To: MLA Executive Council

From: Committee on K-16 Alliances (Glenn Fetzer, Vincent Lankewish, Rita Oleksak, Beckie Bray Rankin, Sarah Ruffing Robbins, Liana Silva, Ebony Thomas) and Executive Council Liaison Julie Shoults; and drawing on work by former committee members Jason Courtmanche, Stacey Donohue, and Michael Prince

Subject: Annual Report

**General Background/Historical Context on the Past Year’s Work:**

2018-19 marked the second official year of the committee’s existence, gratefully still building upon the enterprising activities of the forerunner working group. Continuing with a fruitful strategy adopted in our first year, we focused in this second foundation-building cycle on a keyword in our title: Alliances. Our assumption was that the MLA’s K-16 vision would best be enacted by cultivating strong networks with other organizations having compatible goals and, within that framework, cultivating connections with individuals from those organizations who would be interested in long-term collaboration, as well as short-term projects. Undergirding this approach has been an assumption—which we hope the Executive Council shares—that while adding colleagues from the K-12 community to MLA membership and encouraging them to buy products (such as publications beyond the ubiquitous *Handbook*) would bolster our own organization’s “bottom line,” the more important goal and associated vision for K-16 should be not (only) to draw in more “consumers” of MLA, but (mainly?) to foster alliances honoring the expertise and energy of such colleagues.

**Reviewing and Responding to the Charge:**

*Committee on K–16 Alliances: Charge*

The Committee on K–16 Alliances will build support in the educational community and beyond for teaching modern languages, writing, and literature at all levels; contribute to the development of the MLA’s advocacy policies and procedures on K–16 issues; identify
ways to integrate the ADE and the ADFL into the MLA’s advocacy for teaching English and other languages at all levels, with particular attention to the indigenous American languages; identify secondary school audiences for MLA publications; advise on the development of public-facing publications; organize convention sessions addressing K–16 issues; and work with other MLA committees (e.g., the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Humanities, the Committee on Community Colleges) to strengthen pathways to careers in education for graduate student members of the MLA.

As noted in our report last year, this committee has responsibilities to many stakeholders, both within the MLA and beyond. Thus, in 2018-19, we sought a strategic blend of short-term activities (such as planning convention sessions for MLA and NCTE) and longer-term goal-envisioning and development with partners beyond MLA (such as the National Writing Project, NCTE, and ACTFL). In our discussion of achievements and challenges below, we will reference both of these activity prongs.

First, we should revisit one structural point related to our charge and committee membership. Specifically, we wish to thank the Executive Council for providing enhanced support of the “FL” dimension of our work by selecting several new members who will bring expertise to this important work. For instance, during the 2018-19 academic year, when one of our members needed to resign due to new responsibilities at his high school, the Council proactively responded to our request that the replacement member bring K-12 foreign/modern-language teaching experience to our group. Beckie Bray Rankin (French, Lexington High School), who came into the committee membership at that point via your appointment, has already made notable contributions, e.g., in planning for one 2020 convention session. In addition, we thank the Council for appointing, among additional new members whose terms just began in summer 2019, two colleagues from the foreign/modern language side of the MLA house—Glenn Fetzer (French, New Mexico State) and Julie Shoults (German, Council Liaison). Returning member Rita Oleksak is already reaching out to this sub-group within the committee to envision projects for the future. Overall, we appreciate that committee membership now
reflects a strong balance that will, we predict, enable us to better address the “FL” aspect of K-16 work.

**Summary of Achievements:**

*Effective Convention Sessions*

The 2018-19 academic year represented the first time that NCTE and MLA sessions officially planned by the K-16 committee were held. We appreciate that very productive sessions had been organized in the past by MLA members engaged in K-16 work; here we spotlight these sessions organized by the committee in part because the work of envisioning and preparing them helped us identify both points of shared interest on our team and areas where we could have healthy debate—with these debates, we realize, also relevant to the larger community of K-16 educators. Also, for both NCTE and MLA conventions, we used our session-planning work to cultivate alliances, consistent with our background statement above. For instance, at NCTE, our session on teaching public culture focused on the challenges associated with creating lessons and longer units of instruction associated with “HOME” as it is represented in complex historical sites with often-marginalized histories. Several members of this presentation team are active leaders in the National Writing Project (specifically, from Nebraska and North Dakota, states/a region sometimes under-represented in MLA activities), which has been collaborating with K-20 teachers for well over two decades. Committee member Ebony Thomas, meanwhile, shared research-based strategies for addressing the troubling history of Philadelphia as a longtime site of enslavement, versus the “happy” experiences of slavery as depicted in some children’s literature about the Early Republic. Including time for conversation after the presentational segment of this session allowed us to identify several potential future partners for follow-up around homeplace-based teaching on public memory, including ideas for collaborative publications.
For MLA 2019, we also aimed to foster alliance-building (especially by honoring pedagogy of K-12 teachers) and to demonstrate how issues in language, literature and writing instruction cut across “levels” of learning. One session, on Multi-modal Composition, was co-developed with the Community Colleges Forum (thanks to committee member Stacey Donohue) and included presenter-instructors for community college and high school, as well as a graduate student. Another, led by Rita Oleksak, focused on intercultural competence and featured public school and university foreign language instruction. On the “debate” point referenced above, we salute Michael Prince, who has just rotated off the committee after leadership including time with the K-16 working group. He organized a session on literature in the writing classroom that implicitly invited audience members to address a question he referenced in a recent letter on his committee service and interests: how humanities (literature) can contribute to writing courses and programs, versus ceding all such pedagogy to composition and rhetoric specialists. For a fuller snapshot of contributors to these engaging MLA sessions, see the appendix with details on each session.

_Cultivating Potential Partners for Long-term Alliances_

Another successful area of activity for the committee in its second year, as last year, has been tapping into K-16 networks in line with this part of our charge—“build support in the educational community and beyond for teaching modern languages, writing, and literature at all levels.” A tactic supporting this connecting goal entailed inviting colleagues from outside the committee to attend one of our virtual meetings to share how their own (organization’s) work aligns with committee goals. From one of these visits late in year #1 of the committee’s official existence (Todd DeStigter’s video time with us), we were able to follow up and engage with a number of commission teams of NCTE’s sub-group on teacher education, ELATE (English Language Arts Teacher Educators). Since one aspect of the committee charge asks us “to strengthen
pathways to careers in education for graduate student members of the MLA,” it is important for us to be informed about how K-12 teachers are being prepared in undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs—and in professional development opportunities organized by ELATE. Therefore, committee members Robbins and Courtmanche followed up on DeStigter’s advice by attending multiple commission meetings for ELATE during the fall 2019 NCTE convention. In summer 2019, committee member Ebony Thomas attended the ELATE conference (where she continued our networking efforts and received an award for her recent book), thereby making the committee and the MLA visible to additional potential partners. From these outreach efforts, we are gradually strengthening “nodes” in a network that the committee can continue to nurture in the years ahead.

**Holding Multiple Meetings with Substantive Conversations**

Our membership’s diverse working conditions make our having held multiple video meetings an achievement in itself. A more substantive challenge, reflective of MLA overall, involves navigating the diverse perspectives and experiences members bring to our shared enterprise. One person’s most pressing interest—whether a particular policy of another organization that might merit a response or a debate around a specific teaching practice—might occasionally dominate a video convening’s conversation. Yet, even those moments, if they did not regularly lead us to consensus or an action step, did provide learning opportunities making us better prepared to serve as advocates and leaders in K-16 education.

**Spotlighting the Achievements and Benefits of K-16 Interactions**

We offer a special salute to Jason Courtmanche, rotating off his committee service but leaving an especially important legacy in his recent preparation of an article for *Profession* on the
benefits of K-16 work. Operating under a tight timeline between invitation to the committee for this piece and submission deadline, Jason wrote a compelling account drawing on his personal experiences over many years (e.g., as an NWP local site director) and on the history of the committee and its predecessor working group. We anticipate that Jason’s article will draw additional interest and activity in K-16 endeavors among MLA members and other Profession readers, and we look forward to connecting with his readers.

Looking ahead:

As in our first year, the exercise of shared reflection for this report has helped us begin to crystallize plans for the coming year. Potential priorities for 2019-2020 include

- expanding and deepening our network-building approaches, including linking up with other organizations’ ongoing initiatives, when they are compatible with our charge, and creating new collaborative ones—such as reaching out to administrative leaders like College Deans and/or School Superintendents, as well as identifying specific strategies for promoting conversations between literature and language instructors at all levels;
- Identify ways to honor collaborative endeavors that have been successful via a recognition program (which might involve applicants applying for an award status to celebrate their K-16/K-20 alliance work) that could, in turn, make models available to others;
- develop a FL-focused workshop aimed to address schoolteachers during MLA 2021 (by building on ideas originally envisioned by Rita Olesak for MLA 2020);
- Address the need to think about how graduate programs’ efforts to prepare their students should include secondary education as an option, both on its own merits and in response to the shrinking job market at the university level;
- Consider ways to help generate interest among schoolteachers in attending the MLA convention, while recognizing how the second-semester school calendar and the high cost of registration (and, for some, travel) impedes participation;
- Identify strategies for making MLA publications beyond the Handbook appealing to secondary educators, while recognizing that their historical exclusion from authorship (versus in NCTE publications) makes this goal challenging. In that regard, we could promote inclusion of their voices in appropriate texts (such as Approaches collections addressing staples of the second curriculum);
- Strive to increase the presence and participation by university-level MLA members in organizations such as ACTFL, AATF, AATG, and SWCOLT (Southwest Conference on Language Teaching); for instance, an AATF presentation might include or even focus on potentially helpful MLA publications;
• Take advantage of shared interest in public humanities as a potential area of collaboration with K-12 educators.

A note on structure: Last year we proposed to the council that increasing the size of the committee could give us an enhanced ability to address its many-faceted charge. Since the Council chose not to have us grow in size, we may want to have our structure of membership grow informally, via project offshoots bringing in colleagues from outside the official committee team. Under such an organizational model, the committee would not carry out all tasks together, as a group, but rather support each other in initiatives that could involve both former members of the committee and working group and other colleagues from organizations (eventually, we hope, also becoming MLA members).

**Vital Requests:**

We have encountered challenges associated with losing the opportunity to meet in person via MLA-funded travel for all committee members in New York once per year. One involves meaningfully welcoming our new members, from wide-ranging backgrounds, and building rapport. Another entails finding large blocks of planning time. A related challenge resides in the fact that, for several committee members, attending the MLA convention is neither expected nor rewarded in their own workplace. In fact, attending poses special difficulties that are both financial (given the lack of funding available for some committee members) and logistical (in that their being away from their classrooms poses hurdles leading their supervisors to object). We respectfully request that the Council provide funding—at least partial, at best substantial—for our members in K-12 settings and university units such as Colleges of Education to attend the
convention. That way, we would be able to ensure at least one opportunity for extended conversation and planning, well beyond what is possible in a video conference.

We face a similar problem when we try to attract colleagues as presenters for our session who are not already affiliated with MLA. These colleagues have important expertise to share. They are surprised when, invited to bring their expertise to the convention, they are then told that, rather than receiving the kind of honorarium often provided by other organizations, they need to pay convention registration, join the organization, and cover their own travel and per diem costs. We ask MLA to provide a budget to address at least a part of such costs. Then, we might attract colleagues who would join the organization in the end, but must first be made to feel welcome, indeed valued. As similar case can be made for offering free attendance to schoolteachers who would like to attend some portion of the convention.

APPENDIX

MLA K-16 Alliances Sessions; Conference of 2019 Chicago
407: University-School Collaborations to Develop Intercultural Competence across the Age Range

Session Information

Presider
Rita A. Oleksak, Glastonbury Public Schools, CT

Speakers
Manuela Wagner, U of Connecticut, Storrs
Dorothy Perugini, Glastonbury Public Schools, CT
Michael Byram, U of Durham

606: The Future of Writing: Moving Composition toward Multimodal Literacies

Session Information
Presider
Jason Charles Courtmanche, *U of Connecticut, Storrs*

Presentations
1: *Why Avant-Garde Visual Poetics Is Absolutely Essential Study for the Preservice Teacher*
   James Shivers, *Capitol Region Education Council*
2: *Negotiating Our Moment: Multimodal Composition and Writing Program Redesign*
   Gabriel Morrison, *U of Connecticut, Storrs*
3: *Multimodal Compositions and Cross-Institutional Alignment: High School and College Teachers Share Assignments and Pedagogies*
   Annemarie E. Hamlin, *Central Oregon Community C*
4: *Making Sense of Their World: Teenage Multimodal Composition*
   Arri Weeks, *New Canaan High School, CT*

Related Material: For related material, write to jason.courtmanche@uconn.edu after 7 Jan.

695: *Blending Literary and Writing Studies: Pedagogies for Success in Grades 9–13*

Session Information
Presider
Michael B. Prince, *Boston U*

Presentations
1: *Literacy Writ Large: Rethinking Writing across Disciplines at Brockton High School*
   Nicole McLaren, *Brockton High School, MA*
   Emily Flores, *Brockton High School, MA*
2: *The Centrality of Close Reading in the Composition Classroom*
   Tara Coleman, *LaGuardia Community C, City U of New York*
3: *The Essay-Centered Curriculum and the Future of Writing Studies*
   Nicole B. Wallack, *Columbia U*
4: *The Supernova Experiment: Teaching Metadisciplinary Awareness in the First-Year Writing Seminar*
   Amanda Irwin Wilkins, *Princeton U*