



DANIEL ROOT



Paula M. Krebs

## Behind the Scenes with the MLA's New Executive Director

Paula M. Krebs became the executive director of the MLA on 1 August. We sat down with her during her first week to find out more about her goals for the association and how she's enjoying the new position.

*You've held leadership roles on campus, but directing a scholarly association must be a change. What interested you about the job?*

I have been involved with the association in a number of ways for a long time, and during that time I've moved from graduate student to faculty member to campus administrator. This position enables me to put my administrative training to work for an organization and a mission that have always been at the heart of my work—what could be better?

*What issues in humanities education are you most concerned about?*

I want us to do everything we can to make clear the value of studying the humanities for all students, not just a privileged elite. Humanities students learn to be critical readers and consumers of information as they dig deeply into specialized subject matter. Humanities skills get students jobs as readily as skills in other disciplinary areas, and I want students from all backgrounds to feel good about pursuing language, literature, writing, and cultural studies in college.

*What do you think will be the biggest challenge you'll face?*

It's a tough political climate for advocates of what we do, and it's a tough economic climate for colleges, universities, faculty members, and, especially, those in our fields who are in unstable employment positions. It's hard for a professional association to intervene directly in employment practices, but it's important for us to make our standards clear and to advocate for better funding for higher education and better employment conditions for those who teach the humanities.

*If a member wanted to get more involved with the MLA and its work, what would you recommend?*

We're always looking for people to nominate themselves for committee service, to run for the Delegate Assembly, and to volunteer as field bibliographers for our most precious asset (after members, of course), the *MLA International Bibliography*. Come to the convention in New York, attend sessions and receptions, and chat with staff members and the MLA's officers. When you volunteer, you can make a real difference in a membership organization like the MLA. And don't forget the regional conventions—MMLA, NEMLA, and the other regional MLAs welcome local volunteers.

*On a more personal note, how have you found living in New York?*

My commute has improved a thousand percent since I moved here! Bike, then ferry—it's like a little pre- and postwork holiday every day (except this morning, when it thunderstormed).

*Is there anything else you want members to know about you?*

I'm on a mission to convince everyone who works in our fields to join us in our advocacy for the humanities and humanities education. There's strength in numbers, especially when it comes to lobbying. So I will ask every member I meet to go out and get a colleague to join, too!

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## #States of Insecurity

This year's presidential theme, #States of Insecurity, pressed itself upon me late last year. It urges us to reflect on how our intellectual, artistic, and pedagogical work helps us confront the grave issues facing our profession(s). What strategies, it asks, do the humanities offer for navigating our current crises: political volatility, fluctuating financial markets, fear-mongering media, and increasingly hateful acts and rhetoric that contribute to a general sense of malaise?

I had originally anticipated my presidential term might highlight resistance and activism, exploring ways that humanists might use the skills they have developed in verbal and written expression, performance and visual cultures, and digital and analog formats to support the values

of the liberal arts and invert, subvert, parody, and redo some of the more nefarious happenings in the public sphere. I was hopeful we might enact solidarity and even joy in support of our disenfranchised students and colleagues as we strengthened our educational mission.

Suddenly, however, it became clear that the challenges facing education in the United States were overwhelming our profession. Resistance and activism, though certainly vital, did not seem enough. With dizzying speed, executive orders announced travel bans. Congress appointed Betsy DeVos, an open critic of public schools, as secretary of education. DACA (deferred action for childhood arrivals) students were at risk of deportation. The White House threatened to defund the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other cultural institutions. Title VI and Hays-Fulbright came under attack, limiting support for language instruction in the United States and abroad. The speed and reach of the hostile actions set off alarms for those of us in the humanities. Gone was the time for analysis, reflection, and discussion so vital to our understanding of critical thinking and decision making. The tables had turned, and the WE, those I had imagined would intervene and redirect the conversation toward more democratic and egalitarian practices, were the ones being parodied and undone.

Public opinion also shifted rapidly. In July, the Pew Research Center reported finding a "deep partisan divide" regarding the value of education (Fain). As I write, our educational system is being dismantled and defunded. Departments, as with Stony Brook University recently, are being collapsed into catchall administrative units to reduce the number of faculty and staff members. Watch lists target "liberal" professors, and reputable scholars are being maligned in the press. Our theories are being used against us. Those of us who had argued cogently that reality is complex and anything but natural and transparent are back in the trenches maintaining the primacy of facts. Advocates of freedom of expression are being slammed using free-speech arguments. The tensions and suspicions that currently

plague our public sphere make themselves felt increasingly in our fields and professional practices. I, like many others, have started to police what I say and what I write.

As the new not-normal unfurled, however, it became clear that resistance and activism, while they might not be enough, remained more important than ever. The women's march and the PEN rally called attention to how critical it is to have people on the streets. Activist groups made common cause with civil rights organizations and journalists to continue to defend DACA. Protestors clogged local airports to impede the travel ban. Nearly 150,000 people have contacted their congressional representatives to defend the NEH. Organizations such as the MLA have been on the front lines of many of these struggles.

#States of Insecurity, then, asks us to consider the very real threats to our educational system even as we use the tools we have—organizing, critique, protest, collective action, and humor—to push back. The hashtag in the title is an emblem of the networked and mediated nature of both the menaces and our responses.

A hashtag is a metadata symbol that helps find, name, and organize materials by topic, such as states of insecurity. The # clusters some of the many possible topics in the convention into a recognizable theme. Are states of security or security states the hoped-for opposite of states of insecurity or the other side of the same subjugation? The hashtag suggests too that this state pertains to a category of similar events—neither the first nor the last in a long series. Indigenous peoples, as well as many racial, gender, national, and religious minorities, have long lived in states of insecurity. The hashtag can also communicate one's feelings about something: #makingprogress, #depressed. The metadata tag on social media automatically creates an ad hoc community or affinity group. As a product of social media, it captures the speed with which the debates and critiques both outside and inside our organization have gone viral.

Ideally there will be as many different ways of thinking through #States of Insecurity at this year's MLA convention

*(cont. on p. 3)*

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as there are ideas on how best to confront these states. More than three hundred sessions (or more than a third of the total number of sessions) have asked to be part of the presidential theme. The Presidential Plenary brings together scholars long committed to activism—including Angela Davis, Cathy Davidson, Judith Butler, the Mayan scholar Juan López Intzín, and Anthony Romero, head of the American Civil Liberties Union—to discuss strategies for survival. The linked sessions, Rights under Repression and States of Insecurity: Accepting Vulnerability, Permeability, and Instability, further explore the theme. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak will receive the Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award.

The MLA is committed to advocating for the centrality of the humanities not only in our educational systems but also in society. The association's new advocacy site, the *MLA Action Network*, will enable scholars to keep up-to-date and respond to threats to free speech, net neutrality, and health care—all of which affect those working in our fields. Because of its size and standing, the MLA can make a difference and help its members intervene in the many states of insecurity we now face. Now is the time not only to assess the dangers but, as a WE, to fight them collectively. I'm looking forward to seeing you all in January!

Diana Taylor

### Work Cited

Fain, Paul. "Deep Partisan Divide on Higher Education." *Inside Higher Ed*, 11 July 2017, [www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/07/11/dramatic-shift-most-republicans-now-say-colleges-have-negative-impact](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/07/11/dramatic-shift-most-republicans-now-say-colleges-have-negative-impact).

Comment on this column at [president.commons.mla.org](http://president.commons.mla.org).

## Contribute to an MLA Volume

The volume *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edith Wharton*, edited by Ferdá Asya, is now in development in the MLA Approaches to Teaching World Literature series. The survey and call for essay proposals for this volume can be found at [www.mla.org/approaches](http://www.mla.org/approaches).



Rose Main Reading Room, New York Public Library

## Nine Little-Known NYC Gems

The convention is returning to New York City! Home to the MLA office and 8.5 million people, New York City is one of the most vibrant and exciting urban centers in the world. Below are nine little-known NYC gems that could make your MLA convention experience even more memorable.

- Mezzrow is an intimate jazz lounge and listening room in the heart of Greenwich Village. Calling all hepcats!
- The Brooklyn Flea (now in Soho!) is the grand dame of urban flea markets. For the bargain shopper in all of us.
- The Rose Main Reading Room at the New York Public Library is recently renovated and provides a quiet space in the middle of midtown Manhattan. Open during regular library hours.
- BargeMusic, moored just under the Brooklyn Bridge, is where you can enjoy gorgeous views of New York City while listening to great music. Their tag is "Music in motion, all year long."
- The New York City Transit Museum is located in a decommissioned subway station in Downtown Brooklyn and captures the history of the NYC subway with vintage cars, turnstiles, and memorabilia. (Can't make it to Brooklyn? Check out their annex in Grand Central Terminal.)
- The Museum of the City of New York honors and interprets the history of the city. With over 750,000 objects, it is an urban history buff's paradise.
- Koreatown, a single-block enclave in midtown Manhattan (at 32nd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues), features over one hundred small businesses, eateries, and shops. It's where to go for a night of bulgogi and karaoke.
- Ever wanted to see an actor do five shots of whiskey and then perform a major Shakespearean role? If so, you're in luck. The Drunk Shakespeare Society does just that and is a *New York Times* Critic's Pick!
- The Onassis Cultural Center hosts free art exhibits in the Olympic Tower in midtown Manhattan to promote and celebrate the richness of Greek culture.

These are all great places to go after enjoying a stimulating day at the 2018 MLA convention. The convention will feature over eight hundred sessions and events, including a wide variety of networking and career-building sessions. So start planning your trip now. We look forward to welcoming you to New York!

## 2017 MLA Elections

The 2017 MLA elections for second vice president, Executive Council, Delegate Assembly, and forum executive committees will be conducted both online and on paper. Current MLA members who have provided an e-mail address will be notified by e-mail when balloting becomes available at the Web site in late October. All other current members will receive a letter with instructions for obtaining a paper ballot.

This year, eligibility to vote in forum-related elections will be based on members' primary forum affiliations, which are recorded in the membership database. Members will be able to update their primary affiliations until 15 October. To review and update your primary affiliations, go to [www.mla.org/user](http://www.mla.org/user) and log in. On the My MLA screen that appears, click on the Forums tab and then follow the instructions.

Online ballots must be submitted before 12:00 midnight (EST) on 10 December; paper ballots must be received at the MLA office no later than 10 December to be counted. Members who vote online do not have to complete the ballot in one session but may exit the system and return as many times as necessary to finish voting.

Online voters have easy access to candidate information within the ballot system. Members who request a paper ballot will receive a printout of the candidate information along with the ballot.

Both ballots provide a means for members to suggest candidates for the 2018 forum executive committee elections.

If you are an eligible online voter and do not receive an e-mail notification by 27 October, please check your spam folder before contacting the coordinator of governance. Requests for paper ballots must reach the coordinator of governance (Carol Zuses, MLA, 85 Broad Street, suite 500, New York, NY 10004-2434; telephone: 646 576-5103; fax: 646 576-5107; [governance@mla.org](mailto:governance@mla.org)) by 15 November.

## Proposed Constitutional Amendments

This year, the Committee on Amendments to the Constitution worked on two proposals for constitutional amendments, one to change the composition of the association's board of trustees, institute different term lengths and term limits, and eliminate references to restricted funds and budget accounts that no longer exist and the other to ensure community college representation on the Executive Council.

As required by the MLA constitution (art. 13.B), the texts of the amendments formulated by the committee have been published at the MLA Web site ([www.mla.org/proposed\\_amendment](http://www.mla.org/proposed_amendment)). Brief explanations of the amendments are also provided. The committee will present the amendments to the Delegate Assembly at the assembly's meeting on 6 January 2018 in New York. If approved by the assembly, the amendments will be submitted to the members of the association in 2018 for ratification.

Members who wish to comment on the proposed amendments may do so at either the open hearing of the Delegate Assembly (5 Jan., 10:15 a.m., Mercury Ballroom, Hilton) or the assembly meeting itself (6 Jan., 12:30 p.m., East Ballroom, Hilton). Written comments are also welcome, but they must be received at the MLA office by 15 December so that the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee may review them before its meeting at the convention. Comments can be addressed to the coordinator of governance at the MLA office or sent by fax (646 576-5107) or e-mail ([governance@mla.org](mailto:governance@mla.org)).

## Membership Ratification Vote

The 2017 Delegate Assembly took several actions—that were submitted to the membership for ratification votes this past spring. All members in good standing as of 17 April who were also members on 7 January, the date of the Delegate Assembly meeting, were eligible to vote. Of the 18,279 eligible voters, 2,931 (16.0%) returned ballots. Voting results are presented below.

The membership voted to ratify the two amendments. The first amendment, to article 3.C, aligns the provision for paid life membership with the new criterion for the granting of life membership after fifty years. The vote on this amendment was 2,428 yes and 166 no. The second amendment, to the head paragraph of article 8, provides for the representation of part-time faculty members on the Executive Council. It was ratified by a vote of 2,382 yes and 239 no. The two amendments have been incorporated into the text of the constitution at the Web site ([www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/MLA-Constitution](http://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/MLA-Constitution)).

For a resolution to be ratified, at least ten percent of the voting membership must vote in favor of the resolution. By this measure, both resolutions that the 2017 Delegate Assembly approved were ratified. The first resolution calls on the MLA to “refrain from endorsing the boycott” of Israeli academic institutions promoted by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. The vote on this resolution was 1,964 yes (10.7%) and 885 no. The second resolution calls on the MLA to endorse a statement of the American Association of University Professors, “Higher Education after the 2016 Election,” and urges members to disseminate the statement widely. The vote was 2,471 yes (13.5%) and 229 no. The preamble and text of each resolution can be found at the MLA Web site ([www.mla.org/2017-Resolutions](http://www.mla.org/2017-Resolutions)).

### Now Online

**2018 Presidential Theme**

**MLA Action Network**

**News from the MLA**

**MLA Bibliography Fellowships**



DANIEL ROOT



## Get Engaged at MLA 2018

We're excited to welcome the convention back to the MLA's home city, New York, in 2018. And I'm especially pleased that my first convention as executive director will bring thousands of members to my new home, a city with a vibrant history of literature, art, theater, and cultural and political engagement of all sorts.

Engagement—activism, advocacy, and participation in the arts—is an overriding theme in this year's convention. The presidential theme, #States of Insecurity, calls attention to the role of the arts and humanities in national and international politics, and the convention will offer participants many opportunities to think about and take action to support the arts and humanities.

Tables will be scattered throughout the convention hotels, marked by *MLA Action Network* banners and staffed by volunteers who will help you send your senators and representatives handwritten postcards (which are more effective than e-mail). We'll have postcards, stamps, and even sample messages for you so that you can convey your support for federal funding for language study, maintaining and strengthening the National Endowment for the Humanities, affirmative action in university admissions, or whatever topics are most important to you.

The humanities and arts in this country need public champions, and the MLA is eager to lead, supporting the study of literature, language, writing, and culture and making clear the value of research in our fields. The convention represents all our disciplines and our work, from activist sessions on adjunct labor (e.g., *Organizing from the Inside: Effecting Change for Adjuncts in Insecure Times*) to pedagogical sessions on the writing classroom (e.g., *Ways of Writing in High School and College*) to research presentations on the newest approaches to literature and language (e.g., *James Baldwin's Speculative Imaginary*; *Why Teach Literature?*; *New Currents in Medieval Iberian Studies*). In keeping with the convention theme, several sessions will focus on advocacy and activism, such as *The Humanities and Public Policy and Sanctuary, Contingency, and the Campus as a Site of Struggle*.

We've shifted the focus of the convention over the years and introduced a wide variety of new session formats, including workshops, roundtables, and sessions dedicated to professional development and advocacy. And, of course,

job interviews take place at the convention. While the MLA continues to advocate for secure, well-paid teaching positions, we also recognize that tenure-track jobs are not the main employment destination for those of us in MLA fields, and, in fact, they were never the sole destination. Those who study and work on language and literature have always pursued a variety of vocations, such as university and community college teaching, public humanities work, secondary school teaching, public service, and even corporate work. Since 2015, the MLA's Connected Academics project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has offered a yearlong career-exploration proseminar for twenty doctoral students from universities in the New York area. We're looking for ways to make the proseminar available to more doctoral students, and so this year's convention will feature a Connected Academics boot camp for twenty doctoral students from around the country. During their four days in New York, the boot camp fellows will participate in a series of linked sessions as well as in special group workshops and a behind-the-scenes visit to the New York Public Library. We hope that participants will be enthusiastic ambassadors for humanities careers, taking their experiences and learning back to their home departments to benefit their colleagues.

Last year's convention featured our first Benefit for the Humanities. The proceeds from that event enabled us to expand our advocacy for the humanities and our support for contingent faculty members and graduate students. We have been able to fund workshops with the OpEd Project, which trains subject experts to write op-ed pieces for

newspapers; to provide travel grants for graduate students and contingent faculty members and internships for graduate and undergraduate students; and to develop the Connected Academics boot camp, among other projects. If this is the kind of work you believe in, I hope you'll join us at this year's benefit on the opening night of the convention. Stay tuned for more information in the MLA news digest.

I'm looking forward to seeing you at the 2018 MLA convention in New York City.

Paula M. Krebs

Comment on this column at [execdirector.commons.mla.org](https://execdirector.commons.mla.org).



2016–17 Connected Academics proseminar fellows

## Travel Assistance

The MLA provides \$400 convention travel grants to graduate students, un-employed members, non-tenure-track faculty members, and members residing outside the United States and Canada. To learn more about these awards and application requirements, visit the MLA Web site ([www.mla.org/financial-assistance](http://www.mla.org/financial-assistance)).

For additional information or details on how to apply, please contact Annie Reiser (646 576-5141; [areiser@mla.org](mailto:areiser@mla.org)).

## Deadlines for the 2018 Convention

- 2 Oct. Early registration ends
- 5 Dec. Hotel reservation deadline
- 7 Dec. Regular registration closes
- 4–7 Jan. 2018 MLA convention held in New York City
- 5 Jan. Postmark deadline for registration refund requests

## About the MLA Career Center

All candidates, departmental representatives, and interviewers who wish to use the facilities of the MLA Career Center must be registered for the convention. The center will be located in Americas II, third floor, in the New York Hilton Midtown. The center will be open from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on 4 January, from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on 5 and 6 January, and from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on 7 January. The center provides several services to candidates.

**1. Information on Interview Locations.** Job candidates can find the location of their interviews by visiting the center (the information is not available by telephone).

**2. Sign-In Procedures for Departments.** Departmental administrators or representatives who plan to hold job interviews during the convention, whether in their hotel suites or in the interview area of the Career Center, are encouraged to sign in at [www.mla.org/jil\\_dept](http://www.mla.org/jil_dept) to ensure interviewees can find them. Alternatively, interviewers may come to the Career Center during the hours listed above to provide their interview locations.

**3. Counseling Service.** Experienced departmental administrators will be available to discuss individual employment challenges and strategies from 10:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. on 5 and 6 January. Appointments can be arranged through the staff member on duty in the interview area. Each counselee should bring a cover letter and vita.

**4. Interview Area.** Tables in the interview area will be assigned to departmental representatives on a first-come, first-served basis. Staff members will be available in the area to assist interviewers and candidates.

**5. Vacancy Notices.** A list of openings will be posted on bulletin boards in the center. Departmental representatives should submit detailed descriptions of any last-minute vacancies to an MLA staff member in the center.

Visit the MLA Web site to read about sessions that may be of particular interest to job seekers and hiring committees.