

Making the Case for Our Disciplines

A big part of what the MLA executive director does is argue and advocate for the value of studying what we study. When I am invited to campuses, I work with faculty members on ways to help their students understand and appreciate the full range of skills, values, and perspectives they get from majoring in our fields. Humanities majors learn about cultural competence, writing in different modes, living with ambiguity, evaluating sources, and much more. These things all make for a better life as well as good career prospects.

The value of studying the humanities also needs a national conversation, and we are working to introduce it into as many settings as possible. The MLA does that work in partnership with other scholarly associations such as the American Historical Association, the American Philosophical Association, and the National Humanities Alliance. Professional associations in the humanities know that if our disciplines are to thrive, they must be seen by undergraduates, high schoolers, parents, and legislators as valuable at an individual level—in helping students with careers—as well as valuable to the community at large—in helping society solve social and technological problems.

Boosting undergraduate enrollments in our courses is central to what we try to achieve. And making the case for the value of an undergraduate degree in language, literature, writing studies, or cultural studies is absolutely tied to making the case for studying these fields at the doctoral level.

The value of humanities degrees lies in the skills, values, and perspectives students acquire as well as in content area knowledge, and the same is true at the doctoral level. If we believe that



Participants in the 2018 MLA Career Development Boot Camp

Edward Savaria, Jr.

a bachelor's degree in French or performance studies prepares students for a range of careers, we should also believe that a doctorate does the same. And just as we want to see the values and perspectives of humanities majors in many different industries and agencies and parts of society, so we should understand the value of advanced study in the humanities to be crucial to the culture.

For years the MLA has encouraged doctoral recipients in language, literature, writing, and cultural studies to think beyond the professoriat when thinking about careers. The Connected Academics program has run proseminars and boot camps to introduce doctoral students to a variety of workplaces that seek the skills humanities PhDs have to

offer, and the program has helped students understand why they might want careers at such workplaces and how best to get them.

In many industries, from state humanities councils to arts organizations to research firms like Ithaka S+R, the value of advanced training in the humanities is understood. A humanities PhD produces deep research and writing skills that can be broken down into a range of component parts—the ability to use different databases and archives to find source material, to engage with and evaluate appropriate sources, and to synthesize ideas and produce original arguments that contribute substantially to

(continued on p. 7)



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Language Matters

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

IN “POLITICS LOST IN TRANSLATIONS,” a recent column in *The New York Times*, Gail Collins seemed to suggest that foreign languages in America might become an issue in the forthcoming presidential elections. I hope she is right. While the MLA is a nonpartisan organization and hence does not endorse any political position or candidate, a commitment to research and teaching so-called foreign languages has been part of the association’s mandate since its founding in 1883. The association’s objectives, first published in 1884, named this point in the scope of its activities: a central mission of the MLA “shall be the advancement of the study of Modern Languages and their Literatures.” Although the founders of the association probably conceived foreign languages to be primarily European, there is no doubt that the MLA’s charter did not want to limit what qualified as a modern language. Over the years, the number of languages represented by the MLA increased, and when the mission statement was revised in 1990 the range of languages was assumed to be global, and “more and less commonly taught languages,” from English to Uzbek, were given equal standing (*History*).

Increasingly, however, the MLA’s commitment to the study of diverse languages and literatures has faced institutional and political constraints. When it comes to cutting back liberal arts programs, foreign language departments are easy targets—and the reductions have had devastating consequences. The total enrollments in languages other than English dropped by 9.2% between

2013 and 2016 (Looney and Lusin 1; see fig. 1). While there is no single explanation for this drop, reports from universities and colleges that have made cuts in programs suggest that non-English language departments are the most vulnerable both because of their small sizes and because of the misleading assumption that such languages are superfluous in a world where English dominates (e.g., at Fort Lewis College [Johnson]; at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point; and at the University of Tulsa).

Language learning is further complicated by a myth that the United States is essentially a monolingual country. I’m surprised by the persistence of this

the United States rose from 88,000 to 415,000. Among the many Telugu speakers who have brought their high-tech expertise to the country is Satya Nadella, president of Microsoft. Could there be a connection between Telugu and technological innovation? There is an easy way of accessing Telugu culture—through the literature produced in the language since the tenth century and its flourishing cinema.

There is another myth to debunk—the idea that foreign languages are only for elites, those who have gone to selective schools and can afford to travel. Using data from the Department of Education, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* re-

“What can MLA members do? Next time general education requirements come up for discussion in your department, stand up for the language requirement.”

myth and its self-fulfilling nature. Surprised because, for instance, a quick glance of Jill Hubley’s linguistic map of New York City indicates that nearly all languages of the world are to be found in this metropolis. Indeed, a survey of almost any college or university classroom—especially those in community colleges—would reveal that many of our students speak languages other than English at home. Between 2000 and 2017, the linguist Geoffrey Pullum reports, the number of Telugu speakers in

ports that, with one exception, the top ten universities graduating majors in foreign languages were public universities (“Which Colleges”). It is remarkable that public institutions, which are the most vulnerable to political interests, have been able to sustain this record. The number of majors is, of course, not the only measure of success in the promotion of languages. Where a serious engagement with language is central to a liberal arts education, as it is at Brigham Young University and Con-

necticut College, foreign languages are valued as cultural capital. Some of the most successful language education programs are those that include opportunities for students to engage in service-learning projects in immigrant communities and internships with international organizations.

What can MLA members do? Next time general education requirements come up for discussion in your department, stand up for the language requirement. And remember that in our multilingual America, your students don't have to travel far to be embedded in Amharic, Basque, Cantonese, Telugu, or Twi. There is probably a native speaker in your university or neighborhood.

Simon E. Gikandi

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Fig. 1

Fall Language Enrollments and Percentage Change

	2013	2016	% Change, 2013–16
Korean	12,256	13,936	13.7
Japanese	66,771	68,810	3.1
Other Languages	34,746	34,747	0.0
American Sign Language	109,567	107,060	-2.3
Arabic	33,526	31,554	-5.9
German	86,782	80,594	-7.1
Russian	21,979	20,353	-7.4
Latin	27,209	24,866	-8.6
Spanish	789,888	712,240	-9.8
French	197,679	175,667	-11.1
Chinese	61,084	53,069	-13.1
Hebrew, Modern	6,698	5,521	-17.6
Italian	70,982	56,743	-20.1
Portuguese	12,407	9,827	-20.8
Greek, Ancient	16,961	13,264	-21.8
Hebrew, Biblical	12,596	9,587	-23.9
Total	1,561,131	1,417,838	-9.2

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Translating Scholarship

*Emily Wilson is professor of classical studies and graduate chair of the program in comparative literature and literary theory at the University of Pennsylvania. We asked her about her approach to translating *The Odyssey* and about her popular @EmilyRCWilson Twitter threads. Read our full interview with her at execdirector.mla.hcommons.org.*

PAULA KREBS: You've said that creating translations is a way of communicating with an audience beyond colleagues and students. Does that desire to connect to readers outside the academy shape the choices you make in translating classical texts?

EMILY WILSON: I was conscious while creating each of my translations that these texts ideally should work for a number of very different demographics: those who had read the original, those who hadn't; eighteen-year-olds, eighty-year-olds, even precocious eight-year-olds. I knew I had to be able to write for a highly intelligent, perhaps well-informed reader, who was probably not any kind of specialist in Homer or archaic Greece. I also wanted to connect with fellow Homerists and try to make an intervention in how the Homeric poems are presented

in the scholarly literature as well as in the classroom; I felt that in the contemporary scholarly and commentary tradition, as well as beyond the world of specialists, there is still a tendency to read *The Odyssey* as if it were told entirely from Odysseus's point of view, instead of paying the kind of attention I think needs to be paid to the poem's complex ethics and complex narrative perspectives.

At the same time, especially for *The Odyssey*—a text that's often taught in American high schools as well as colleges and may be the first, for some readers the only, work of ancient literature they ever read—I wanted to change



common cultural perceptions about what ancient epic is like, both in poetics and in worldviews and world building. *The Odyssey* is often seen as a foundational text about a white elite man's struggle to return to his heteronormative marriage, his success in slaughtering or outwitting native peoples, his dominance over his wife and slaves, and the triumph of consumerism, patriarchy, militarism, and normal male white people over foreigners. Those ways of reading are simplifications of the text, and they lurk, it seems to me, behind the perceptions of classicists as well as nonspecialists. I think it's essential to get them out into the open so they

can be discussed and interrogated. If we don't think hard, clearly, and critically about the text's political or social world, we can end up inscribing some terrible things. So I thought as hard as I could, as a reader, a scholar, and a translator, about the ways that the poem contains multiple different points of view. I thought hard about how to echo that complexity, how to give voice to characters other than Odysseus himself, as well as the wonderfully complex, fascinating protagonist himself; how to ensure that violence, including structural violence (like slavery), was visible to the reader.

I didn't feel I had to do entirely different things for different audiences. For everyone, I wanted to convey something of the joy of reading Homer, and the ways that these poems are both so simple and so difficult at the same time.

I wanted to echo the regular poetic rhythm of the original, the clarity of Homer's language, and at the same time the complexity of the emotions, the social dynamics, the ethics, the characterizations, the shifting narrative points of view.

I'm thrilled to hear, as I do fairly regularly, from high school teachers who tell me it's working for their students, including at high schools (and colleges) with a lot of immigrant students; this is a poem that can speak pretty directly to immigrant experiences, as well as to experiences of broken homes and violence in communities. There was an initiative in Baltimore last year, run by Amy Bernstein, to buy copies for underserved

high school students, and they created projects based on their study both of my *Odyssey* translation and *Hamilton*. I created a much-abridged staged reading that was directed at BAM by Desiree Sanchez last year, with veteran actors from Aquila Theater, and she's doing another, more fully theatrical version next year; it was very moving to see how the veterans connected with this dramatic poem about the veteran experience in all its complexity. Academics don't always have to choose between communicating with each other and communicating in a broader conversation.

PK: Translators inevitably weigh a desire to capture the distinctive voice of the original text and its culture with a desire to speak to contemporary audiences, to eliminate barriers between the author and the audience. What factors influenced your choices in translating *The Odyssey*?

EW: How do you make a text that feels alien and familiar at the same time? I think a lot about the scene in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus wakes up on his own home island of Ithaca and doesn't recognize it, because it's covered in fog sent by Athena. It's a moment of geographical and temporal confusion: he doesn't know where he is in space, and also where he is in time, because Ithaca exists both in the present and in the twenty-years-ago past. I see my own task as a translator as analogous to that scene: I want to convey the reader, like Odysseus in the swift magical self-steering Phaeacian boat, across a vast distance, with smooth, ostensibly effortless energy, so she'll sometimes feel unaware of where she is in time or in text, or of my own labors; but I also want to create moments of bewilderment, when the reader doesn't quite know if it's three thousand years ago or now.

The Homeric poems are very recognizable, very human, very relatable and gripping, and also very alien; I wanted to create an experience of both. I want the reader to have a sense, for example, of how much Telemachus is like any normal

moody bullied angry aggressive dopey man-child adolescent—but that at the same time, he's growing up to be an elite warrior, and his culture's expectations of him are quite different from those that surround most elite young men in American society. It's all plain sailing, a nice boat trip, and all of a sudden, you get to the beach, and they're slaughtering a hundred bulls to Poseidon. Cultural alienation, and engagement with cultural difference, can be created and enabled by linguistic clarity and by the reader's sense that the translator isn't speaking in a show-off voice or a fake foreign accent; she's speaking to you, whoever you may be, about a world you can understand, though you may not know it yet.

PK: Your @EmilyRCWilson threads examine the challenges of translation and analyze specific choices that translators of *The Odyssey* have made. What advice would you have for MLA members who want to start a broader conversation about their scholarly work?

EW: One of my central realizations about *Twitter*, a platform that I'd always felt alienated from and puzzled by, was simply that I could bring to it the skills that I

of any communication or conversation about scholarly work, either inside the academy or beyond. I also think a key fact to bear in mind is that academics are not smarter than nonacademics. When we talk only to specialists in our field, we can cut a lot of corners; we don't have to explain all the terms we've learned from the pile of scholarly literature we've read on the subject at hand. We can't cut those corners when we talk to nonspecialists. But that doesn't mean simplifying; it just means that different elements need to be explained and clarified, and clarity is at a higher premium. I personally feel that my work as a translator is in fact scholarship; it's a deep, detailed critical practice, based on intense study of a text and other scholarship on that text. But I also feel that my practice of several different kinds of writing, for different audiences—including on *Twitter* and in the public press—has improved my ability to communicate in scholarly writing and in the classroom, too. I'd say we need to start moving away from drawing so many boundaries between what counts as academic writing and counts for the tenure file. I wish we could change the terms of appointment and promotion in more institutions, to enable more broad and deep conversa-

“Academics don't always have to choose between communicating with each other and communicating in a broader conversation.”

already had. Those included the skill of packing a lot of meaning into a tiny number of words—a skill I'd honed in creating line-for-line translations—as well as pedagogy in close reading. *Twitter*—and other social media platforms too—can be a virtual classroom, and all MLA members already know a great deal about pedagogy. Of course, as in any classroom, you have to avoid patronizing your students, and you also have to avoid losing or alienating them by assuming they know things that they probably don't. Clarity without dumbing down seems to me the goal

tions. That's the bigger institutional picture. To individuals, I'd say, let go of those preconceptions, and do your work: tell a complicated, important, interesting truth, in clear, engaging language, with precise attention to conveying exactly what you hope to convey. Think hard about who you want to talk to, and think about why nonacademics should care about what you yourself care about. If more of us did that, more and better, there would be a far deeper understanding among nonacademics of what the humanities are and why we need to protect them.

The Importance of Indigenous-Language Programs

Although many countries already include indigenous languages in their systems of education and research, those that don't should consider the advantages of sustainable programs in indigenous languages now, in 2019, the United Nations' International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019). Linguistic diversity increases knowledge, fosters peace and reconciliation, and affirms fundamental human rights.

The United States, with 573 federally recognized Indian Nations and a

in the 1970s. The largest advance in indigenous-language instruction came in 1990 with the passage of the Native American Languages Act, in which "acts of suppression and extermination of Native American languages and cultures" were recognized and funding was appropriated to support the study of indigenous languages (Public Law 101-477).

Some of the most innovative indigenous-language programs are operated by tribal nations in the form of immersion day care centers, bilingual

At the college or university level, indigenous languages can support the identity of an institution and forge connections to community and place. Although not every nation is eager to have its language spoken beyond its boundaries, many believe there is still an opportunity to improve the future for all citizens when indigenous languages are spoken by descendants, settlers, and immigrants. In today's multicultural reality, many students are a blend of all three. Which history would we ask them to deny? By building and sustaining indigenous-language programs, we address core issues of individual, communal, and national identity and dignity.

Lastly, indigenous-language programs produce intensive, high-impact courses with good retention rates and can lead to interdisciplinary research at the most competitive level. It is now possible to earn tenure and be promoted as a scholar of indigenous languages. It is also important to recognize that some of the best teachers of indigenous languages are elders and speakers who come into the academy through alternative paths and should be treated as equal partners in the study of language and culture. Both kinds of teachers add to students' understanding of a language. It is no less important to know the word for "swamp" (as it relates to understanding cultural affiliations to a wetland area) than it is to know how to master the use of obviative endings for transitive animate verbs.

Language is the means by which we articulate reality, observe the universe around us, and narrate our lives. Stories, and the ability to tell them in our own language, are a source of well-being. Translation and negotiation, both centered in language, are the highest forms of empathy and self-respect.

“By building and sustaining indigenous-language programs, we address core issues of individual, communal, and national identity and dignity.”

smaller number of state-recognized tribes, does not lack indigenous linguistic history ("Tribal Nations"). The languages of these tribes have been recorded and studied by linguists and ethnographers since the mid-1600s. The challenge comes in integrating these languages into K-12 and postsecondary programs. Lasting programs begin with an understanding of the legacy of government- or church-operated boarding schools, where the indigenous languages were banned, and can lead to acts of reparation and revitalization that change the course of history and support these languages. Many indigenous-language programs can be traced directly to the closing of government- or church-operated boarding schools and the renewal of indigenous civil rights during the American Indian Movement

and immersion elementary and middle school classes, and options for enrolling in indigenous languages at the high school and university levels. In many states, these efforts are supported by the Department of Public Instruction through alternative paths to teacher certification for language instructors or equal licensure as part of world language programs. Both approaches are valid, depending on the needs and resources of the nations and the heritage languages. Rather than enumerate the many examples of success, I encourage language teachers and school district administrators to connect directly with the nations nearest their school to find out what the education director or tribal historic preservation officer can share about language revitalization at a locally relevant level.

These are gifts I hope to give the next generation of students as tools to help them shape the future and address the past they have inherited. I encourage all institutions to consider building and maintaining an indigenous-language program.

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an ongoing critical conversation. Dissertations are multipart projects, with deadlines and revisions, and they need project management skills; those skills may be taught by a PhD program or developed on one’s own in self-defense, but if you’ve finished a PhD, chances are that you have them.

If we believe in the value of studying the humanities, we should be prepared to advocate for them. This advocacy can take many forms. We can help students, career services offices, and admissions offices understand the postgraduation value of a humanities degree. We can talk in public settings about the importance of bringing humanities perspectives to social, political, and technological problems. We can work with our government relations officers at colleges and universities to make sure they are telling the stories of the humanities to our state legislatures. (The 2020 MLA Annual Convention in

Seattle will feature a how-to session on advocacy, with government relations officers from universities, officials from the National Humanities Alliance, and the president of the University of Washington, Ana Mari Cauce.)

Advocacy can help build the undergraduate enrollments that are essential for the survival of doctoral programs. But just as essential for those graduate programs is advocacy for the value of graduate degrees. No one expects every PhD in chemistry or engineering to become a college professor, because everyone understands that advanced knowledge in those fields has value in industries beyond academia. We must do the advocacy work to make clear the value of what we study for careers beyond academia as well, and we must help our students understand that value. The MLA has resources to help departments advocate for changes that can make a difference. Hit us up.

Paula M. Krebs



Elisabeth Meyer

Attendees mingle at the ADFL Summer Seminar in Spokane.

INTRODUCING MAPS

What is MAPS? Launched in February, MLA Academic Program Services (MAPS) brings together the Association of Departments of English (ADE) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) and enhances the benefits offered to member programs. Bringing the ADE and the ADFL together under the umbrella of MAPS will allow us to reach out to a wider range of humanities departments and programs and expand the pool of leadership experience members can draw on. Find out more about professional development events, management training, evaluation and consultancy services, and other resources that MAPS offers by visiting www.mla.org/MAPS.

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2020 MLA Annual Convention

The MLA convention is coming to Seattle,
9–12 January 2020! Registration for MLA members
opens in early September.

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