An Invitation to Apply for the Position of

Executive Director
Modern Language Association of America

New York, New York

“The ideal of a liberal education in which the sciences and the humanities together prepare people for lives as free men and women is as vital as it has ever been. Without liberal education, our culture founders, our public discourse festers, our social bonds are frayed, and our individual lives are impoverished.”

—MLA President Kwame Anthony Appiah

THE SEARCH
The Modern Language Association of America (MLA) is seeking a visionary leader with a passion for advancing the humanities in educational and cultural institutions and with a deep commitment to advocating for the critical role of the humanities broadly.

Founded in 1883, the MLA promotes research in and teaching of languages, literatures, writing, and cultural studies through its programs, publications, annual convention, and advocacy work. The MLA mission is as important today as it was when the association was founded. Shrinking public resources and an increasing emphasis on science disciplines, often at the expense of the humanities, continue to create challenging working conditions for MLA members, who face the erosion of faculty governance, an increasing dependence on contingent labor, and a dramatic decline in funding to support students. For generations, the MLA has been a leader in advocating for its members and in promoting the role of their disciplines in enriching society. The MLA remains staunch in its leadership, continually seeking ways to expand its impact, and, given the current pressures on members and their disciplines, it is essential that the MLA continue to be a robust and engaged association.

Membership currently includes 25,000 scholars and teachers in 100 countries. The MLA is organized into 153 forums, which provide MLA members with opportunities to network and pursue scholarly interests in specialized disciplinary areas. The MLA Handbook, recently released in its eighth edition; the MLA International Bibliography; and other MLA publications are considered indispensable resources for students, teachers, and scholars. The MLA Annual Convention and the association’s other programs offer members valuable opportunities to share research and advance knowledge in the field.

The next executive director will be charged with ensuring that the MLA is an effective advocate for the humanities and that the association responds to the highest aspirations of its members. The executive
director will be expected to bring energy, creativity, and insight to the challenges facing existing and potential members and the humanities more broadly. The executive director must attend diligently to the overall strength of the association by advancing its financial sustainability, enhancing the diversity of its staff and members, promoting the professional growth of its staff, and ensuring its programs and publications retain their exemplary quality and relevance. The ideal candidate will bring experience in academic administration and nonprofit management, as well as enthusiasm for working with elected leadership to create new avenues for advancing the MLA’s work.

The MLA has engaged Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist with this important search. Inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed in confidence to the firm as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT THE MLA

Programs and Strategic Priorities

The MLA exists to support the intellectual and professional lives of its members; it provides opportunities for members to share their scholarly work and teaching experiences with colleagues, discuss trends in the academy, and advocate for humanities education and workplace equity. The association aims to advance the many areas of the humanities in which its members currently work, including literature, language, writing studies, screen and performed arts, the digital humanities, pedagogy, and library studies. The MLA facilitates scholarly inquiry in and across periods, geographic sites, genres, and languages and in disciplines in higher education that focus on communication, aesthetic production and reception, translation, and interpretation. Through the Association of Departments of English and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, the MLA also supports the work of department chairs and directors of graduate studies.

The MLA strategic plan includes the following vision statement and broad goals:

The MLA must be able to attract members in a growing range of fields and professions, represent the needs and interests of those members as they encounter increasingly challenging job prospects and employment conditions, and foster greater public support for the study and teaching of language, literature, writing, media, and culture. To do so, the association must offer a rich, flexible, sustainable variety of services that enhance its members’ professional lives, while maintaining the stable revenue base needed to provide these services.

Over the next five years, we will focus our efforts on the following:

1. Outreach: Increase the MLA’s reach through focused efforts to develop the association’s audience and strengthen the engagement of members and constituents.
2. Careers and the convention: Expand the range of career services provided by the MLA and refocus the convention on increased opportunities for engaging in professional development.
3. Advocacy: Improve the MLA’s effectiveness as an advocate for its members and their professional concerns.
4. Publications: Strengthen the value provided by the MLA’s publications and develop other services that can provide stable revenue to sustain the association’s future.
Detailed information about the MLA’s current programs, member services, and outreach and research initiatives can be found at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

**Governance**

As a membership organization, the MLA depends on the dedication and commitment of its members to ensure the vitality of association programs. Each year, hundreds of members serve on the association’s governing council and committees and in the Delegate Assembly.

**Executive Council**

The MLA Executive Council has fiduciary and administrative responsibility for the association. It has eighteen members, as follows: the officers of the association (a president and two vice presidents), who are elected by the MLA membership; the executive director (without vote), who is appointed by the council; twelve at-large members, who are also elected by the MLA membership; and two members from the Delegate Assembly, who are elected by the assembly. The elected officers of the association serve for three years: one year as second vice president, one year as first vice president, and one year as president. The officers are ex officio voting members of the council.

The 2016–17 MLA president is Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor of philosophy and law at New York University. The MLA’s first vice president is Diana Taylor, university professor and professor of performance studies and Spanish, New York University; the second vice president is Anne Ruggles Gere, Gertrude Buck Collegiate Professor and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of English, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

**Delegate Assembly**

The MLA Delegate Assembly meets annually at the convention. The assembly elects two members of the Executive Council and five members of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee; elects the Nominating and the Elections Committees; elects honorary members and fellows; determines the dues structure of the association, subject to confirmation by the Executive Council; receives reports from committees and commissions; recommends actions to the Executive Council regarding the conduct of association business and the association’s direction, goals, and structure; approves amendments to the MLA constitution; and supervises its own organization and operation.

There are 278 members of the assembly, as follows: (a) 88 delegates representing areas of study, who are elected by the executive committees of the forums that currently have seats in the assembly; (b) 108 regional delegates, distributed to accord with the proportion of the MLA membership in seven regions (New England and Eastern Canada, New York State, Middle Atlantic, Great Lakes, South, Central and Rocky Mountain, Western United States and Western Canada) and elected by the membership in each region; (c) 54 special-interest delegates, who ensure representation of special-interest constituencies of the MLA’s membership and who are elected by the MLA membership; and (d) 28 ex officio delegates, including voting members of the MLA Executive Council and of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee and official representatives of each of the six regional MLAs.
Committees

The standing committees of the association, established either by the Executive Council or by the constitution, oversee the MLA’s ongoing activities. This category currently includes publications committees, governance committees, prize selection committees, the MLA convention program committee, and committees that address professional or scholarly issues. Many of these committees report annually to the council and the Delegate Assembly.

Ad hoc committees (sometimes called commissions or task forces), established by the council to oversee particular projects or investigate particular areas of professional or scholarly concern, exist for limited periods of time, usually two or three years, and typically issue final reports, which may include recommendations for the council’s and the Delegate Assembly’s consideration. Recent examples are the Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, the Committee on Professional Employment, and the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing.

The executive committees of the MLA’s forums are also part of the governance structure of the association. These five-member committees conduct the forums’ business.

The MLA Staff and Budget

The MLA headquarters office is located in New York City’s Financial District. There are nearly one hundred highly experienced and dedicated staff members, a quarter of whom have been with the MLA for more than twenty years. The headquarters is organized into eight units: the office of the executive director, administration and finance, bibliographic information services, information systems, outreach, programs, research, and scholarly communication. Each office is headed by a director, who reports to the executive director.

The annual budget of the MLA is approximately $16.5 million. Publication sales and royalties account for over half of association revenue; other revenue sources are membership dues and the annual convention. The organization has assets of $23 million. The MLA endowment (valued at around $4 million), the Scaglione endowment ($2 million), and several smaller, restricted prize funds are overseen by a board of three trustees. The trustees are appointed by the MLA Executive Council.

Rosemary G. Feal has served as executive director of the MLA since 2002. During her tenure, the organization has expanded programming and publications, created a wide variety of new outreach initiatives, undertaken important management improvements, and been actively involved in affiliated national and international organizations. In February 2016, she announced to the Executive Council her plan to step down in 2017; she will remain in the position until a successor is named and in post.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Technological, demographic, and economic forces are dramatically reshaping higher education and the membership of many disciplinary societies. These forces have reached a critical point for the MLA and are creating pressure for the association to respond and adapt. The MLA membership has been declining, and its composition changing in significant ways. A particularly powerful shift has occurred because of
changes in the higher education job market: as tenure lines have been reduced, reliance on adjunct instructors has increased. The erosion of faculty governance and decreased support for graduate students have contributed to campus cultures that, too often, are academically compromised.

While the executive director has a wide array of responsibilities, as described below, the following overarching opportunities and challenges are priorities and will have an effect on all the association’s activities in the coming years. Addressing these opportunities will require boldness, political acumen and diplomacy, openness to different viewpoints, solid analytic and facilitation skills, a strategic perspective, creative thinking, and an ability to transform consensus about purpose into meaningful action. The MLA will emerge a more vibrant, more stable, and more influential organization if the next executive director can successfully tackle these challenges.

**Vision and Strategy**

The MLA is asking fundamental questions about the makeup, purpose, and structure of a disciplinary association. There is broad consensus that the organization requires a close examination of its mission and goals. The content and delivery of programs, policies, and publications may need to be refreshed to ensure the association’s long-term viability and relevance. Any new strategic framework should address the definition of membership and its benefits, financial sustainability, and the impact of new technologies on association programs and publications.

The next executive director should be prepared to undertake a broad strategic review led in active consultation and collaboration with elected leadership and membership. The executive director must ensure that the strategic thinking of the organization is informed by relevant data, best practices, and insights from allied organizations. The executive director should ensure that any process for evaluating strategy is open and inclusive and invites participation by all segments of the membership as well as by external constituencies.

**Organizational Strength and Sustainability**

The primary role of the executive director is to ensure that the association has the staff and resources to fulfill its mission. The MLA has been well managed and well served by a dedicated staff. The next executive director must ensure that the association is properly staffed and organized to efficiently and effectively serve the mission and meet the membership’s evolving needs.

The executive director must maintain an office culture that models the highest standards of collegiality and professionalism. The MLA’s headquarters unit should broadly reflect the values and diversity of the MLA membership.

Members of the elected leadership and the senior staff have been careful financial stewards of the MLA, and thus the association is fiscally sound. However, the association is not immune to the same external forces confronting other scholarly associations, including declining membership and technological changes that influence the way people interact with one another and digest information. Recognizing
these changes, the next executive director must be prepared to further expand and diversify the MLA’s revenue streams to create a sustainable financial future for the association.

External Advocacy

The MLA, through its elected leadership and executive director, must continue to be a persuasive and prominent public voice for the value and benefit of its disciplines. It must also try to create a public discourse for the humanities beyond appeals to a particular notion of tradition or to practicality. This role is increasingly important since budget reductions are forcing colleges and universities to make hard choices about faculty lines and academic departments. Mechanisms such as salary freezes, erosion of tenure, increased use of contingent faculty members, and the consolidation and closing of programs and departments have created a harsh work reality for those who teach and research in the humanities. By building initiatives around broad, diverse, and distinct constituencies such as the humanities workforce, the MLA could become a leading voice in expanding the career horizons of scholars and teachers trained in humanities disciplines and in improving the working conditions of humanities teachers and scholars.

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S RESPONSIBILITIES

The specific duties of the executive director are as follows:

Advocacy

- Strongly and energetically promote the value of the humanities.
- Articulate the changing nature of the field and the policies and actions needed to support it.
- Promote the association’s work with the media, handle all inquiries from reporters, and ensure that MLA officers receive media training and support.
- Ensure the concerns of non-tenure-track faculty members are recognized and addressed, including salary and benefits, workplace issues and conditions of employment, participation in departmental and institutional governance, academic freedom, and professional development.
- Represent the MLA and its concerns on the national level through meetings with members of Congress; interact with the work of the National Humanities Alliance, the Council on International Education, the American Council of Learned Societies, and other organizations.
- Perform outreach work by attending the regional MLA meetings and meetings of national and international organizations and by visiting college and university campuses to meet with MLA members and their students.

Stewardship

- Expand external support through grants, contracts, and donations.
- Chair the staff Finance Committee; oversee the fiscal health of the association.
- Lead strategic planning efforts with staff members and in collaboration with the Executive Council.
- Oversee member relations, including responding to members’ concerns, cultivating new members and donors, and maintaining appropriate data.
• As clerk of the Delegate Assembly, work with the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee on all its business.
• Ensure that the MLA is in compliance with all city, state, and federal laws and statutes; engage attorneys, auditors, and other consultants necessary to ensure compliance and best practices.
• Meet with all the MLA committees at least once a year; act as the liaison between ad hoc committees and the Executive Council, as needed.
• With the MLA president, coordinate agenda for Executive Council meetings and prepare all material for the meetings.
• Oversee all nomination and election processes.
• Educate self and the Executive Council on best governance practices; plan new council member orientation.

Management

• Maintain a collaborative, professional, and efficient office culture.
• Directly supervise senior staff members and generally oversee total staff of approximately one hundred.
• As general editor of MLA publications, oversee content and design of all print and electronic publications; develop ideas for new approaches to scholarly communication.
• As chair of the Program Committee, oversee structure of the annual convention, including special programming, promotion, and marketing.
• Ensure excellence in all major program work related to the study of the field, such as seminars for department chairs, research projects, and job information activities.

QUALIFICATIONS

The ideal candidate will possess the following professional qualifications, skills, and personal qualities. Candidates who do not meet all these qualifications will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Professional Qualifications

• PhD in an MLA discipline or in a closely aligned field with commitment to and a demonstrated record of scholarship in the humanities
• Experience in higher education with a broad intellectual understanding of the current landscape and emerging issues
• Demonstrated public advocacy in the humanities
• Senior-level leadership experience in higher education, foundations, or the nonprofit sector, including the management of a highly skilled staff, complex programming and budgeting, strategic planning, and building a strong organizational culture with best practices and a high level of staff morale
• Experience with publications, print and electronic, highly preferred
• Experience in member relations, development, and convention planning preferred
Skills, Abilities, and Personal Qualities

- Genuine passion for the humanities and for the MLA mission and constituencies
- Exceptional strategic abilities: is able to think expansively about the future of the MLA, articulate a clear and compelling vision, and get buy-in from different parts of the organization
- Commitment to diversity: is able to cross boundaries and to see the big picture, possesses a broad identification with various humanities fields, is open-minded and comfortable with change
- Emotional intelligence: is collaborative, can empower staff, and is not ego-driven
- Business acumen: has the proven ability to find and attract new sources of revenue and to effectively project budget needs, manage funds, and understand fiscal issues
- Commitment to continuous improvement, learning, and professional development and to benchmarking of other organizations for best practices and new ideas
- Understanding of the value of technology, including social media
- Integrity and demonstrated adherence to the highest ethical standards
- Ability to effectively navigate highly charged political situations and debates
- Creativity; imagination; willingness to take calculated risks and to promote innovation
- Superior communication skills; ease with public speaking; willingness to be a public champion for the humanities and the MLA
- Energy, curiosity, enthusiasm; ability to generate excitement and momentum
- Demonstrated commitment to transparency and accountability
- Willingness to take initiative, seize opportunities, and network; agility; responsiveness
- Diplomacy; conflict-resolution skills; ability to deal fairly, respectfully, and effectively with a wide variety of constituents

APPLICATION PROCESS

Evaluation of prospective candidates will begin immediately with the anticipation that the position will be filled by July 2017. All inquiries, nominations, referrals, and applications (including résumés and letters of interest) should be sent electronically and in confidence to

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The Modern Language Association is an equal opportunity employer and welcomes a diverse pool of candidates for this search.