

Minutes of the MLA Executive Council

The council approved these minutes at its October 2020 meeting.

The council met virtually on 14–15 May 2020. President Judith Butler presided. The officers present were First Vice President Barbara Fuchs, Second Vice President Christopher John Newfield, and Executive Director Paula M. Krebs. The Executive Council members present were Samer Mahdy Ali, Eric Hayot, Jean Howard, Ann Kalscheur Suarez, Lisa Karakaya, Elizabeth Mathews Losh, Anjali Prabhu, Jahan Ramazani, Leah Richards, Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Ramon Saldivar, Evie Shockley, Julie Shoults, and Dana Williams. The MLA staff members present were Director of Convention and Events Karin L. Bagnall, Director of Administration and Finance Terrence Callaghan, Director of Outreach Anna S. A. Chang, Director of Scholarly Communication Angela Gibson, Director of Programs Dennis Looney, Director of Bibliographic Information Services Mary Onorato, Director of Information Systems Thanh Trinh, and Assistant to the Executive Director and Coordinator of Governance Leigh A. Neithardt.

In the morning on 14 May, the council convened in regular session to begin working through the reports and action items on its agenda. It also held a discussion, “Present Challenges for the MLA during the Pandemic,” which culminated in the formation of an advocacy task force (see item 4, below). That afternoon, the Finance and Audit Committee met from 1:00–1:30 p.m. and the council met in executive session from 2:00–3:15 p.m. to establish criteria for the review of the executive director. Afterward, the council discussed the report of the Finance Committee (see item 1, below) and discussed the 2021 convention (see item 5, below). In the morning on 15 May, the council returned to its discussion of the advocacy task force, and then to its sponsored convention sessions. During the regular session that followed, the council took up the remaining items on its agenda. The council adjourned at 3:30 p.m., having concluded all the business before it.

The council took the following actions:

1. *Administration and Finance.* The Finance Committee presented a report of the unrestricted and restricted fund budgets for the fiscal year 2019–20. The committee began the fiscal year projecting a deficit of \$689,760 in the unrestricted fund but now

anticipated a deficit of \$22,850. It also projected a surplus of \$22,850 (the same number that was projected at the start of the fiscal year) in the restricted fund.

The committee reported that overall revenue is now expected to be \$898,030 less than originally budgeted. Because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee expected a 20 percent reduction in the number of membership renewals the association typically receives between April and August. Additionally, it anticipated a reduction in institutional memberships, in online subscriptions to the *MLA International Bibliography*, and in sales of the *MLA Handbook*. The amount of the association's projected spending decreased by \$255,870, for a reduction in overall expenses of \$1,564,940 in the unrestricted fund.

Council members asked questions about planning for the 2021 convention; Paula Krebs said that current plans included a small in-person event along with a virtual component, and that staff was budgeting for 2,500 attendees. She said that we would still have the same full slate that we would have had if we were only holding the convention in-person. [Note: In August, the association announced that the 2021 convention would be entirely virtual.]

The Finance Committee also presented to the council a tentative budget for the fiscal year 2020–21 that projects a shortfall of \$74,010 in the unrestricted fund and a surplus of \$22,850 in the restricted fund, bringing the total projected deficit to \$51,160.

Paula Krebs said that the receipt of the Payroll Protection Program loan has made a difference in the association's deficit this year. She said that the senior staff has worked to bring the deficit down to \$60,000 for the next fiscal year, and that the staff has made a lot of programming cuts and reductions in the salary line of the budget. She added that the current budget will be a baseline for future budgets. After reviewing the tentative budget for the fiscal year 2020–21, the council voted to approve it.

The council designated EisnerAmper LLP to conduct the audit of the association's fiscal year 2019–20 accounts.

2. *Approval of the February 2020 Council Minutes.* The council approved the minutes of its February 2020 meeting for publication on the association's website.

3. *Confirmation of Actions Taken between Council Meetings.* The council took eight decisions between meetings: (1) it issued in March its Statement on the Termination of

Graduate Student Strikers at the University of California, Santa Cruz; (2) it appointed a member to one of the association's standing committees; (3) in March, it issued its Statement on COVID-19 and Academic Labor, which twenty-eight other organizations have endorsed; (4) it endorsed in April the American Sociological Association's statement titled A Call to Higher Education Administrators Regarding Faculty Review and Reappointment Processes During the COVID-19 Crisis; (5) it approved the application of a joint grant shared between the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association to the Mellon Foundation for additional money to fund the association's COVID-19 emergency grant program, which the Mellon Foundation declined; (6) it authorized Paula Krebs to submit a grant application to the NEH for CARES money to help make up for lost association revenue; (7) it endorsed the American Sociological Association's new statement titled A Call to Higher Education Administrators Regarding Student Educational Progress During COVID-19; and (8) it authorized Krebs to submit an application to the Spencer Foundation for one of its COVID-19 Related Research Grants.

4. *Advocacy Task Force.* On Thursday, the council held a discussion, "Present Challenges for the MLA During the Pandemic." Paula Krebs said that the association has alternative financial scenarios for everything that is an income stream. The discussion turned to the advocacy work that the association is doing. Barbara Fuchs thanked the staff and said that she feels that the association has many opportunities to publicize our work. Judith Butler noted that we haven't always communicated directly with deans, with chairs, or with the Delegate Assembly, whose members could act as liaisons. She added that we could strengthen our relationship with the regional MLAs.

Paula Krebs said that the work that the council members were describing could be facilitated through mechanisms of the membership. She asked the council to think about what mechanisms exist that we can mobilize. She asked whether the council wanted a task force to figure out what needs to be done.

Barbara Fuchs said that she wanted to form a task force to examine how the association communicates with its members in order to improve both the process of publicizing the work that the association is undertaking and expand its target audiences. She wants the task force to think about campus-based recruitment, and to work first with the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee and then decide how to engage members of the

Delegate Assembly.

Council members discussed needing to create resources for campus advocates. The council passed a motion appointing a task force to work on enhancing the association's advocacy and expanding membership by improving communications and campus representation. Judith Butler, Barbara Fuchs, Christopher John Newfield, and Leah Richards will serve on the new task force and will confer with Paula Krebs and Anna Chang.

The council continued this discussion on Friday morning. Krebs had asked the senior staff to offer thoughts that the task force should consider as it determines its charge. She asked Anna Chang to speak about the work that the Outreach staff is doing. Chang gave the council an overview of that work, including marketing and promotion and designing all front-facing material (e.g., content on the website, publications, and e-mail). The office plans digital and print advertising campaigns, maintains the association's social media presence, supports the bibliography and *Style Center*. She said that Outreach sends four hundred e-mails a year (not including automated renewals) and reaches one hundred thousand people.

5. *Discussion of the Convention.* Krebs told the council that the Program Committee is engaged and excited about the possibilities offered by a virtual convention. She said that the association has opened a number of new Just-in-Time sessions so people will have time to submit proposals in August. Karin Bagnall said that one of the overwhelming messages that the Convention and Events staff has been receiving is that members want to meet. She said that the convention staff is working with the Information Systems staff to evaluate which platform would be best for our purposes. She said that making sessions engaging is both a challenge and an opportunity. A virtual convention will allow participation from more members, and we need to look at ways to provide social interactions.

Council members discussed the possibility of replicating the informal structures that facilitate member interaction at the convention, including virtual book exhibits, discussions with authors and editors, and the presentation of films and other performances. One concern is the amount of bandwidth that would be required to stream these events; another is figuring out when to plan sessions, as participants will not all be in the same time zone.

On Friday, the council discussed its planned sessions: "Reimagining the MLA of Tomorrow: Needs and New Directions"; "Instituting Access: Persistence, Pandemic, and Precarity"; and "A Call to Action: The MLA Report on Ethical Conduct in Graduate

Education.” They also discussed ideas for other sessions: Barbara Fuchs suggested one about new cultural forms that are emerging in the midst of the pandemic. Council member Elizabeth Mathews Losh suggested addressing how online education has been moved to larger companies and how the education technology industry has been given a lot more influence on education and taken advantage of that. Council member Eric Hayot said that he wanted to remember that the study of literature and philosophy is joyful, and offered to work on a session, titled either “The Persistence of Joy” or “The Joy of Persistence.” Council member Jean Howard agreed about resilience in the arts and also with Losh: a pressing issue is teaching online and digital pedagogy, and we need to think about these corporations. She suggested that this could be discussed as a faculty governance issue and how the MLA is doing this work. Council member Dana A. Williams said that, like Hayot, she had been thinking about how the humanities enlivens us. Krebs said she often has to make the case for the value of literature study, critique, research, and what faculty members do outside the classroom. She said that performance is one way to engage in that work. Council member Ignacio Sánchez Prado suggested a panel on the way different arts are happening right now (literature, arts, theater). Fuchs said that she wanted to work on this, and suggested multiple sessions. [Note: Sánchez Prado and Fuchs are each presiding over two sessions: “Making Art Work in the Time of COVID: Emergent Affordances” and “Making Art Work in the Time of COVID: Modes of Performance.”]

6. *Updating the Charge for the Committee on Women, Gender, and Sexuality in the Profession.* The council approved a motion at its February meeting to rename the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender in the Profession and decided to revisit the committee’s charge (last updated in May 2018) at this meeting. Staff had updated the charge’s language with the new name and acronym in March. A council member suggested that a smaller committee could offer a revision to the charge. Judith Butler and Leah Richards offered to work on updating the committee’s charge. The council would approve their new draft in October 2020, prior to its October meeting.

7. *Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement.* The council received four candidate dossiers from the Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Committee, rather than the mandated three. Council members raised concerns about this and about

the lack of diversity among the slate of candidates. Because of these issues, one council member made a motion rejecting the slate of candidates. The motion did not pass. The council then held a vote to choose a recipient. Because some council members felt that the vote was rushed, on 22 May, the council reconvened, rescinded its vote, and voted a second time to choose an award recipient, whose name will be announced in late November.

The council also decided that it will review the committee's mandate at its October meeting and include language about forwarding a diverse slate to the council. The council will also consider appointing a committee whose members are from diverse fields to recommend candidates for the 2023 Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement.

8. *Nomination of Honorary Fellows.* The council received recommendations from the Committee on Honors and Awards (CHA) pertaining to the nomination of honorary fellows. Acting on the CHA's recommendations of individuals to be honored this year, the council nominated Bei Dao and Reina María Rodríguez for honorary fellowship. Following the provisions of article 3.D of the MLA constitution, the elections to honorary fellowship will be conducted during the 2021 Delegate Assembly meeting.

9. *Statement on Teaching Evaluations.* Eric Hayot, Leah Richards, and Dana Williams had previously agreed to write a statement on teaching evaluations. Paula Krebs said that she would put them in touch with Natalie Eschenbaum, the MLA's ADE president-elect, who also expressed interest in working on this document.

10. *Council Meeting Schedule.* The council approved the following dates for its meetings in 2023: 24–25 February, 18–19 May, and 27–28 October.