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Highlights from MLA 2018 and an Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen

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Edward Savaria, Jr.

Benefit for the Humanities Launches Fund-Raising Campaign

THE MLA HELD ITS SECOND ANNUAL Benefit for the Humanities at the 2018 convention in New York City to raise funds for MLA advocacy and career-development programs. More than one hundred attendees joined the MLA's executive director, Paula M. Krebs, and special guests at the 4 January event. Jon Parish Peede, senior deputy chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), opened the evening with a reflection on the importance of the MLA and the NEH as national representatives of the humanities. Krebs then led a dis-

cussion with three distinguished journalists: David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*; Amy Goodman, host and executive producer of *Democracy Now!*; and Lydia Polgreen, editor in chief of *HuffPost*. They discussed intersections between cultural coverage and journalism and reflected on the importance of a free press in the current climate. The event brought in over \$109,000 from donors and institutional sponsors, surpassing its \$100,000 goal and exceeding the amount raised at the inaugural benefit in Philadelphia last year.

The Benefit for the Humanities is the flagship event in the MLA's fund-raising campaign Paving the Way: For the Future of the Humanities. Contributions to the campaign fund MLA programs that support workplace fairness and career development for graduate students and adjunct faculty members as well as advocacy efforts on behalf of the humanities.

To learn more and to find out how you can contribute to this cause, please visit the MLA Web site (www.mla.org/Paving-the-Way).



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Building Alliances

Comment on this column at
president.mla.hcommons.org.

TALK WITH COLLEAGUES FROM another institution, and conversation often shifts to shared concerns about declining enrollments in classes, majors, and minors; smaller numbers of students learning languages other than English; and, especially, public attacks on the humanities. As a former high school English teacher, I think changes in the K–12 world contribute to these challenges. Public high school education has suffered deleterious changes in recent decades. Teachers are required to spend an appalling amount of time preparing students for, administering, and dealing with the fallout of standardized tests; students' concepts of reading and writing have become correspondingly more reductive and instrumental; and budget cuts have eliminated many school programs that make the humanities visible and valuable to local communities.

The new MLA Committee on K–16 Alliances offers an avenue for increased cross-level traffic, and a quick overview of educational “reform” will make its importance clear. [A Nation at Risk](#), published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, called K–12 education inadequate, and this claim led to the standards movement of the 1990s. As standards emerged for school subjects, states began requiring tests to determine whether the standards were being met. These tests took on added impact in 2002, when [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB) was signed into law. NCLB requires states to assess student progress in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once during high school.

The most powerful force shaping public high schools came with the 2010 [Common Core State Standards](#) (CCSS). Unlike NCLB, CCSS is not a federal law; it was created by David Coleman's [Achieve Inc.](#) Coleman and his staff, with support from the [National Governors' Association](#) and the [Conference of State School Officers](#) and funding from the [Gates Foundation](#), developed a set of grade-specific standards for English and mathematics. In September 2009, I chaired a committee composed of MLA and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) members to, we thought, offer advice on the CCSS. Our committee, convened by the [American Council on Education](#), met with Coleman and one of his associates, and it quickly be-

The federal grant program [Race to the Top](#) required states to commit to CCSS in early 2010, before the standards were released, in order to apply for federal funds. States also had to link teacher evaluations to student scores on standardized tests. Although the Common Core standards were subsequently dropped by many states, they were replaced by very similar standards and assessments, and these assessments carry significant weight in teacher evaluations—forty percent for teachers in my state beginning in the 2018–19 school year.

The cumulative effect of mandated standards and assessments reduces many students' understanding of reading to searching for the “right” answer, giving little or no attention to aesthetic

“The cumulative effect of mandated standards and assessments reduces many students' understanding of reading to searching for the ‘right’ answer . . .”

came clear that they wanted our committee to give a discipline-based stamp of approval to the CCSS. We pointed to a number of concerns: that literature would be increasingly displaced by informational texts, which would constitute seventy percent of students' reading by senior year; that reading was conceptualized largely as a process of extracting an explicit meaning; and that rhetorical dimensions of writing received very little attention. Despite several additional conversations that extended through spring 2010, our concerns were not addressed, and neither the MLA nor the NCTE approved the CCSS.

considerations, while writing becomes the production of responses to rhetorical prompts within thirty minutes and with few opportunities for revision. Teachers, whose jobs depend on students' test scores, report that they've had to cut back on literature (one Shakespeare play instead of two, excerpts rather than full texts) and offer a reductive approach to writing (impromptu rather than extended composing and little attention to the social dimensions of writing).

As we consider enrollment challenges and declining public support for the humanities, we might think about what students bring with them from high school,

how we can work with their teachers on projects of mutual interest, and ways schools can enlarge the public's understanding of the humanities. The Common Core State Standards' and various assessments' lamentable lack of attention to languages other than English might be redressed by building bridges with high school language departments. On my campus, for example, the annual [German Day](#) helps create future students for the Department of Germanic

Languages and Literatures and displays the value of studying other languages and cultures.

The MLA [Committee on K-16 Alliances](#) offers another way to reach across levels and generate wider support for the humanities. (Thanks to the leadership of Margaret Ferguson, a past MLA president, a working group on K-16 alliances was created in 2015, and in 2017 the Executive Council voted to transform this group into a commit-

tee.) Charged with building support for teaching modern languages, writing, and literature at all levels, this committee welcomes members' suggestions for advocacy initiatives, models to emulate, and advice on public-facing publications and programs. Alliances fostered by this committee will, in the words of the late Michael Holquist, another leader in the working group, improve our own futures as teachers.

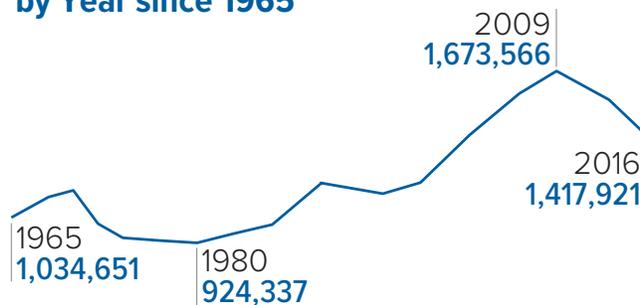
Anne Ruggles Gere

New MLA Report on Language Study

Since 1958, the MLA has collected data on enrollments in undergraduate language courses nationwide. A new report on censuses of summer and fall 2016 enrollments finds that enrollments in languages other than English declined between 2013 and 2016 and that, of the fifteen most commonly taught languages, only Korean and Japanese showed gains. The report presents a brief summary of the MLA's findings from the 2016 censuses; a full analysis of the findings will be published this summer.

The report on the 2016 data assembles responses by a total of 2,547 institutions, including two- and four-year colleges, universities, and seminaries. Taken together with the data from the previous census, in 2013, the report finds that the decline in enrollments appears to be "the beginning of a trend rather than a blip." Aggregated fall course enrollments fell 9.2% between 2013 and 2016, from 1,561,131 to 1,417,921, signaling the second largest decline between censuses in the history of the census. The decline between 2009 and 2016 was 15.3%. Between 1980 and 2009, by contrast, there had been consistent growth (with the exception of a dip of 3.9% between 1990 and 1995).

Fall Language Enrollments by Year since 1965



Language Enrollments Increases since 2013

↑ **3.1%**
Growth in Japanese language enrollments

↑ **13.7%**
Growth in Korean language enrollments

Between 2013 and 2016, only Japanese and Korean saw growth, showing increases of 3.1% and 13.7%, respectively. Spanish still leads as the most commonly studied language. More than half of all language enrollments are in Spanish; in 2016 Spanish programs reported more than 710,000 enrollments, towering over the next most studied languages, French and American Sign Language, whose enrollments were between 100,000 and 200,000.

The census tracks enrollments, not individual students. In many cases, especially among language majors, a single student will be enrolled in more than one language course in a semester. While the report presents a comprehensive picture of language enrollments, it

does not take up the question of why enrollments are down. Because the census does not, for instance, track the number of courses offered in language departments, it remains to be seen whether the recent decline is in part due to program cuts. Of the institutions surveyed, 219 reported no enrollments in languages other than English in fall 2016; 981 reported no language enrollments in summer 2016.

The MLA's complete archive of language enrollment data is available in a searchable online database (apps.mla.org/flsurvey_search). While assembling this year's census, the MLA also made small corrections and edits to earlier data. The 2016 report is therefore definitive, superseding all previous reports.

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Viet Thanh Nguyen: Going Public

*The author, scholar, and MLA member Viet Thanh Nguyen spoke with the MLA's executive director, Paula Krebs, in October 2017, after he had been awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship. His debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in fiction.*



Edward Savaria, Jr.

PAULA KREBS: Congratulations on winning a MacArthur. Do you have plans?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: I run a blog called *Diacritics*, which is the leading online source for Vietnamese and diasporic arts, culture, and politics. I started that on my own, run it on my own. So I'm going to use some of the funds to hire an editor and to figure out a way to make that editor self-sustaining.

PK: You've got the creative, you've got the traditional scholarly-critical, and then you've got this public outreach. Could you talk about how they inform one another?

VTN: I came out of an undergraduate background of activism and ethnic studies in addition to English. And the only

reason I went to graduate school was because I was convinced, along with many academic people of my academic generation, that literary and cultural criticism had a political dimension to it. Certainly I was deeply influenced by Marxist traditions and anticolonial national traditions. And part of that was the idea that writers and intellectuals could serve a political purpose and could be organic, or public, figures. All these things are interrelated. They inform my scholarly work and give me a theoretical foundation for trying to figure out how to write fiction in a way that was different from how I perceived most of contemporary American fiction.

And doing the blog and my other work with community arts organizations was part of my sense of obligation that writers and academics need to be working

outside the academy, or trying to figure out ways that their writing and scholarship can interact with the world outside literature and academia. Through the blog I was writing for a nonacademic audience out of this conviction that what I thought about in my theoretical thinking could also reach a larger audience. And, conversely, writing for the blog was actually very helpful for me because in writing for nonacademics I could deploy colloquialism and satire and humor that I never dared to use in academic writing.

And so ultimately, when it came time to write *The Sympathizer*, all of that blog writing actually really helped me, because my fiction writing before *The Sympathizer* didn't really have that much humor in it. And so when I sat down to write *The Sympathizer*, I thought, What

if I tried to write a satirical novel? And lo and behold the blog writing had actually provided some of the inspiration for that.

PK: What is it about advanced study in the humanities that works its way into your popular writing?

VTN: It goes both ways. It's not simply a case of translating academic thinking for the public. Writing for a public outside academia also works in reverse to help me shape my academic thinking.

So the first part is my conviction that scholarly and theoretical thinking have

convey that. The choice, though, was not between "sophisticated" academic thinking and "writing for the masses." There's a whole spectrum of difference in between. In this case I chose a writing style that would be criticism for an informed general public, and I wrote the book as a narrative.

PK: I don't see defensiveness about the humanities in any of your work. It's a shameless *promotion* of the humanities.

VTN: I think that's a good way of putting it. I started off as a humanist; that's one of the reasons I became an academic,

VTN: The work that we do within our own disciplines is not enough. I could write a novel, but, although it may change *something*, it's not necessarily going to change the world. You still need social movements to take place. It doesn't help the academic cause that a lot of academics *can't* speak outside academia, and even the ones who *want* to speak outside academia are ill-practiced at it. People have to be willing to take risks with their careers and with their intellectual and professional progress.

Our work could be more relevant if more people could read us, but if more people could read us, our work could actually be more threatening. It could make things more problematic if people who are already skeptical of the humanities could actually hear the things that are being said. But that could also mobilize more people on our behalf, when they really can understand some of the relevance of scholarly projects. There is potential for the scholarly humanities to actually *move* people and give them new insights into really important issues.

Part of the problem is that scholars don't think of themselves as *activists*. They generally tend to be individuals, and they want to do their own work. If people keep on just doing their own books, they'll be standing on islands that get smaller and smaller.

The path that I chose was a very difficult one personally and professionally. But outside the question of "reward"—the MacArthur or whatever—it's been *fun* being able to write for a larger audience, being able to reach people who are not academics. Knowing that my work, that my *writing*, has been able to move people emotionally (and I'm speaking not just of the fiction but also of *Nothing Ever Dies*)—that's enormously rewarding. I would never have continued in academia if I had written my second academic book like my first one. So turning myself into a more public writer has been a lifesaver for me, but it's also been enormously fun.

“Our work could be more relevant if more people could read us, but if more people could read us, our work could actually be more threatening.”

insights that are applicable outside academia. Now if we insist on writing for a particular guild or profession, then of course the impact of those kinds of thinking is very muted because people generally don't want to read these kinds of things. We have to make an effort to figure out how to translate.

Doing all that while also writing fiction had an impact on my academic writing too. I wrote a book called *Nothing Ever Dies* after I wrote *The Sympathizer*. And the research for *Nothing Ever Dies* was carried out before *The Sympathizer*. I'd written a bunch of academic articles for academic journals. But when it came time to write the book, I had a choice between just collecting all those essays and putting an introduction and conclusion on them—and, presto, I'd have a book—or starting from scratch and writing a narrative. I chose the latter. After writing *The Sympathizer* and writing *The Refugees*, I just couldn't go back to conventional academic writing. And I thought, what I'm arguing in this book about war and memory, forgiveness, justice—all these things have wide applicability outside academia, and I just have to find a way to

a graduate student, and a writer. A lot of *Nothing Ever Dies* was about trying to get over the sentimentality that's often attached to humanism, at least in the way we as academics pitch it. I coin the term *the inhumanities* to describe what I do.

I think that undergraduates and graduate students are enthusiastic about all these ideas about trying to reach broader audiences and are willing to be experimental with blogs, digital humanities, and many other kinds of things. And so even if the MLA is going to run into difficulty trying to get tenure reviews to allow for blogs, it is good that *PMLA* is creating space for things besides academic articles and reviews, for things like excerpts from blogs or profiles of scholars who are doing interesting things—people who have all the credentials of respected scholars but are also doing something else.

PK: You talk in an *LA Times* article about the “burden of uselessness falling with greater weight” on the arts and humanities, where everybody has to prove that their major is going to lead to a job in finance.

OpEd Project Workshop at MLA 2018

If you've been frustrated by opinion pieces that question the value of a humanities major, that suggest coding classes should take the place of languages, or that doom English majors to lifelong careers as baristas, you'll know why the MLA invited the OpEd Project founder, Katie Orenstein, to lead an interactive workshop at the 2018 convention. As Orenstein explained during the session, Spark Talk: The OpEd Project, newspapers publish pieces by the people who pitch to them. Ninety percent of the op-ed pitches that the *Washington Post* receives, she noted as an example, come from men. It's no surprise, then, that 88% of the paper's bylines are for men.

How can you change the conversation about your field? Understand how to define your area of expertise and why you're the best person to write about a subject. Orenstein invited session attendees to participate in an exercise: tell your fellow attendees what you are an expert in and why. Attendees then asked questions and offered suggestions to help each expert refine these claims. Don't be afraid to pigeonhole



Katie Orenstein, founder of the OpEd Project, leads a workshop at the 2018 convention.

Edward Savaria, Jr.

yourself, Orenstein urged. Narrowly defining your area of expertise makes it more likely that you will be the best person to talk about it. Once you've been published on one topic, you can write about others. But you need to join the conversation first.

Consistent with the OpEd Project's mission to get underrepresented voices heard in the media, the session also highlighted other barriers to making suc-

cessful pitches, including discomfort with touting one's own accomplishments. To counter this, Orenstein explained, we should ask ourselves "What could I accomplish of value?" rather than focus on how promoting our expertise will make us look. As one participant noted after the session, "we should realize what we have to offer is actually something that not only will be of interest to others but will benefit them."

MLA 2018 IN NEW YORK CITY

Clockwise from top right: Advocacy tables offer attendees a chance to send a postcard to Congress; using the #mla18 convention app; taking advantage of free head shots in the MLA exhibit hall.



Edward Savaria, Jr.

My Crash Course on Careers

At the 2018 MLA Annual Convention, I was part of an interdisciplinary cohort of twenty doctoral candidates who traveled from all corners of the country to participate in the inaugural session of the MLA's Connected Academics Career Development Boot Camp. The boot camp, a four-day intensive experience built into the convention, was designed to help us explore expanded career possibilities for PhDs in MLA fields. During a meet-and-greet dinner we were put into smaller groups and paired with mentors, who were alumni of the year-long Connected Academics Proseminar on Careers. In collaboration with the boot camp's facilitator, Chris Golde, the mentors conducted workshops that introduced us to a variety of careers and guided us through the process of communicating our skills to potential employers.

In addition to participating in professionalization workshops and panels, we also made a site visit to the New York Public Library. Despite our visit's almost being foiled by a blizzard and frigid temperatures, we embarked on a personalized tour of the library before landing in the office of Michael Inman, a curator of rare books. While showing us a rare copy of *Leaves of Grass* and a First Folio, Inman detailed the ins and outs of his position and what he found fulfilling about his work. After touring the historic Schwarzman building, we congregated in one of the beautiful conference rooms to meet with other librarians and learn about the responsibilities and joys of their careers.

I returned home from the boot camp grateful, encouraged, confident, and sleepy. While the four-day crash course was jam-packed, my tiredness was in no



way similar to the typical exhaustion of being a doctoral student; rather, it was the result of the sustained excitement and immersive interaction with warm and dynamic individuals. I was so inspired by my time at the boot camp that I instantly began sharing what I learned with my colleagues. I am eager to meet with my director of graduate studies and the assistant dean for career development. I hope to encourage them to incorporate some of the ideas and practices that I was exposed to as a boot camp participant.

Mariann J. VanDevere is completing a joint degree in English and media studies at Vanderbilt University and is interested in pursuing a career in entertainment. Her dissertation focuses on contemporary African American stand-up comedy.

Make a Legacy Gift to the MLA

If you would like to leave a lasting legacy of support for the study and teaching of languages and literatures, consider pledging a planned gift to the MLA.

Contributions to the MLA support the professional development of graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty members, provide assistance to colleagues, and sustain advocacy efforts at the local and national level.

To learn more about ways to give or to make a pledge, please visit www.mla.org/Planned-Giving or contact Jacqueline Lerescu (jlerescu@mla.org or 646 576-5053).

NEW FROM THE MLA

Be a Part of the Action

The *MLA Action Network*, the association's recently launched advocacy site, is looking for contributors. If you have news to report from your campus, workplace, or town; a public humanities project you want to share; or a resource we should know about, write us! Send a short pitch (no more than 100 words) to advocacy@mla.org. Visit action.mla.org/take-action to learn about other ways you can take action on behalf of humanities education.



Visit us online at
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START PLANNING FOR MLA 2019!

Submit your proposals and program copy by 2 April!