Minutes of the MLA Delegate Assembly

The sections Forthcoming Meetings and Conferences of General Interest and Professional Notes and Comment are no longer printed in PMLA. They have been moved to members-only pages of the MLA Web site, where they are updated twice a month (www.mla.org/resources).

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he Delegate Assembly met on 29 December 2005 at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC. First Vice President Marjorie Perloff presided. The assembly was called to order at 1:13 p.m. The chair made some preliminary announcements about the conduct of the meeting, called for a demonstration of the electronic voting system to be used during the meeting, and announced the quorum for the meeting, which was 71 delegates, because 142 delegates had signed in for the meeting at the beginning. [Note: Of the 263 delegates, 163 (62%) attended all or part of the meeting (see the list that follows for the names of the delegates in attendance).]

1. On behalf of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC), Michelle Massé moved the adoption of the agenda that had been sent to assembly. The motion occasioned no discussion and no objections. The chair therefore declared the agenda adopted by unanimous consent.

Massé then offered a motion on behalf of the DAOC that the rules presented to the assembly be adopted with the following change: the deletion of the provision limiting participation in the assembly’s open discussion (see item 4, below) to elected delegates. The motion occasioned no discussion and no objections. The chair therefore declared the rules adopted by unanimous consent.

Again on behalf of the DAOC, Massé moved that the assembly approve the minutes of the 2004 meeting as printed in the May 2005 issue of PMLA. The chair asked if there were any corrections. Since no corrections were offered, the chair declared the minutes approved as published.

2. The assembly elected one of its members, Laura J. Rosenthal (English, Univ. of Maryland, College Park), to the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee for a three-year term (2006–08). In the election of a delegate to serve on the Executive Council, Paula Rabinowitz (English, Univ. of Minnesota, Twin Cities) was elected for a four-year term (2006–09). Voting from a slate of nominees selected by the 2005 officers of the association, the assembly elected Claire Kramsch (German, Univ. of California, Berkeley), Lawrence D. Kritzman (French, Dartmouth Coll.), and Rebecca J. West (Italian, Univ. of Chicago) to the Nominating Committee for two-year terms (2006–07). Voting from a slate of nominees selected by the DAOC, the assembly elected the following persons to the Elections Committee for two-year terms (2006–07): Dawn Bratsch-Prince (Iowa State Univ.), Katharine Conley (Dartmouth Coll.), Andrea A. Lunsford (Stanford Univ.), and Dana D. Nelson (Vanderbilt Univ.).

3. The assembly received the DAOC’s annual report. The chair called on Michelle Massé, chair-elect of the DAOC, to present the report. After she did so, the chair asked if there were any questions on the report. There were none.
4. The assembly held an open discussion of two topics selected by the DAOC—what to do about service expectations and evaluation and what to do about contingent labor—on which delegates had received background information in advance of the assembly meeting. The chair asked Second Vice President Michael Holquist to preside over the open discussion. Holquist reminded all present that one hour had been set aside for the open discussion, thirty minutes for each topic. He also reminded those in attendance of the rules that would govern the open discussion.

Michelle Massé introduced the first topic, what to do about service expectations and evaluation. She said that the service leg of the research-teaching-service triad was due for reconsideration in the light of recent changes in the human economy of colleges and universities. Because of the increased use of adjuncts in higher education, there are fewer tenured faculty members available for service activities. As a result, junior faculty members, as well as women and members of minorities at other ranks, have become increasingly involved in service activities that are not always appropriately recognized. She asked delegates to consider the issues of participation in service activities, appropriate rewards for participation, and equal sharing of the burdens of service.

A number of speakers said that nontenured and adjunct faculty members should have the opportunity to participate in service activities if they were willing to do so. The inclusion of these faculty members would alleviate the increasing service burden that falls on the tenured faculty, would provide professional development for adjuncts, and might qualify contingent faculty members for full-time appointments. It was also suggested that institutions compensate these faculty members for their service. One speaker said that the situation of graduate students, who receive mixed messages about the value of service, should be addressed. Another speaker urged faculty members to become involved in service at the college or university level, not just at the department level. The need to ensure fairness in service assignments was also noted. Two speakers raised the issue of keeping track of service.

It was suggested that faculty members keep detailed lists of their service and that a point system be established as an aid in evaluation. Two other speakers drew attention to the increasing service burden experienced by women of color and to the access issues involved in service for faculty members with disabilities. Several speakers urged recognition for types of service that they said were invisible to an institution (e.g., tenure and promotion work done for other institutions, serving as an outside reader on a dissertation committee). The importance of community service was also discussed. Such service can generate support for higher education in the local community and in state legislatures and should be appropriately rewarded by colleges and universities.

Michael Bérubé introduced the second topic, what to do about contingent labor. He noted the association’s long-term engagement with issues surrounding contingent labor and referred to the MLA’s Statement on Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members (http://www.mla.org/statement_on_non-ten) and to a report on the association’s 1999 staffing survey, both of which delegates had received before the meeting. Bérubé then presented several slides to the assembly to review statistics showing that about two-thirds of faculty members do not have tenure. He asked speakers to comment on what could be done to improve the situation of non-tenure-track faculty members.

Several speakers said that adjuncts needed to unionize to protect themselves. Other speakers commented on the graduate student strike at New York University and called on the MLA to show support for the striking graduate students (see items 7 and 9, below). The discussion also included several more general comments on the exploitation of graduate student teachers. It was suggested that such exploitation could be countered by reducing the size of graduate programs, by insisting on full funding for graduate students, and by setting the course load for graduate student teachers to one course a semester. One speaker noted that there were alternatives to unionization, such as the appointment of an ombudsman, and that regular faculty members could also press for better working conditions for adjuncts. Another speaker recommended using the MLA’s staffing standards to pressure institutions into moving away from the hiring of adjuncts. Other institutional strategies for assisting adjuncts were also put forth during the discussion (e.g., developing new types of contracts to provide better conditions and more job security for adjuncts, establishing and publicizing best-practices guidelines for different types of institutions, using top-ten lists to get administrators to focus on the problem). One speaker noted that departments could improve conditions for adjuncts by assigning them to teach upper-level courses, not just service courses. It was suggested that the MLA work with other disciplinary organizations on these issues and on improving the public’s view of higher education so that decreases in support for higher education might be reversed.

When the time for discussion had expired, George Schepel moved to extend the open discussion by ten minutes. This motion was seconded. The chair asked the assembly to vote on the motion, which was not debatable and required a two-thirds vote for adoption. The motion failed by a vote of 52 yes and 79 no. The open discussion therefore came to a close after one hour, at which point First Vice President Perloff returned to the chair.

5. The assembly received a recommendation from the DAOC that the assembly amend the Delegate Assembly Bylaws to bring them into conformity with the recently amended MLA constitution. Michelle Massé presented the recommendation on behalf of the DAOC and explained that the constitutional amendments the assembly had discussed and approved at its 2004 meeting (see May 2005 PMLA 934–36), which were currently in effect after having
been ratified by the membership in the spring of 2005, had created inconsistencies with the first paragraph of Delegate Assembly bylaw 7, because the bylaw was based on constitutional provisions that had been amended. Though the MLA constitution takes precedence over the assembly’s bylaws, the DAOC recommended amending bylaw 7 to eliminate any confusion that the inconsistencies between the constitution and the bylaws might create. Massé therefore moved that the assembly approve the following amendments to the first paragraph of bylaw 7. [Note: The proposed amendments appear in boldface; each amendment is followed by an explanation in square brackets.]

Motions to be placed on the agenda of any meeting of the Delegate Assembly must be submitted by the proponent by 1 October [replaces: 15 October]. Similarly, resolutions to be considered at a meeting of the assembly must be signed by at least ten members of the association and must reach the Organizing Committee by 1 October [replaces: 15 October], except for those occasioned by emergencies arising after 1 October [replaces: 15 October]. Such emergency resolutions must be signed by at least twenty-five members of the association and must reach the Organizing Committee no later than twenty-four hours before the scheduled assembly meeting. Such resolutions shall not name individuals or institutions in such a way that, in the determination of the committee, a response from the named party must be sought [new provision]. Resolutions or motions proposed after 1 October [replaces: 15 October], except for motions arising directly out of the business on the floor of the assembly, may be discussed at the meeting under the heading of new business, but no action may be taken at that meeting, unless three-quarters of the members present vote to take immediate action on an emergency resolution. Resolutions may not exceed one hundred words in length. Both resolutions and motions must be accompanied by material that provides evidence in support of the resolutions’ or motions’ claims [replaces: documented background material].

Because the assembly had already considered the proposed changes in 2004, the chair said that, if there were no objections, only a single vote would be taken on the bylaw amendments. There were no objections. The chair also explained that a two-thirds vote was required for immediate adoption of the proposed amendments and that if fewer than two-thirds of delegates voted for approval at this meeting a second vote would be required at the 2006 assembly meeting. The chair then opened the floor for discussion of the proposed bylaw amendments. Discussion focused on the new provision for seeking a response from a named party if the DAOC determines that a response is needed. Speakers thought that the provision created difficulties for members who submit resolutions naming parties after 1 October and was vague with respect to how the DAOC would make its determination and with respect to the time frame for carrying out the process. In response to the concerns raised, members of the DAOC noted that the provision for a response from a named party was intended to ensure fair and informed deliberations on resolutions; that anyone dissatisfied with the provision would need to propose an amendment to the MLA constitution at a future meeting; that the provision only called for seeking a response from a named party, not receiving one; and that it was not necessary to use the resolution process in all cases, since the Executive Council could be asked to act. One delegate asked what the consequences of the assembly’s rejection of the amendments would be; another proposed that the sentence containing the new provision be struck from the bylaw. In response, DAOC members and the parliamentarian noted that, since the language proposed for bylaw 7 was already part of the MLA constitution and since the constitution takes precedence over the bylaws, neither the rejection of the bylaw amendments nor the striking of the new provision would have any effect except that of perpetuating differences in the provisions of the constitution and the bylaws. DAOC members repeated that their recommendation was based on the need to avoid the potential confusion that a lack of conformity between the bylaws and the constitution might cause, and the parliamentarian noted that the only actual change embodied in the bylaw amendments was in the submission deadline for motions, which, like resolutions, would have to be submitted by 1 October instead of 15 October.

When there was no further discussion, the chair restated the question on the adoption of the proposed amendments to the Delegate Assembly Bylaws and asked the assembly to vote. The assembly approved the amendments by a vote of 109 yes and 18 no, which was more than the two-thirds vote required for immediate adoption.

6. In the category of new business, there was one regular resolution that was received by the 1 October submission deadline for resolutions. The resolution, which was referred to as Resolution 2005-1, was submitted by Grover Furr on behalf of the Radical Caucus in English and Modern Languages. It read as follows:

Whereas the Academic and Student Bills of Rights (A/SBOR) will, wherever embodied in legislation, give some power over course content and faculty expression to one or another governmental agency, encouraging it to define such matters as "indoctrination," "substantive disagreements" and "controversial matter," "appropriate," and the "spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints";
Whereas their purpose is to enforce the teaching of "conservative" ideas that cannot win support through their own merit;
Whereas, therefore, the purpose of these initiatives is the violation of academic freedom of both students and faculty;
Resolved that the MLA oppose the A/SBOR and all related legislation.
Michael Bérubé of the DAOC presented the resolution to the assembly along with the DAOC’s recommendation against approval of the resolution. Bérubé explained that the members of the DAOC thought the issues raised in the resolution were extremely important, but they could not recommend the resolution because both the preamble and the resolved clause posed a number of problems. The statement of purpose contained in the second whereas clause was not necessarily true. In addition, it did not, and perhaps could not, provide a sufficient analysis of the multiple purposes of legislation that had been proposed in various states. The resolved clause was also problematic because the reference to “all related legislation” committed the association to a particular stand on future legislation whose specific content was as yet unknown. The chair explained the two-stage process of consideration for resolutions and motions with preambles. She would call first for debate and amendment of the resolved clause or clauses and then for debate and amendment of the preamble before putting the full text of the resolution to a vote.

The chair stated the question on the resolution and called for discussion of the resolved clause. There was none. The chair then called for discussion of the preamble. George Schepker proposed to amend the preamble by striking the second whereas clause. This motion to amend the preamble was seconded, and the chair opened the floor for discussion of the amendment. Support for the amendment came from speakers who noted that the whereas clause introduced ideological terms that clouded the all-important issue of academic freedom, did not convey all that needed to be said about the multiple purposes of the legislation referred to in the resolution, and used a restrictive clause that could be misconstrued as a nonrestrictive clause. Those who opposed the amendment characterized the whereas clause as a forthright statement about a particular political agenda. Two speakers said they had different amendments in mind. At the conclusion of the discussion, the chair put the amendment to a vote. The assembly approved the amendment by a vote of 105 yes and 16 no.

The chair called for further discussion of the amended resolution. Roselyn Costantino proposed to amend the preamble by restoring the second whereas clause but without the word conservative. This motion to amend the preamble was seconded, and the chair called for discussion. Again speakers focused on whether it was advisable to include in the resolution such a narrow statement about the purposes of the legislation referred to. Joel Cohn moved to close debate on the amendment. This motion was seconded, and the chair called for a vote on the motion, which was not debatable and required a two-thirds vote for passage. The assembly closed debate on the amendment by a vote of 111 yes and 5 no. The amendment therefore came to an immediate vote. It was rejected by a vote of 15 yes and 98 no.

The chair asked if there was any further discussion of the amended resolution. Since there was none, she asked the assembly to vote on the resolution. The assembly approved the amended resolution by a vote of 107 yes and 8 no. The text of the resolution approved by the assembly read as follows:

Whereas the Academic and Student Bills of Rights (A/SBOR) will, wherever embodied in legislation, give some power over course content and faculty expression to one or another governmental agency, encouraging it to define such matters as “indoctrination,” “substantive disagreements” and “controversial matter,” “appropriate,” and the “spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints”;

Whereas, therefore, the purpose of these initiatives is the violation of academic freedom of both students and faculty;

Resolved that the MLA oppose the A/SBOR and all related legislation.

7. Michelle Massé presented a report on an emergency resolution that had been submitted to the DAOC on 28 December, during the Open Hearing on Resolutions. It dealt with the graduate student strike at New York University (NYU). She said that the proposers of the resolution, following the advice of the DAOC, had revised the resolution so that the constitutional provision about seeking a response from a named party (see item 5, above) would not come into play. Though the committee was divided on the question of whether the resolution named NYU in such a way that it was necessary to seek a response from NYU, this provision was not the reason why the resolution could not come to the floor of the assembly. The reason was that the resolved clause of the revised resolution, which called on the MLA to reaffirm a position previously taken, was out of order according to the association’s parliamentary authority (the current edition of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised). The parliamentarian read out the relevant provision from Robert’s. Massé said that the DAOC was concerned about the situation of the striking NYU graduate students and appreciated the work done by the proposers of the emergency resolution but that the committee found it difficult to work productively on resolutions that are submitted late. She noted that the Executive Council could be asked to address the situation, and she encouraged members to write to the council and ask it to take up the matter.

The parliamentarian responded to several questions about how the assembly might pursue the matter. She explained that nothing could be done with the emergency resolution, since it could not even come before the assembly, but that the proposers of the resolution could introduce a motion when the assembly reached “other new business” on its agenda (see item 9, below). A motion introduced at that time could only be discussed, not voted on, but the motion and the assembly’s concerns would be recorded in the minutes of the assembly meeting.

8. Also in the category of new business, there were three motions that had been received by the 15 October submission deadline and so could be discussed and voted on by
the assembly. The first motion (labeled Motion 2005-1) was submitted by Barbara Foley on behalf of the Radical Caucus in English and Modern Languages and read as follows:

   Whereas academic freedom is under assault from the right; and
   Whereas AAUP policies on academic freedom are routinely misrepresented in this assault; and
   Whereas the AAUP’s 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure states, “Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject”; and
   Whereas the 1970 AAUP Clarification asserts, “The intent of this statement is not to discourage what is ‘controversial’ but cautions teachers “to avoid persistently intruding material which has no relation to their subject”; and
   Whereas the caution to avoid “matter/material which has no relation to their subject” provides humanities teachers with insufficient protection, since it is widely acknowledged that our subjects have porous boundaries; and
   Whereas the casualization of academic labor has made non-tenure-track and graduate student teachers especially vulnerable to job loss and chilled speech;
   Be it moved that the MLA urge the AAUP to strengthen its protection of free and critical teaching.

LaVonne Ruoff of the DAoC presented the motion to the assembly and noted that the assembly was considering the revised version of the motion that had been distributed to delegates at the sign-in table immediately before they entered the meeting room. The chair stated the question on Motion 2005-1 and called for discussion of the resolved clause. There was none. The chair therefore called for discussion of the preamble. After brief discussion, which focused on clarification of the terms “critical teaching,” “casualization,” and “chilled speech,” the chair asked the assembly to vote. The assembly approved the motion as submitted by a vote of 91 yes and 10 no.

The second motion (labeled Motion 2005-2) was submitted by Christopher Cobb. It read as follows:

   BE IT MOVED that the MLA adopts a policy of union preference for convention hotel contracts; and that those responsible for negotiating said contracts shall, in accordance with this policy:
   (A) select a union facility if any such provider(s) respond(s) to a request for proposals and meets relevant criteria;
   (B) take measures to ensure that meeting attendees will not be compelled to cross picket lines or violate a boycott; and
   (C) add labor disputes to the standard escape clause in any MLA contract for convention hotels and meetings.

Luca Somigli of the DAoC presented the motion to the assembly along with the DAoC’s recommendation that the assembly approve the motion. He noted that the motion reflected current association practice with regard to hotel contracts and that approval of the motion would have the effect of formalizing that practice as association policy. The chair called for discussion of the motion. After brief discussion, the assembly voted to approve the motion. The vote was 95 in favor and 5 opposed.

The third motion (labeled Motion 2005-3) was submitted by Clara Orban. It read as follows:

   Be it moved that the Executive Council refrain from selecting convention cities that are in states that have passed laws or amended their constitutions to ban same-sex marriage.

On behalf of the DAOC, Suzanne Pucci presented the motion to the assembly for discussion and a vote. When the chair opened the floor for discussion of the motion, questions were raised about the effect of the motion on states that might have banned same-sex marriage but offered other options such as civil unions, about the lack of a provision in the motion for cities with liberal attitudes that happen to be in states targeted by the motion (e.g., New Orleans), and about the restrictions the motion would place on convention sites for the association. Speakers also questioned the boycott strategy embodied in the motion and asked whether a different approach—holding conventions in states that had enacted bans on same-sex marriage and engaging in outreach activities—would be more effective. One speaker noted that the motion would not have the desired effect on states, since it was local businesses that would suffer the economic consequences of the boycott the motion called for.

Luca Somigli proposed to amend the motion by adding the following phrase at the end: “with the exception of municipalities that have passed legislation opposing discrimination based on sexual preference.” This motion was seconded, and the chair called for discussion of the proposed amendment. Speakers who endorsed the amendment said that it provided a needed corrective to the restrictiveness of the original motion. One speaker opposed the amendment because the exemption for cities would lessen the economic consequences that the motion sought to create in states that had enacted bans on same-sex marriage. At the conclusion of the discussion, the chair asked the assembly to vote on the amendment. It was approved by a vote of 65 yes and 22 no. After brief further discussion of the amended motion, the chair asked the assembly to vote. The amended motion was defeated by a vote of 33 yes and 57 no.

9. The chair called for the announcement of other items of new business and noted that any new proposals could be discussed but could not be voted on until the next assembly meeting. Sophia McClennen proposed the following motion.
Whereas the Modern Language Association has affirmed the right of graduate students and academic workers to organize and enabled the MLA Executive Council to support unionization;

Whereas graduate student employees at New York University, having already established a recognized union, are striking to force the university to negotiate with the union;

Whereas the university has failed to recognize the union and threatened sanctions against student strikers;

Be it moved that the MLA communicate with NYU demanding that they recognize the NYU graduate student union, negotiate with it, and cease threats of punitive action against students and faculty.

The chair opened the floor for discussion of the motion. Speakers expressed support for the motion and for the striking graduate students at NYU and said it was regrettable that procedural problems prevented assembly action on an urgent matter. Several speakers asked why it was necessary for the assembly to consider new resolutions and motions if previous resolutions and motions already stated the association’s position on matters such as unionization. The executive director explained that resolutions were general statements of sentiment that members and others were free to use in situations that arose on their campuses but that motions normally specified particular actions whose implementation was determined by the Executive Council. Members could easily inform themselves of the council’s implementation decisions, since they were a matter of record. She noted that the council’s implementation plan for Motion 1999-11 (see Oct. 2001 PMLA 1486), which specified support for unionization, depended on receipt by the council of a specific request for council action in the matter of a unionizing effort. Members of the assembly and others were once again encouraged to write to the Executive Council, which had procedures in place for making decisions on urgent matters between council meetings.

When the time for nonmembers to speak had expired, Barbara Foley proposed an extension of the discussion time allotted to nonmembers. The parliamentarian explained that such an extension necessitated a suspension of the assembly’s rules, which required a two-thirds vote for approval. It was then noted that the assembly had lost a quorum. The parliamentarian further explained that the assembly’s rules provided for the continuation of the meeting in the absence of a quorum but that motions could not be adopted unless a majority of the quorum, or 36 members, voted in favor. The chair asked the assembly to vote on the question of extending the discussion time allotted to nonmembers. The vote was 33 in favor and 1 opposed, and so the motion failed. After two additional comments from delegates, the discussion came to a close. The chair assured all those present that their sense of urgency on this matter would be conveyed to the Executive Council.

10. The assembly received the report of the executive director and the Finance Committee report. The chair noted that no action on these reports was required but that comments and questions were welcome. Delegates had no comments or questions on these reports, so the chair asked the assembly to turn to the annual reports it had received from the following association committees: PMLA Editorial Board, Publications Committee, Committee on Scholarly Editions, Committee on the New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, Advisory Committee on the MLA International Bibliography, Committee on Honors and Awards, Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities, Committee on the Literature of People of Color in the United States and Canada, Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, Committee on Information Technology, Radio Committee, Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession, Committee on Community Colleges, and Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession. The chair called on Michelle Massé of the DAO to present these reports. She said that the DAO had planned to review each report briefly with the assembly, since the committees did a significant amount of the association’s work. Given the lack of a quorum, the DAO decided to wait until the 2006 meeting to carry out its plan. Massé encouraged delegates to keep the reports and read them through. A delegate suggested considering the committee reports earlier in the meeting, since they were thorough and informative and gave members a good sense of the breadth of the MLA’s work.

11. The chair called for announcements. There were none.

12. Since there was no further business before the assembly, the chair declared the 2005 meeting of the Delegate Assembly adjourned sine die at 5:25 p.m.

Delegates in attendance:


**Special-Interest Delegates:** Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio, Julie A. Baker, Klaus T. Benesch, Alanna Kathleen Brown,
Regional Delegates: Michael Adams, Rachel Adams, Thomas M. Allen, Eric Gary Anderson, Kathleen Ashley, Rita Barnard, Janet E. Barnwell, Alan Bartlett, Nina Berman, Carol L. Bernstein, Kevin Binfield, David A. Brenner, Nicholas Brown, Cristina Vischer Bruns, Katy L. Chiles, Carrie C. Chorba, Matt Cohen, Joel R. Cohn, Mary Jean Corbett, Roselyn Costantino, Craig Decker, Theresa Delgadillo, Richard Dellamora, Mary Ann Dellinger, Jamie Thomas Dessart, Meadow Dibble-Dieng, Ana Maria Dopico, Jeanne Dubino, Margaret Gates Frohlich, Paul Hanstedt, Valerie Henitiuk, Nancy Henry, Coleman Hutchison, Catherine Jaffe, Da-