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MLA Newsletter



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International Symposium

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Five Ways to Improve First-Round Job Interviews

Fewer and fewer institutions are conducting first-round job interviews at the MLA Annual Convention. And that can be a very good thing, for institutions and for graduate students.

The MLA welcomes graduate students at the convention and wants them to participate in all convention-related activities. We think the convention presents a great introduction to the many professional paths for humanities PhDs. Sessions on research help graduate students see what's new in their disciplines. Sessions on professional development help them learn to apply for grants or write a book proposal or see what life is like at a community college.

We also think that graduate students shouldn't have to pay their own way to the convention for the convenience of search committees. There was a time when that was worth it—when convention interviews replaced old-boy-network hiring practices and the odds of getting an academic job were better. But there are inexpensive alternatives now—and more reasons to choose them.

If you are chairing an academic hiring committee, and you are planning your hiring for next year, please consider these suggestions:

INTERVIEW BY VIDEOCONFERENCE

Pick two days in January for interviewing by videoconference (options abound for systems: *Zoom*, *Skype*, *Google Hangouts*, *Greenjobinterview*). All candidates get video interviews, so those who can afford to travel to the convention don't have an advantage over those who cannot.

INTERVIEW BY PHONE

For those who do not feel the need to see each candidate, this can be an even more leveling option. No visual might mean no preconceived notions about the



Jon Benjamin Photography

candidate based on appearance. And the technology requirements are low. (The Association of Departments of Foreign Languages and the Association of Departments of English have tips for [conducting](#) and [participating in](#) remote interviews.)

INTERVIEW AT THE CONVENTION IN A SUITE

We recognize that interviewing in a hotel sleeping room with two or three strangers is far from ideal for job seekers. Suites that provide a separate room with a table and chairs remove the awkwardness of having a bed in the room while interviewing. Be aware, however, that not all candidates will have institutional support for getting to the convention. The MLA offers \$400 travel grants, but they are meant to supplement other support, not to cover the total cost of travel and accommodations.

INTERVIEW AT THE CONVENTION IN THE CAREER CENTER

The Career Center offers tables for conducting job interviews. The tables remove the bed-in-interview-location problem

and provide departments a no-cost option to holding interviews in a suite. This system still requires candidates to get to the convention, though.

OFFER TRAVEL GRANTS TO THE CONVENTION FOR CANDIDATES

If your department flies candidates in for campus visits, consider trimming the cost of the visit a bit (e.g., dinner on campus instead of at a restaurant, accommodation in a residence hall instead of a hotel) so that you can provide a small subsidy for candidates to come to the convention for first-round interviews. Interview eight candidates instead of ten or eleven, offer each a \$100 reimbursement, and you become a department known for forward-looking hiring practices. The economizing on the campus visit would be seen as part of a larger progressive policy.

If your department has come up with an innovative way to conduct first-round job interviews, let us know by writing to advocacy@mla.org. We want to know what's working.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Rethinking Public Humanities

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

THE TERM *PUBLIC HUMANITIES*

emerged shortly after the National Endowment for the Humanities was established in 1965. Initially, public humanities programs were the province of professionals outside the academy who led entities like state humanities councils and recruited academics who were willing to translate their scholarship for wider audiences. By the mid-1990s, academic humanists began creating their own mechanisms for engaging with wider publics. *Imagining America*, which fosters public engagement with the humanities, was established in 1999, and by the early 2000s some universities began offering degrees in public humanities.

The practice of making humanistic knowledge more accessible has been with us for a half century, but it takes on new urgency in today's context. As the total number of undergraduate enrollments has increased, the relative number of students completing degrees in English and in languages other than English is at a historic low (Laurence, "Decline"). Jobs for PhDs in both English and languages other than English have been declining steadily for a decade and in 2016–17 were lower than at any time since 1975, when the MLA first began tracking these numbers (851 in English and 808 in other languages [*Report 1*]). The gap between PhDs conferred and jobs available keeps increasing. In 2016, for instance, 756 individuals earned doctorates in American and British literature (*Doctorate Recipients*, data table 13), while only 359 jobs were advertised in these fields (*Report 29*). The only academic-employment categories showing significant growth since 1995 are administration and non-tenure-

track, both full- and part-time (Laurence, "Employment Trends," fig. 5).

These data may seem abstract unless you are the new PhD who cannot find work or the untenured lecturer who is not rehired because a course didn't attract enough enrollments, but these numbers also drive policy decisions that have more tangible effects. Governors of several states have recommended cuts in the humanities and favored majors that offer clear career pathways, and administrators at a number of universities have followed such recommendations. The University of Pittsburgh cut programs in German, classics, and religious studies; the University of Southern Maine eliminated offerings in French and consolidated English, philosophy, and history into one department; and the University

humanities. All of this, combined with an environment in which college is seen as a private commodity rather than a public good and a sizable portion of the population believes that higher education is not good for the country, shows the necessity of making the value of the humanities even more visible.

Doubling down on previous initiatives offers one way to respond. Service learning, as Marcy Schwartz explains, connects humanists with local communities and in the process gives literary and literacy studies a wider audience while providing undergraduates opportunities for reflection and civic awareness. *Imagining America* engages publics by uniting culture and participatory democracy. *Books@Work*, a nonprofit organization that hires professors to lead literature

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of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, recently proposed creating a “different kind of university” by eliminating majors in, among others, American studies, English, French, German, philosophy, and Spanish while adding programs of study in chemical engineering, fire science, and marketing (Flaherty). On many campuses, smaller but equally invidious decisions—such as substituting the BS for the BA because it eliminates the language requirement or shifting a vacated tenure line in a humanities department to a STEM department or professional school—chip away at the

discussions in workplaces and in communities, gives nonacademic readers access to creative expressions along with new perspectives on their own lives. The alt-ac movement, through initiatives like the MLA's Connected Academics and department-sponsored internships for graduate students, links the academy with the public square.

Projects like these merit emulation, but the urgency of the present moment requires us to do more by seeking control of the discourses surrounding the humanities. The OpEd Project, which of-

ferred a workshop at the 2018 MLA convention, can help us learn to convey our messages more effectively both locally and nationally. Humanities in Five, an innovative session planned for the 2019 MLA convention, will feature colleagues talking without notes in accessible language about their work. Creating public syllabi like Black Womanhood, which has been taken up by several individuals and organizations, breaks down the classroom wall so that those outside the academy can read along with us. Projects like these offer models for public discourses that describe the humanities in *our* words.

Anne Ruggles Gere

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How We Write Now

The January 2018 issue of PMLA features a special Theories and Methodologies section on the question of how we write now. As Angelika Bammer, associate professor of interdisciplinary humanities in the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory University, writes in her introduction to the cluster, "writing is as fundamental to our work as reading—by some measures even more so," and yet how we write has generated far less discussion than how we read. We asked Bammer and her fellow contributor Nick Sousanis, who is starting an interdisciplinary program in comics studies at San Francisco State University, to discuss the current state of writing, including their own.

How has the way you write changed over the course of your career? To what do you attribute those changes?

ANGELIKA BAMMER: When I was a graduate student, particularly at the beginning when I was still new to the United States and writing in what one of my professors described as a "very Germanic style" (I immediately knew that it wasn't meant as a compliment), I was concerned about fitting in. My writing was performative. When I wrote, I would wonder, How do I sound? My efforts paid off and I was successful. But sometimes I'd be so focused on how I was sounding that I'd forget what I wanted to say. It was a frightening feeling, as if I was losing hold of my own thoughts. If that was the price of admission to the academic guild of my field, I either had to do something else or do things differently.

I tried the latter and didn't look back. I stopped wondering, much less worrying about, how I sounded. What mattered to me was if my writing was honest, if it was true to who I was and what I thought. I wanted to write so that my reader could hear me and connect to what I was trying to say.

NICK SOUSANIS: As a kid, I wrote and drew my comics all the way through high school. When I went to university, I set that aside a bit, thinking I should be doing "intellectual things," and comics, certainly in the official view but also in my mind-set, weren't that. I should note that my fascination with making comics didn't mean I wasn't interested in writing. Some years out of college, I ended up running an arts magazine and writing and editing many articles every week. But over that period, I found that

as much as I enjoyed the work, I felt like something was missing. I wanted to be drawing. And it's in turning back to comics that I found I could say things in a more powerful way than I could when I used only words. Over time, I also found I could make connections in my thinking that weren't possible unless I was drawing and writing at the same time. It's with this realization that I came back for my doctorate, with the idea of making comics in an academic setting.

Angelika writes in her introduction that college teachers often "lament that students can't write anymore." Is student writing getting worse?

NS: It seems to me every generation says this about the one coming up. In my own courses, I push [students] to do things where writing may be a com-

ponent but they are inventing the form that they carry it out in. And I am *always* struck by what they come up with. Every single time. They latch on to something that matters to them, and they start realizing how capable they are of exploring and expressing it. So I tend to think, if writing is getting worse, it's because they don't see the connection to things that matter to them. The skills can come, but the interest in why they're doing it has to be there.

AB: I don't know how to assess if student writing is getting worse. But I do think that something has gone wrong. I disagree with colleagues who claim that students these days are not engaged with matters beyond themselves, that they're apathetic and just don't care. They care about a lot of things and have lots to say. The students who spoke at the recent March for Our Lives events all across the country made that perfectly clear. But that sense of purpose, of urgency, of having something to say and needing others to hear it dissipates when we give them writing assignments.



Eliza Lamb

“In my own courses, I push [students] to do things where writing may be a component but they are inventing the form that they carry it out in.”

Perhaps the problem is that we ask them to write about things that matter to us, not them, things that we, not they, think are important. On top of that, we ask them to translate their thoughts into formal conventions that they often find alien, or boring, or disconnected from the way they live and the things that energize them. Under these circumstances, it shouldn't be so surprising that they “can't write.” I suspect they “can't write” because they don't *want* to. At least not on topics and in forms decided by us. Maybe instead of telling them what and how they should write and declaring them failures when they can't do it, we could do a better job of listening. If we hear what they have to say and offer to help them say it through their writing, chances are that they will learn to write better. And maybe we will learn something new about writing too.

What recent cultural changes have had the most significant impact on how we write in 2018?

AB: Outside the academy, in the contemporary media and cultural landscape, many boundaries, for better or worse, have blurred. I am often amazed—sometimes taken aback, but usually delighted—at the ease with which my students, undergraduate and graduate, embark on projects for which they seem almost entirely unskilled. They will propose to write a novella, do a podcast, produce a video, or make a photo-essay with minimal—or even no—formal training. This is a cultural change that I find significant, if not transformative. The potential for experimenting, for trying new ways of doing things, is exciting, even as the risks are obvious. But if anyone can be a writer, a filmmaker, or a photographer, as



Richard Steven Street

“Perhaps the problem is that we ask them to write about things that matter to us, not them, things that we, not they, think are important.”

my students' intrepid optimism seems to suggest, the conditions for writing, including scholarly writing, must be similarly generative.

NS: Certainly one change is the increasing acceptance of forms that go beyond strictly text as part of how we make and present meaning. Was this simply long overdue? A result of our visually and digitally saturated culture? When I approached doing my own work in comics I didn't see it as a big deal at all. It was more, Well why not? But since then, I've seen the struggles people have faced, the barriers in their way, and a kind of fear that shuts things down before they get started. Obviously this is easing, but it's not happening all at once or everywhere. It takes time. For those who are worried that these new forms will pose a threat to writing, it's better to see this not as reducing but as adding to or, better yet, as multiplying the ways we can convey meaning. Is it a more complicated terrain to navigate? Sure. But I think we're up for the challenge—and I know our students are.

New MLA Grants Will Support Students and Faculty Members

The MLA is launching three new grant programs that will make a direct impact in members' lives by promoting innovative teaching projects and enhancing career development opportunities for adjunct faculty members and graduate students.

Grants of \$1,000 will be available for adjunct faculty members to support their professional development. In the first year, twenty grants will be disbursed, allowing grantees to cover a range of expenses, including travel to an interview, professional training, or a new computer. According to the MLA's executive director, Paula M. Krebs, these grants offer much-needed assistance to adjunct faculty members who "often have little or no support for their professional development from the institutions where they work."

Grants of \$5,000 will be awarded to departments to improve and expand the career services they offer to graduate students. Three grants will be awarded in the first year, allowing departments to create programs that better help their graduate students prepare for careers in and out of academe.

In addition, grants of \$3,000 will be available for innovative teaching projects that engage the public and encourage more students to study the humanities. Says Krebs, "We want to



Edward Savaria, Jr.

offer support for curriculum development aimed at increasing enrollments in humanities courses and majors as well as increasing community engagement. This kind of advocacy work is critical to raising awareness of the value of studying language, literature, writing, and culture." In the first year five grants will be available to cover faculty members' curricular-development costs.

The new grants are being funded by the MLA's fund-raising campaign Paving the Way: For the Future of the Humanities. The campaign funds a range of projects that promote workforce fairness,

THREE NEW GRANTS FROM THE MLA

\$1,000
For adjunct faculty members to support their professional development

\$3,000
For innovative teaching projects that engage the public and encourage humanities studies

\$5,000
For departments to improve and expand the career services they offer to graduate students

provide direct support for graduate students and adjunct faculty members, and enhance local and national advocacy efforts. According to Krebs, these expanded fund-raising efforts "are enabling us to increase the support we can offer to our most vulnerable members as well as to increase our efforts to advocate for the humanities."

More information on the grants, eligibility, and deadlines will be available on the MLA Web site in the coming weeks. You can make a contribution to the Paving the Way campaign in support of these grants at www.mla.org/Paving-the-Way.

The International Symposium in Lisbon

The second MLA International Symposium will be held in Lisbon from 23 to 25 July 2019. The event, hosted by the Faculdade de Ciências Humanas at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, will bring together distinguished scholars from around the world to collaborate and share research focused on the intersection of culture and social change.

The theme of the 2019 symposium is Rescuing Voices Lost. Through 21 September 2018, we invite proposals for papers, panel sessions, and roundtables that focus on recuperating voices lost through time or marginalization. Visit the International Symposium Web site (symposium.mla.org) for more information and to submit.

COMING SOON

A Full-Text Bibliography

In 2018 the MLA will launch a full-text version of the *MLA International Bibliography*. The full text of more than one thousand indexed journals will be available through the EBSCO platform. Learn more on the EBSCO Web site and stay tuned to the MLA News Digest for the launch announcement.

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