center offers workshops and consultations on teaching and learning and on teaching-related aspects of the academic job search, such as developing a teaching portfolio and preparing a teaching demonstration for an on-campus academic job interview. It also offers a certificate of teaching and learning in higher education (see <http://gsi.berkeley.edu/certificate/index.html> for details) as a structured way to prepare graduates for teaching in future careers. Certificate requirements are completion of an approved field-specific pedagogy course (most foreign language department pedagogy courses have been approved for this certificate program); a number of required and optional workshops; and classroom observation and feedback by a faculty member. The capstone project for the certificate program is the development of a teaching portfolio, which contains, among other things, a sample course syllabus with learning outcomes (<http://gsi.berkeley.edu/certificate/certificate-faq.html#portfolioincludes>). Furthermore, in conjunction with Graduate Division Academic Services, the center hosts the Summer Institute for Preparing Future Faculty. The program consists of a core course, From Graduate Student to Faculty Member, which introduces graduate students to the history of higher education; the Carnegie classification system; the hiring and tenure process across the Carnegie classifications; what the lives of new, mid-career, and senior faculty members are like at a range of institutions; and how to apply for academic positions and postdoctoral appointments. In addition to readings and practical assignments, institute fellows benefit from weekly panels of faculty members from local colleges and universities who address these topics from the perspective of their particular institutional context. Fellows also take one elective, either Editing, Academic Writing, and Academic Publishing or Developing a Teaching Portfolio.

The Berkeley Language Center (BLC; [blc.berkeley.edu](http://blc.berkeley.edu)) provides numerous opportunities for doctoral students as part of its mission to support the learning and teaching of heritage and foreign languages. It hosts a monthly lecture series that brings major scholars in applied linguistics, language studies, and language education to address a wide variety of topics of relevance to language teachers. Some of these events are very applied and pedagogical (e.g., workshops on particular approaches or kinds of materials, such as film); others are more theoretical and tend to problematize precepts in the profession. They are well attended by graduate students from language departments and the Graduate School of Education. In addition, the BLC Fellows program brings together lecturers and graduate students who pursue research projects on various aspects of language and culture for one semester (e.g., this semester's fellows' projects include creating a database of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian folklore; creating a Russian humor database; developing a curricular plan for integrating medieval history in the elementary Italian program; and developing an online placement test for Chinese heritage learners). Fellows meet in seminar style with BLC staff members two hours a week and present their project at a public

***Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature***

lecture and write an article for the BLC Web site. We encourage fellows to do a more elaborate write-up that they could submit to a professional journal (such as the *L2 Journal*, which is run out of the BLC), which some have done successfully. Past fellows have found that the experience of doing a BLC fellowship project has helped them significantly on the job market.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

University of California, Davis, Humanities Institute

*John Marx*

At the University of California, Davis, the campus Humanities Institute (<http://dhi.ucdavis.edu>) is partnering with departmental directors of graduate studies to develop professionalization programs geared for a widely various job market. In so doing, we mean to avoid the overly neat opposition between academic and alt-ac. Situating the programs at the Humanities Institute instead of any particular department or the campus career center allows us to address the particular challenges facing doctoral candidates in the humanities. It also allows us to address a psychic barrier that often prevents students from imagining themselves as part of a humanities workforce and from participating in nonacademic professional workshops. Students in the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) are much more likely to avail themselves of the services and programs offered by the campus career center, according to its directors. Bringing these programs in-house at the Humanities Institute lends them a critical imprimatur and reduces the stigma students may feel about seeking advice on nonacademic career paths. Before they can pitch themselves to an employer or transform their CV into a résumé, before they can begin to think of their education in terms of skills learned or expertise acquired, graduate students need to be able to recognize that they are doing more than training to enter a discipline-specific job market.

To this end, we are planning programming for humanities PhDs at several phases of their education. Through panels and breakout sessions, we will introduce students still taking course work to experts and others who can help them deliberately approach their work with an eye on many possible career paths. We will provide career fairs, speed-dating-style informational interviews with possible employers, and workshops for more advanced students and hope eventually to collaborate directly with placement officers in humanities departments preparing students for the tenure-track job market. Ours is very much a pilot program. We rolled out our first programming efforts in spring 2014. Simultaneously, we are compiling a database of UC Davis PhDs in the humanities from the last twenty years, which will provide students with a network of contacts working in a range of positions and institutions. Lastly, we are liaising with offices across our campus—in the graduate studies dean's office, in the career center, and in the development and alumni relations office—to make existing resources more accessible for humanities students and to make our PhD students and their careers more visible to professionals in those offices.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

University of Colorado, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures

*Helmut Mueller-Sievers*

Our innovative PhD in German studies is designed so that students can complete their course work and their dissertation in four years (<http://gssl.colorado.edu/node/52>). The idea behind this shortening of time to degree is to invite not only applicants interested in an academic career but also applicants who may want to pursue careers in government, business, and the not-for-profit sector. In Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and many other European countries, it is a strongly held conviction that a doctorate demonstrates to employers intellectual independence, superior research and writing skills, the perseverance and ingenuity to complete an original piece of scholarship, and deep familiarity with a different culture. We believe that these qualities are equally valuable in the twenty-first-century American economy and indeed in the global marketplace. We also believe that a German studies PhD that includes experiences such as graduate-level internships can enhance the interdisciplinary preparation of students who wish to pursue a career in academia.

The shortened time to degree of our PhD program will not compromise its academic rigor. To this end, our program provides intensive and personalized mentoring, directed reading advice, and clinics devoted to dissertation and conference paper writing, digital and archival research, oral presentation, and interview preparation. Our PhD strongly emphasizes interdisciplinary work within a secondary concentration area of the student's choice, and includes one year spent abroad at our partner universities of Göttingen and Regensburg or at other leading institutions in the German-speaking world. A wide range of graduate-level course offerings is designed to ensure content coverage and to move research projects into publishable scholarship. Our expanded graduate faculty includes scholars in disciplines such as political science, comparative literature, Jewish studies, business, and library science.

## University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

*Sidonie Smith*

The GTC+Digital Media Teacher Certificate Program (<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/cert/dm>) is designed to structure and document professional development for University of Michigan graduate students who are already pursuing or have completed the Rackham Graduate School–CRLT (Center for Research and Learning on Teaching) graduate teacher certificate. The GTC+ program adds to the certificate a focus on integrating digital media into college instruction, providing structured opportunities to engage with current scholarly conversations about the ways digital environments shape our thinking and practice as teachers and learners. This program is designed in part to help prepare students for a competitive academic job market. Students who complete the GTC+ will be well equipped to enter and lead conversations not only about effective teaching practices but also about the complex interactions between those practices and new media.

The program's primary focus is not on using tools to make teaching more efficient and effective. Rather, this program invites participants to think critically about technology tools and digital environments. How do digital media shape, facilitate, or limit the ways teachers and students access information, represent data, develop and communicate ideas, collaborate on intellectual projects, and define scholarship?

## University of Pittsburgh, Department of English

*Don Bialostosky*

In lieu of coverage comprehensive exams, the PhD in critical cultural studies (<http://www.english.pitt.edu/graduate/phd-critical-and-cultural-studies>), a rubric that covers our programs in literature and composition and film, requires what we call the PhD Project. Our Web site describes it as follows:

At the end of the third year, students develop a critical project that functions as the comprehensive examination required to achieve doctoral candidacy. This project defines an area of study sufficiently broad in scope to suggest a range of long-term intellectual goals that build on previous coursework and prepare them for more focused dissertation work. For example, past projects have brought together nineteenth-century fiction and feminist nationalism, popular film and the history of sexuality, literacy and literary history, globality and the Irish Renaissance, Indian cinema and global media, composition studies and Foucaultian critique, and Renaissance prose and the history of Protestantism.

The first phase of the project involves a project proposal, a 10-page document with bibliography developed in consultation with a student-formed project committee. Between the end of the third year and the end of the fall term of the fourth year, students write two 30-page project papers that explore some of the problems and issues laid out in the proposal and developed in the course of their research. The final phase of the PhD project is a written and oral exam, which takes place before the second term of the fourth year. The exam phase of the project builds on the proposal, the bibliography, and the project paper.

The overarching goals of the PhD project are to prepare students for the broadly informed yet in-depth inquiry required of a dissertation, and to facilitate participation in the critical intellectual activity of English studies.

The first paper usually surveys the literature relevant to the student's inquiry; the second constitutes a first intervention into one of the issues discovered there. PhD prospectuses typically follow the semester after the project exams are taken, and project papers often provide the starting places for chapters. We have found that the opportunity to undertake a project attracts to our program students who have begun to formulate a line of inquiry of their own and who welcome the chance to deepen it in conversation with a faculty committee. We have also found that such students often have begun thinking toward and even formally initiating the project before the required semester.

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

## University of Virginia, Scholars' Lab

*Bethanie Nowviskie*

We created the Praxis Program at the University of Virginia as a test bed for new-model, graduate-level, interdisciplinary methods training in the digital humanities (<http://praxis.scholarslab.org/>). It is notable in that it is housed in a library-based center, the Scholars' Lab, and is developed and taught not by conventionally employed humanities faculty members but by alt-ac professionals (humanities-educated technology staff members and librarians) who work outside the academic departments. It complements a more traditional, dissertation-year fellowship awarded by the Scholars' Lab—in which doctoral candidates undertake digital projects related to their individual research—but instead targets graduate students at earlier stages in their careers and asks them to come together as six-person interdisciplinary teams to spend an academic year on the design, development, testing, and publication of a new digital platform or tool for humanities research and teaching. Along the way, by writing for a broad, public audience on the Scholars' Lab blog, they reflect on the nature of collaborative work, on the specific technologies in which they are gaining confidence, and on the methods, practices, and ethos of digital scholarship across the disciplines and professions represented by Praxis team members and mentors. Student fellowships in the first two years of the Praxis Program were offered through a pilot project on graduate education reform by the Mellon Foundation–supported Scholarly Communication Institute and are now supported by the University of Virginia Library. Our program also formed the seed of an international Praxis Network (<http://praxis-network.org/>), made up of like-minded but differently structured practicum-based humanities training programs at eight institutions in four countries. They come together to articulate their emerging models and share teaching materials and outcomes, with the goal of inspiring further experimentation and the development of creative alternatives to the single-department-based humanities methods course.

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

## University of Washington, Division of Spanish and Portuguese Studies

*Anthony L. Geist*

We reopened our doctoral program in fall 2013, after it was suspended more than fifteen years ago, and took the opportunity to reenvision a PhD in Hispanic studies for the twenty-first century (<http://spanport.washington.edu/phd-program>). We consider it our responsibility to prepare students, in the words of Sidonie Smith, past president of the MLA, “for the increasingly collaborative scholarly world of the future and for new ventures in collaborative public scholarship, which seeks to link those in the academy to intellectuals and communities outside it” (“Beyond the Dissertation Monograph,” *MLA Newsletter*, spring 2010). In recognition of the fact that many of our students will pursue careers outside academia as well as in traditional teaching and Research-1 institutions, our PhD has taken the form of a streamlined, interdisciplinary degree with an alternative dissertation model. Time to degree is intended to be five years from the BA or four years for those entering with an MA. As part of their course of doctoral study, our students will participate in the certificate in public scholarship through the Simpson Center for the Humanities (<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/programs/curriculum/certificate-in-public-scholarship>).

### EXAM STRUCTURE

The exam portion of the PhD program is composed of three elements:

1. the composition over several quarters of an annotated bibliography
2. the composition of a ten- to fifteen-page dissertation prospectus
3. a ninety-minute oral exam, to be administered in the third quarter of the third year (Y3Q3)

Unlike traditional comprehensive exams, our PhD exam is designed to encourage the student to focus on areas of investigation more specifically related to their dissertation project. Starting in the second year of enrollment, students will choose a chair for their PhD exam committee. Under the direction of that chair, students will prepare a PhD reading list of thirty to forty primary sources and twenty to twenty-five secondary sources. Throughout the second and third year of enrollment, students will produce an annotated bibliography with extensive entries for each of the works on the PhD reading list.

### DISSERTATION PROJECT

The dissertation project may take the traditional form of a scholarly monograph on a subject mutually agreed upon by the candidate and the director. Alternatively, the dissertation may take a less traditional form, such as a portfolio of scholarly and creative work, a digital publication, an exhibition with a strong scholarly apparatus, or other configurations, to be determined by the candidate in consultation with the dissertation committee.

The inclusion of a nontraditional alternative to the dissertation comes in response to significant changes in the profession that affect not just Hispanic studies but all

*Report of the MLA Task  
Force on Doctoral Study  
in Modern Language  
and Literature*

humanities disciplines. The crisis that has beset university presses in the last decade makes the scholarly monograph an endangered species. It is increasingly difficult to get a book published, regardless of quality or subsidy. While in many ways this is a loss for scholarship, it has led to a questioning and reconfiguring of the forms of production and dissemination of knowledge. As state support for public universities dwindles, it is increasingly urgent for us to make our disciplines known to a broader audience. Hence the exploration of new forms of scholarship and publication, which may take the form of an ensemble dissertation, or a suite of three or four essays either linked by a common theme or critical stance or in which the candidate experiments with different scholarly voices and topics. The alternative dissertation could also include a digital project of interest to other scholars, teachers, and students; a collaborative project; a translation of a primary or secondary source with a reflection on the practice of translation; or a project of public scholarship pursued in tandem with a cultural institution in the community. These dissertation alternatives will be held to the most rigorous intellectual and scholarly standards.

## Vanderbilt University, Department of English

*Mark A. Wollaeger*

### Restructuring Comprehensive Exams to Facilitate Progress toward Dissertation Completion

#### *Aims*

The English Department (<http://as.vanderbilt.edu/english/graduate/>) recently restructured its comprehensive exams to achieve three goals: move students through the examination and dissertation proposal stages by the end of year 3 and enable them to dedicate two full years to dissertation research and writing (Vanderbilt fully funds all PhD students for five years, including summers); better fulfill the twofold purpose of our comprehensive examinations (acquisition of general proficiency in the student's areas of teaching and scholarship and preparation to write a dissertation that will intervene productively in the field); and make more effective use of each committee's autonomy and discretion in guiding a student through the examination and proposal processes.

#### *Key Program Changes*

In the past, three preliminary exam lists (one each for two major fields, one for a minor field) were due at the end of May of year 2. Final lists were due at the end of September in year 3. Written comprehensive exams were completed in May of year 3—one essay for each list, all written over a ten-day period. A preliminary dissertation proposal was due the first day of classes in year 4, oral exams based on the three essays and the preliminary proposal were completed in September or October of year 4, and the final dissertation proposal was due 1 November of year 4. Dissertation defenses were completed in May or June of year 5. There were several problems with the old system: postexam (ABD) dissertation research and writing time was limited to nineteen months; students lost momentum between the written and oral components of the exam; students often could not compete successfully for external dissertation-year fellowships, most of which have deadlines in the fall of year 4 and require a dissertation chapter.

Changes include the following:

- Written component of the exams was moved up, from May of year 3 to March of year 3 (mid-semester, over Vanderbilt's spring break).
- Deadline for the preliminary dissertation proposal was moved up, from first day of classes year 4 to 15 April of year 3; called a "dissertation abstract," it is a maximum of five pages.
- Oral exams were moved up, from September or October of year 4 to the first two weeks of May of year 3.
- Final dissertation proposal was moved up, from 1 November of year 4 to 15 June of year 3.
- Formal expectations were established for student-committee consultations during exam reading in fall of year 3. Regular meetings are held to discuss

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

priorities for professionalization and to develop a subset of each reading list that best represents these priorities.

- Formal deadline for establishing two-tiered lists was instituted. By 15 December of year 3 students must formally distinguish between texts of primary and secondary significance within each list.

### *Concluding Overview*

The new exam structure now integrates the twofold purpose described above by making the discovery and refining of a workable dissertation topic part of the more general goal of acquiring field proficiency. The more structured reading process and the earlier deadlines for the dissertation abstract and final proposal (these last are made possible by the earlier written exams) allow students to make better use of the summer after year 2 (for preliminary reading on their own) and of the summer after year 3 (beginning dissertation writing instead of dithering over the prospectus).

### *Results*

Two years into implementation, we are happy with the results. Students are getting an earlier start on their writing, more are completing in five years, and the dissertations are more developed.

## **Instituting a Noncredit Publishing Program**

### *Aims*

The publishing program aims to increase the likelihood that our students enter the job market with at least one peer-reviewed publication. With a five-year program geared to dissertation completion, it is difficult for students to find the time to publish articles. Students take six four-hour courses in year 1, five in year 2, and two in the fall of year 3. They also begin teaching one course each semester (with full instructional responsibility) in the fall of year 2. (Most students have at least one semester free of service in year 5, and many have the entire year service-free.) It would be too difficult to require an entire course dedicated to publishing, particularly since we already require a pro-seminar in the fall of year 1.

### *Project Publish Overview*

Project Publish is a year-long, noncredit, optional program designed to get students to submit an article for publication by May of year 4. It is run by the director of graduate studies (DGS) with support from other faculty members. All students in year 4 are encouraged to participate; students in year 3 may participate if a faculty member has told them that one of their seminar papers is potentially publishable or if they receive permission from their comprehensive exam committee and from the DGS.

The fall semester has three workshops with coordinated assignments:

*Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*

1. Introduction and Editorial Survey focuses on how editors think about submissions, making use of a colleague's database of responses from journal editors to an annual survey.
2. Journal Review features discussion of targeted journals, in which students come in having devoted some attention to one or two journals that seem appropriate for their article. They are expected to say something about what they've found, and three invited faculty participants facilitate discussion of writing for particular journals.
3. Getting Started looks at the openings of published articles distributed in advance. Students come in prepared to discuss ways of engaging the reader and ways of setting up arguments. They then submit their own opening pages (three to four pages) by early November. These are read and commented on by the DGS, by a second faculty member assigned to Project Publish for the year, and by one expert in the field (recruited from the faculty).

The spring semester includes peer-reading groups, deadlines for drafts, and consultation with committees. The locus of the work shifts to peer-reading groups and dissertation committees: deadlines are set over the semester for meeting with peer-reading groups to discuss initial drafts of the entire article, then for meeting with dissertation committees to discuss revised drafts; then the process repeats, with the goal of submitting an article for publication in May of year 4.

#### *Related Program Changes*

Using graduate endowment money earmarked for graduate student professional development, we eliminated a cash prize for best dissertation prospectus and created a first-chapter prize that can be awarded to up to two students. (The dissertation prospectus under the new exam structure is less worthy of being evaluated for a prize.) This prize is designed to work hand in hand with the new exam structure and with Project Publish: when students complete the prospectus in June of year 3, their dissertation committees are enjoined to discuss with them which chapter they should begin writing first, with an eye both to the 1 December deadline for submitting a chapter to the first-chapter prize (open only to students in year 4) and to Project Publish (composed mainly of students in year 4). Ideally, students will begin drafting their dissertations with a chapter that seems most publishable and that they can work on in Project Publish.

#### *Results*

We are only one year into having implemented both the new first-chapter prize and Project Publish, so it is too early to say what the effects of the changes have been. But it is already clear that by the end of the fall of year 4, students now have highly polished chapters to submit for external fellowships.