Executive Summary

The MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education was appointed in response to both new and long-term problems faced by graduate students. Students’ increased precarity and recent highly publicized instances of faculty harassment and sexual abuse of graduate students invite a larger look at graduate education, especially faculty/student relations. The 2018 MLA Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) surveyed MLA members on perceived problems with graduate education, especially those that arise from the unequal power relations between faculty and graduate students. The survey results, discussed at the Delegate Assembly meeting in January 2019, demonstrated a wide range of concerns about not only precarity and sexual harassment but also issues such as mental health challenges, lack of transparency, favoritism and bias, and emotional and material exploitation. The survey shows marked dissatisfaction—but it also highlights structural problems in how we educate and professionalize graduate students, and spotlights longstanding practices that invite abuse. The MLA Executive Council charged the Task Force to consider these issues and recommend guidelines aimed at eradicating abuses of power and exploitation.

In the following summary, and in the detailed report that follows, the members of the Task Force advocate for student-centered graduate education informed by an ethics of care. We emphasize the urgent obligation of faculty to support the professional well-being of the graduate students whom they teach and whose research they supervise, and call on programs and institutions to create a workplace culture in which students may thrive as they pursue diverse careers, including but not limited to college and university teaching. In many cases, graduate students themselves have taken the lead in requesting departments and institutions recognize their needs and address abuses. We urge faculty, Graduate Deans, and Provosts in their turn to become more active in support of graduate students, recognizing the ethical responsibilities that come with training and employing graduate students in the context of increasing economic and professional uncertainty. Our report outlines the negative and minimum requirements—what should never occur, what must occur to satisfy professional obligations. More important, we call on all stakeholders in graduate education to reckon with the reality that our students face, and structure graduate education with that reality in mind.

The relationship between faculty and graduate students is a special one. Ideally, it is intellectually stimulating, long-lasting, and reciprocally rewarding. Within that relationship, however, faculty hold considerable power over the graduate students they teach and advise. Faculty give or withhold not only professional licensure in the forms of grades and approvals, but also their time (including whether they serve as a dissertation adviser or committee member). They also grant or withhold various forms of patronage, including collaboration and recommendations for coveted fellowships or teaching opportunities. Graduate students depend in myriad ways on the good will and professionalism of the faculty with whom they work.

1 For the full text of the charge of the Task Force, see Appendix 1.
Faculty must understand their principled care of graduate students as an ethical obligation central to their professional life, and not abuse the considerable power they hold.

These issues fall within the broad ambit of graduate teaching. Yet because teaching is conducted within an educational community, our recommendations encompass institutional and departmental conduct along with that of faculty members. Departments, graduate schools, and universities share the responsibility to create a student-centered educational environment, and a workplace culture in which graduate students can learn and develop. The question of graduate school culture should be addressed in any accounting of best practices.

The Task Force offers the following recommendations, designed to recognize and respond to the increasing precarity of graduate students. The recommendations move from those that fall most directly on individual faculty members in their interactions with graduate students, to the responsibilities of programs and institutions.2

1. **Institute forms of collaborative or networked advising.** Thoughtful alternatives to the single-advisor model will increase the range of professional possibilities for graduate students, reduce stress caused by reliance on single mentors, and provide a check on faculty abuses of power.

2. **Categorically reject all forms of sexual harassment and discriminatory behavior.** Faculty have an obligation to understand what constitutes sexual harassment and discrimination in regard to race, gender, socioeconomic or educational background, sexuality, age, and ability status. Departments should establish, and faculty should follow, basic guidelines for treating all students fairly. When sexual harassment claims are lodged, faculty must refrain from public comment on such matters while they are adjudicated by university bodies charged with this task. Departments and programs should educate faculty on “bystander responsibility,” and the need to guard not only against impropriety but also the appearance of impropriety, which affects workplace culture as well as individuals.

3. **Promote transparency to reduce bias and favoritism.** Faculty should publicly set, revise, and apply, in a fair and professional way, clear criteria and procedures for all matters that affect graduate students and their progress through a program. Wherever possible, graduate students should be included in department meetings, deliberations, and committees bearing on matters affecting them.

4. **Establish clear rules for faculty accessibility and responsiveness.** Faculty should follow public and agreed-upon protocols for responding to papers, dissertation chapters, full dissertation drafts, and requests for letters of reference in a timely fashion, including when they are on leave.

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2 These recommendations respond to the first two points of the Task Force’s charge, which is included in the appendix to this document. Our response to the third point of our charge is addressed to the MLA Executive Council only and is also included in the appendix.
5. **Offer graduate students professional training without exploiting them.** While departments and graduate schools may require service to the university as part of graduate student funding packages, workloads should prioritize students’ timely progress through the program. Departments and individual faculty should in no way impede graduate student unionization efforts.

6. **Provide professionalization opportunities and career guidance in line with the new realities of the academic job market.** Graduate schools and departments—in collaboration with offices of career services, development and alumni relations, and other institutional offices—should offer workshops and training for diverse humanities careers as well as for the varied possibilities within the academic job market. Students must be supported, and not stigmatized, when they explore diverse career paths.

7. **Meet the distinctive professional needs and welfare of Master’s students.** Master's students are not “Ph.D. Students Lite.” The educational and professional goals of Master’s and Ph.D. students differ. MA students should be recognized as part of graduate student culture and should be provided with their own academic and professionalization opportunities as part of a thoughtfully-structured program of study.

8. **Provide mental health services and supports for work-life balance for graduate students.** The structure of graduate education has created its own unique mental health crisis connected to graduate students’ relative powerlessness and the catastrophic falling-off of tenure track positions for PhDs. Mental health services should be part of the health benefits offered graduate students.

9. **Within institutional constraints, strive to provide all graduate students with funding that enables them to live without taking on outside work.** Many graduate students in language and literature work outside the university due to economic necessity, sometimes in direct contravention of their institution’s funding policy. Institutions should regularly survey their graduate students to gather information about their financial needs with the aim to provide adequate stipends and ensure a reasonable standard of living. They should establish clear and transparent funding policies; convey funding decisions in a timely fashion; and distribute student stipends according to a predictable schedule.

**Report of the MLA Graduate Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education**

The anger and disillusionment graduate students feel toward unresponsive or abusive faculty came through forcefully in the responses to the informal survey sent out by the DAOC and the follow-up Delegate Assembly discussion at the 2019 MLA Convention. Graduate students report that some faculty act unprofessionally. They fail, for example, to return dissertation chapters for many months, to answer crucial emails, or to submit letters of recommendation in a timely
fashion. In some instances, faculty, both male and female, sexually harass graduate students, or
demand emotional or material labor of an unprofessional sort: proofreading faculty papers
without compensation, collecting laundry, housesitting pets. Less obvious, but also injurious, are
subtler forms of neglect, bias, or abuse. These include faculty pressure on students to choose
them as their dissertation advisors or discriminating against students on the basis of race, ability
status, age, or gender. All of these behaviors increase the precarity felt by graduate students and
impede their timely progress toward the degree. Added to these forms of unprofessional behavior
are the stresses that arise from inadequate funding packages, lack of childcare or mental health
benefits, or appropriate job counseling and training. We should recognize these responses not
simply as the result of anger in the present moment, but rather of frustration accumulated over
years of inappropriate faculty and institutional practices and lax oversight. In what follows, we
enumerate some of the key topics that the Task Force has identified as detrimental to student
well-being, and suggest remedies.

**Precarity.** Graduate students have always lived with limited resources, but a more diverse
student population, coupled with a straitened academic job market, now lead to varying
experiences of precarity—that is, psychological stress, coupled with income insecurity and often
with food and medical insecurity—within student cohorts. Precarity is affected by marital/family
status, wealth/class, gender, race, background, and prior education. The increase in cost of living
across the US, coupled with unpredictable funding during pursuit of a degree and the reduced
number of tenure-track jobs, exacerbates already-known challenges during graduate study and
beyond. Many students now anticipate that they will continue to experience forms of precarity
beyond their degree, and this sense of insecurity is a key factor in the mental health issues
reported by students. Along with economic insecurity, unresponsive advisors, unclear rules
governing progress through the program, or insecurity arising from a hostile teaching or learning
environments may all contribute to graduate student feelings of precarity. In order to address or
minimize the material and psychological uncertainties that graduate students experience—and as
part of an ethics of care—greater attention should be paid to the many kinds of challenges
graduate students face and the supports they need in meet those challenges including such basic
matters as paychecks that arrive on time. We address such challenges below.

**Networked or Collaborative Advising.** Group advising was repeatedly recommended in survey
feedback that the DAOC received. Graduate students are not and should not be the private
responsibility of a single adviser. Group advising at the thesis stage, in particular, can greatly
enhance a graduate student’s intellectual experience and check the behavior of rogue faculty by
increasing transparency. Group advising can take many forms; we recommend that departments
and programs devise one that will work best for their own local culture. The practice may
include, for example, having all members of the dissertation committee present for the discussion
of individual dissertation chapters. Students receive feedback from everyone at the same time,
allowing for differences of opinion to be aired and discussed. Dissertation workshops attended
by faculty and graduate students from one field (or several) also allow students to see how their
work is received by up-close and more distant intellectual interlocutors; or departments may set
up a colloquium series in which advanced students present their work, including practice

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3 One example: Columbia University’s Department of English and Comparative Literature has instituted a successful
practice of dissertation advisement by committee, in which all three committee members share power and responsibility.
interviews and job talks. When students share their work with a range of faculty, rather than just a single adviser, they establish an expanded network from which to receive mentoring, advice, and references, and they reduce the chances of getting locked into an unproductive relationship with a single adviser. Group advising is particularly crucial when a student searches for jobs outside of academia. Department Placement Committees and Graduate School career counselors should supplement the career and job advice given by the dissertation director and other committee members, and empower students seeking the full range of career options.

Avoiding Sexual Harassment and Discrimination. Faculty must refrain from all forms of harassing and discriminatory behavior and actively support the increasing diversity of graduate student cohorts. Faculty have an obligation to understand what constitutes sexual harassment and discrimination in regard to race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic or educational background, age, and ability status. Moreover, when a charge of harassment or discrimination is brought against a faculty member, other faculty should refrain from public comment on the case on the assumption that they know in advance who is and who is not capable of this behavior. Adjudication of such charges must be handled by the procedures established and publicly set forth by each institution. Normative standards must exceed simply refraining from these behaviors; the appearance of impropriety (that is, the belief that sexual harassment or discrimination may be occurring based on a failure to maintain professional behaviors) may also harm the culture of a graduate program. As well, faculty must also understand their “bystander responsibility,” a legal as well as ethical obligation. Institutions and programs should convene discussions of bystander responsibility to educate both faculty and students on this subject.

Transparency to Reduce Bias and Favoritism. Academic culture is a culture of evaluation, and it is therefore crucial that evaluation be performed fairly, transparently, and as openly as possible. Faculty have a collective professional responsibility to publicly set, revise, and apply clear criteria and procedures for graduate student nominations, rankings, and evaluations leading to the award of department grants, graduate teaching and research appointments, summer funding, and admission packages, as well as for any postdoctoral positions or lectureships available within the institution for those who are not successful on the external job market. Rules (such as those governing time to degree) must be equitably and transparently enforced. Acts of bias, favoritism, scapegoating, or retaliation, as well as punitive or unrestrained behavior, are unacceptable, and undermine graduate program culture and erode student trust. We recommend including graduate students on departmental committees that make policy on graduate student matters to further transparency and the direct representation of graduate student interests and perspectives. As well, faculty should avoid language that demeans or stereotypes a category of student, and should take care not to favor one subset of students (such as those from elite educational backgrounds) over another, and honor student requests in regard to preferred forms of address.

Accessibility and Responsiveness. Graduate students work under institutionally mandated time constraints. Just as faculty need to reserve time for their own research and teaching, graduate students’ time must be recognized and respected. Students require timely responses to both their work and their career-related needs. Faculty who teach and advise graduate students should post and follow protocols for responding to papers, dissertation chapters, full dissertation drafts, and
requests for letters of reference. Typically, papers should be returned within two weeks and chapters and full drafts of dissertations within a month, while students should give faculty at least two weeks of notice when requesting letters of reference. Faculty should make publicly available, and faithfully keep, their weekly office hours, and should establish a public policy for answering student emails within a reasonable period. Faculty members should expect to be in regular contact with their graduate student advisees when on leave and should communicate clearly in advance their availability for phone, skype, or other forms of contact. Faculty who consider relocating to a different institution should inform their advisees in a timely fashion. If the faculty member will remain in the advising role after a move, clear arrangements should be established with both institutions to insure the advisor’s continued accessibility.

Productive, Non-Exploitative Educational Culture. Departments, programs, and graduate students themselves share responsibility for students’ professional development and proper support. The institution as a whole has a multi-level responsibility to create a local and global culture that supports graduate student progress. Graduate students pay a high opportunity cost for their studies. They deserve a productive, equitable workplace with ample resources for career advancement of all kinds. The PLAN program at the University of Louisville offers an outstanding example of such a supportive culture that integrates institutional- and program-level efforts to prepare students for a full range of careers both inside and beyond academia.4

Central to any such culture is the principle that graduate students must not be exploited. Departments and Graduate Schools often require service to the university in exchange for the funding graduate students receive. While such work lets students gain valuable teaching or other experience, such labor can become excessive. Graduate student workloads should be appropriate, with priority given to the students’ timely progress through the program. In addition to institutionally-mandated work, graduate faculty, advisors, and department chairs can subtly pressure graduate students to agree to perform tasks, such as committee service, that might give students useful experience, but that may also produce burdensome student workloads. Faculty should take care to present all such opportunities in a way that allows students to say “no” without fear of falling out of favor or being overlooked for future tasks. Another form of exploitation of graduate students arises when graduate students aid in the production of ideas and scholarship and are not credited for it. Faculty should take special care to insure that graduate students receive proper credit for their intellectual work.

Careers and Professionalization. Graduate schools and departments do not always prepare students sufficiently for the realities of the job market(s) that they will face. It is of course important to support students applying for academic jobs, from the vetting of cover letters through the conduct of practice interviews. However, given the drastic reduction in the number of tenure-track positions in recent years, schools must diversify the kinds of career training and counseling they offer, including preparation for diverse humanities careers, information about relevant internships, and postdoctoral positions. Students should be offered training in how to

4 “PLAN Professional Development,” Graduate School, University of Louisville, http://louisville.edu/graduate/plan/
apply for jobs not only at research-intensive institutions but also at community college and other teaching-intensive institutions. Depending on the opportunity, such training and support may be provided by the department or by the Graduate School. This effort may involve graduate career counselors, alumni/ae resource networks, and other means of exposing students to a broad range of prospective employers. Faculty must recognize that in today’s changing job market, not all students want or can get the kinds of jobs their mentors have enjoyed. Faculty should not, directly or indirectly, demean students’ decisions to seek humanities careers outside academia, or to seek community college, high school, or other teaching-intensive positions. Faculty should encourage the full range of student career choices. Students live the consequences of their decisions; faculty should not simply tolerate but encourage the full range of student career choices.

The Welfare of Master’s Students. MA students often occupy an unclear or purely instrumental place in the mission of a doctoral program. Master’s degree students are frequently ignored when graduate issues are addressed, but they are part of graduate student culture too. Programs that mix MA and PhD students too often overlook the need of MA students for a coherent curriculum, professionalization opportunities, and career advice appropriate to their experience. The lack of specific support for MA students can make their transitions—whether to a doctoral program or employment outside of academia—unnecessarily difficult. Programs should develop curricula, policies, and supports that recognize the distinctive needs of MA students.

Mental Health. The structure of graduate education has created its own unique mental health crisis. The root cause is graduate students’ relative powerlessness even as they are increasingly—and rightly—expected to take charge of their own education and professional development. There is a central tension between a so-called apprenticeship model – that implies professional role-modeling, protection, and support until the apprenticeship is complete – and the reality of graduate student lives. Graduate students in language and literature typically function both as students and workers, undertaking concurrent classroom responsibilities as teacher and student. At the same time, they face pressure to professionalize, to publish prior to completion of the terminal degree, and to navigate multiple job markets for positions that may be unfamiliar to the faculty advising them. These factors contribute to stress, and often to mental health issues. A recent study provides evidence for significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression amongst graduate students than the general population; this was true across genders and was associated with lack of work-life balance and inadequate mentoring. 6

Funding. Many doctoral students are not given a stipend sufficient to sustain themselves without other employment. Institutions should survey current students and recent graduates to collect information on their economic circumstances and needs. As far as is possible, schools and departments should provide graduate stipends that cover a student’s basic cost of living. Like any group of workers, graduate students need information about expectations in order to do

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5 Lehigh University’s English department offers a valuable example of a student-centered educational culture that promotes diverse opportunities for graduate students. See https://www.chronicle.com/article/Outcomes-Based-Graduate/246501

financial planning. Programs should, beginning with students’ first year in the program, articulate clear and transparent policies regarding student stipends, tuition waivers, summer support, travel grants, and all other forms of financial support available to graduate students. Many students live from paycheck to paycheck. Payment should be made to students on time according to publicly established rules and deadlines. Whenever possible, institutions should allocate funds for graduate student travel to conferences, for research trips, for emergencies, and for childcare support as part of graduate student benefit packages.

Conclusion

This is not the first time the MLA has focused on the welfare of graduate students in the profession. In 2013, the MLA Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession established guidelines for improving the institutional circumstances for graduate students in languages and literatures by identifying “areas of policy and practice where progress has been made and areas where change can and should be sought.” In 2014, the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature concluded that the success of doctoral programs required “drawing on the resources of the whole university through collaborations with scholars from other disciplines and with professional staff members often outside departments” to achieve goals in four main areas: maintaining academic excellence, preserving accessibility, broadening career paths, and focusing on the needs of graduate students.” But as the DOAC’s 2018 survey and the 2019 Delegate Assembly discussion revealed, the lives of graduate students have become more precarious, and they are frequently dissatisfied with their graduate experience and uncertain about their future in the profession.

We hope that this Report will help programs engage in student-centered graduate education informed by an ethics of care.9 The specific recommendations in this report address areas graduate life that lay outside the primary focus of earlier reports, including the sense of precarity felt by many graduate students as the academic job market has worsened and the failure of some departments and faculty to address long-standing problems of harassment, bias, and unprofessional behavior. Our recommendations aim to help departments, graduate schools and universities establish guidelines and practices that promote inclusion and create sustainable communities that will equitably support graduate students of all backgrounds. We know that many departments around the country have already adopted some of the practices and guidelines

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9 Per our charge, we recommend that the Executive Council of the MLA consider if and when the time is right to revisit the 2014 Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature for a possible updating of its conclusions or the establishment of a new committee to consider all aspects of the graduate experience. See Appendix.
provided in our report, but today’s graduate students face unique problems that demand the urgent attention of every faculty member, department, and graduate school. An ethics of care, a commitment to professional responsibility, and a clear understanding of institutional changes and transformations must inform graduate education in the 21st century.

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**Appendix**

**Charge to the Committee**

- To consider concerns raised about student/faculty relations including such issues as lack of transparency about policies and expectations, failure to respond to student work, sexual harassment, and exploitation of student labor.

- To set up guidelines and recommendations aimed at eradicating abuses of power and exploitation in faculty/student relations and at increasing transparency and equity in all aspects of graduate education.

- To advise the Executive Council on the need to appoint a subsequent task force to update the recommendations made in the 2014 Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature in the light of changes in the profession and the job market.

In response to the third point of our charge, the Committee refers this matter to the Executive Council. It would require a comprehensive look at aspects of graduate education not included in the charge for this committee.

**We request the MLA Executive Council consider if and when to revisit the work of the 2014 Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession.**