

Our Majors Can Fix Things

Undergraduate language, literature, and writing students are not MLA members, but without them there would be no MLA.

We devote a lot of attention, and rightly so, to doctoral programs, to research, and to working conditions for faculty members in our fields. But now, in a period of significant change in higher education—budget cuts, attacks on shared governance, reduction in tenure lines, and the undermining of the humanities—it is undergraduate enrollments that will make or break the humanities in higher education. And undergraduate enrollments are an equity issue.

It's easy to name a bunch of reasons why undergraduate enrollments in language classes and English classes and folklore and linguistics and area studies

major that does not have a clear path to a particular job. The National Humanities Alliance's 2020 Humanities Recruitment Survey revealed that the biggest challenges to recruiting students to the humanities were: student concerns about job prospects, lack of understanding of humanities disciplines, discouragement from parents and other influences, and debt.

Too often, students with a passion for the humanities get channeled into business or STEM fields in the mistaken belief that those degrees "pay off" better than humanities degrees. (For data that challenge that perception, see "Workforce"; *Strategies*.) And the humanities run the risk of being seen as only available to students who don't have to worry

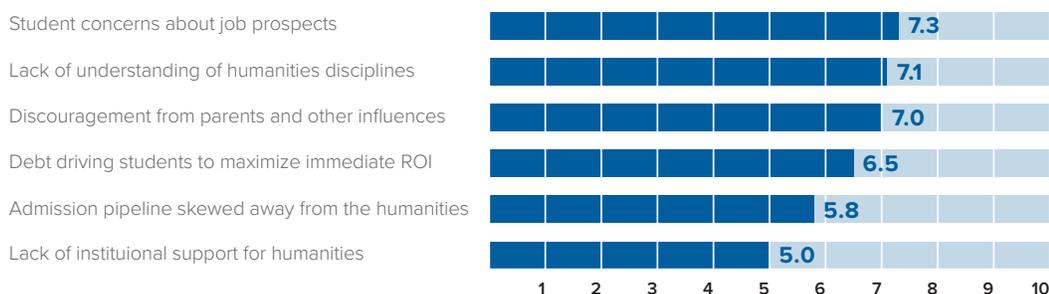
The feeling that students from underrepresented groups cannot find a comfortable home in our fields is deeply tied to the public perception that our fields are not essential. The more the skills, values, and perspectives cultivated by the humanities are highlighted in public and understood to be important to decision-making in all walks of life, the easier it will be to make the case for the skills, values, and perspectives our undergraduate degrees provide. And the more we can name and even find ways to measure those skills, values, and perspectives, the more students will see our upper-level courses and majors as congenial places for them.

Nancy Cantor, the chancellor of Rutgers University's Newark campus, likes to talk about the strength of the humanities majors at her institution, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse in the country. Students of color flock to the humanities at her school, she says, because humanities departments make clear to incoming students that their majors are the places students will get to address

social and political problems and issues in their communities.

If we can shift the public perception of the value of our disciplines—for addressing social issues, providing analytical skills, and assessing sources and for synthesis, argument, risk-taking, and

Overview of the influence of challenges. Respondents were asked how influential each challenge is on their campus, with 10 indicating a major challenge.



Humanities Recruitment Survey: Challenges and Audiences. National Humanities Alliance, 2020, https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/nhalliance/pages/2320/attachments/original/1611260180/HRS_report_final.pdf?1611260180.

have been on the decline, but I want to focus on one: we, the humanities, have not done enough to make clear the ways our courses and our majors are good options for students who are worried about student loan debt and the kind of future they will have after graduation—students who have to convince their families that it's OK to choose a

major that does not have a clear path to a particular job. First-generation college students, students of color, and Pell Grant recipients *do* need an engraved invitation into our majors because there are so many cultural factors pulling them in other directions and even actively pushing them away from language and literature and writing majors.

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Subtexts

Comment on this column at
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AS JENNIFER LOPEZ APPROACHED

the end of her medley of “This Land Is Your Land” and “America the Beautiful” during the 2021 inauguration, she suddenly broke into Spanish: “*Una nación bajo Dios, indivisible con justicia y libertad para todos.*” These two lines of the Pledge of Allegiance were followed, to many fans’ delight, by a quick “Let’s get loud!”—the artist’s hit from 2000.

While J. Lo spoke in Spanish, the caption on my computer screen read, “Speaking foreign language.” Heartened though many viewers must have

million people in the United States—signals the important work yet before us.

If Spanish can still be deemed a foreign language, how much more complex is the situation for the many other languages that English displaces, globally as well as within the United States? The recent online theater piece *Read Subtitles Aloud*, based on an initial version in Turkish by Onur Karaoglu, re-created in English by Karaoglu and Kathryn Hamilton, offers the illusion of voices meeting on the screen—one prerecorded, one live—as it repurposes

in the production and dissemination of culture and their reflection in something as seemingly trivial as subtitles. The English-speaking writer is dreaming, but the dream appears to be in Turkish, and the subtitles register X’s frustration at being shut out of a conversation between the partners and lovers left behind. Viewers with no Turkish share the bracing experience of subtitles that no longer smooth out linguistic difference but instead remind us of our limitations. *Read Subtitles Aloud* reminds us of the unevenness of multilingualism in a world where all roads lead to English, with no expectation of reciprocity.

As I begin my year as MLA president, I would like to think together about how the association might work to emphasize the centrality of multilingualism to our current condition. Without overlooking the often violent histories of how language and cultures intersect, we must insist on a multiplicity of now—multilingualism not just as vexed history, or unattainable utopia, but as our shared reality.

Linguistic multiplicity is, of necessity, acknowledged at times of national emergency—I think of the COVID-19 Health Literacy Project, launched by a first-year Harvard medical student, Pooja Chandrashekar, which swiftly translated what scant information was available in the pandemic’s first days into over thirty languages. Yet the health emergency was also invoked to prevent international students from coming to the United States or remaining here as their colleges moved to virtual instruction. Increasingly, the financial impact of COVID-19 is offered

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been at the Spanish, many may also have been put off, as I was, by a caption that seemed to negate the entire point of the intervention. Countering J. Lo’s powerful gesture of political inclusivity as she addressed the nation was the automated, mechanistic force of its characterization. While the performance was undoubtedly an important moment of signaling, its immediate framing as an irruption of the foreign, the untranslatable, the unknown—in the form of a language spoken by over fifty

subtitles for multiple narrative games. The participatory melodrama, at times reminiscent of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, explores the struggles and power dynamics of transnational collaboration, as the former writer for a theater company decamps to Hollywood. The viewer plays that writer (“X”), reading the scripted subtitles aloud to establish a dialogue with various recorded performers. One key episode, “The Dream,” offers an incisive take on the hierarchies at work

as the rationale for further cuts to offerings in the humanities, and particularly to language programs, which are taught most effectively in small sections. In the wake of the 2008 recession, there is no more fat to these programs—all cuts now are to the bone.

In this complicated context, the MLA is finding new ways to advocate, on the promotion of language study as on so many other fronts. The Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities continues its essential work of defending academic freedom and shared governance, particularly as the pandemic is used to

justify ignoring these key tenets. At the 2021 Delegate Assembly—conducted virtually thanks to the remarkable efforts of MLA staff members, and with remarkable forbearance from the delegates—we modified our bylaws to add advocacy on professional issues as a central role for the delegates. Our goal is for more active representation throughout the year, as delegates get out the word about MLA priorities and, conversely, convey issues of concern on their campuses to the MLA. The Executive Council’s Task Force on Advocacy and Communication, founded by Judith Butler during her presidency,

continues to work on how best to communicate our priorities and support our members in our diverse professional situations and various career paths. I encourage you to take part in these efforts by reading the monthly news digest and following the @MLAnews *Twitter* account and by sharing association statements, guidelines, and other resources. As we emerge from this difficult period of isolation and loss, I hope the MLA can offer a model of solidarity and collegiality in a world knit together by multilingualism.

Barbara Fuchs

The Value of the Public Humanities: An Interview with Helen Small

Helen Small, Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford, is an MLA member and the author of The Value of the Humanities. We interviewed her by e-mail.

What do you think about public humanities as a way of reorienting both undergraduate and graduate studies in the humanities?

Helen Small: I welcome efforts to train students in writing for audiences beyond the academy, although it’s hard not to feel that something is awry if we are especially priding ourselves on reorienting to “outsiders.” Asking students, early in their college careers, who they think they are writing *for* can be illuminating: the answer tends to run along the lines of “for an imaginary reader who doesn’t know anything about the subject.” Why not get students to start by admitting the reader they have: the professor or teaching assistant who knows the subject, wants to read something new, and would prefer it to be something that grips their curiosity and intelligence?

Public humanities I see as a modulation of address, allowing the work we do within the university to reach the

numerous, overlapping audiences who stand to benefit from it. The challenging aspect of outward-facing humanities work is getting the correct gauge of a particular audience’s rough starting point, then putting our trained thinking into forms that don’t just popularize but genuinely mediate it and so broaden the conversation.

Do you embrace more explicitly public-oriented curricula and student projects (e.g., innovative dissertation formats)?

HS: Yes, so long as they are designed from the inside, by people who understand the humanities’ objects and purposes. Of course, just adding something of substance to the more conventional secondary literature is no small achievement and can often be enough, but Louis Menand names a key ambition of public humanities advocacy when he writes about the desirability of the university’s having an eye to “actual social

and cultural life” (*The Marketplace of Ideas*; W. W. Norton, 2010, p. 158). Problems emerge when the content drops out and curriculum designers set aside knowledge of the subject; put relevance or impact first, as an abstract aim; and then try to backfill what should be done to get there. Start with the texts, the cultural objects, the political issue, the historical problem. Find the shape for it that fires the curiosity of teachers and students, then design the form of public orientation that captures the reason for the curiosity and will elicit new curiosity from publics beyond the academy.

What can organizations like the MLA do to help communicate the value of the humanities to a broader public?

HS: Organizations like the MLA are providing an essential service, supporting the full variety of work in languages and literature across a national and international sector with huge disparities in

political commitment to the humanities and institutional resources to support them. Communicating the work that speaks across our range of disciplines and out to other divisions of the university is vital. Amid so many threatened and actual departmental closures, it is essential to convey the different forms of interpretative value we bring to the culture, admit intelligent audiences to that variety, and provide access to the expertise necessary to do cultural work. Finally, keeping the connections open among critics, creative practitioners, schools, educational and other public institutions is crucial. The humanities don't stand alone in their work or in the challenges of their public advocacy, but we are oddly unlike the social sciences, science, and especially medicine in having more often to remind others (perhaps also ourselves) that what we do *is* work and that it has effects in and on society.

What can we learn from comparing trends in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia?

HS: Professional structures in the United Kingdom and Australia have, perhaps more consistently than in the United States, encouraged back and forth between specialist and outward-facing activity. The gap between the academy and publics “beyond” tends to look wider in the States, even now. It's legible in the peculiar self-consciousness that seems to attach to debates in the US about the public humanities: the sugges-

tion that something deliberately civic is happening, a gap being bridged. There may be something worth learning from more flexible structures of professional reward in other countries—although we,

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in the UK, certainly have things to learn from the stronger curation of colleagues' careers in the US.

All our countries are in the grip of a new institutional urgency around demonstrating the humanities' public benefit to our funders (government, private funders, loans companies, fee payers). As far as the work of public advocacy for the humanities is concerned, the crucial question before starting is how far there exists a *prima facie* scepticism about that benefit. The US has just come through an exceptionally hostile period of . . . not even scrutiny. Call it preemptive disbelief. Australia has experienced similar periods of hostility, and, with proposed changes to student fees introducing a disincentive to choose the humanities, things may be about to get much worse. If the UK is in a better place, it nevertheless has huge economic challenges ahead. We are not helped by being, for now, systemically

wedded to public accounting for public benefit, with government bodies (I am willing to believe) eager for evidence that confirms a value already broadly understood economically, culturally, in-

tuitively, but onerous to provide case by case. I have spent much of the last two years preparing nine impact case studies to demonstrate the public benefit of research in English literature to funders of the UK government in a regular national research-assessment exercise known as the REF (the Research Excellence Framework)—and I don't recommend trying to prove the worth of the humanities in this way. If we are defending ourselves with the term *public*, then public trust—in us, in what we do—is a crucial addition to the repertoire. So, a more informed discussion of trust is in order. Where, and to what extent, do we already have it? How might we gain more of it? Who or what practices can help us to do so?

This interview has been edited for length. You can read the full interview at profession.mla.org.

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anything else you foreground when you teach—we can make our courses more welcoming. Sprinkling in a few writers of color or an ethnic literature class is not enough. Making clear the full range of what students learn and what they can do at the same time as making clear the value of studying language and literature for understanding the world around you and how to change it—that’s what will make our majors more inviting. Making our majors more welcoming will be a transformative effort.

Research in language and literature and writing studies and cultural studies is valuable. We should talk more about why. Advanced training in the human-

ities is valuable. The MLA’s work on career options for PhDs has been addressing this value for years. The more confident we get in making the case for the importance of the humanities in public life, the better we will be at making the case for our courses and majors at the undergraduate level for students who may see our fields as reserved for those who can afford to major in them. Many of the MLA’s efforts are working toward addressing that continuum—from undergraduate enrollments through public humanities. At every level, making our majors more accessible and our research more widely understood will be our best defense and our most productive future.

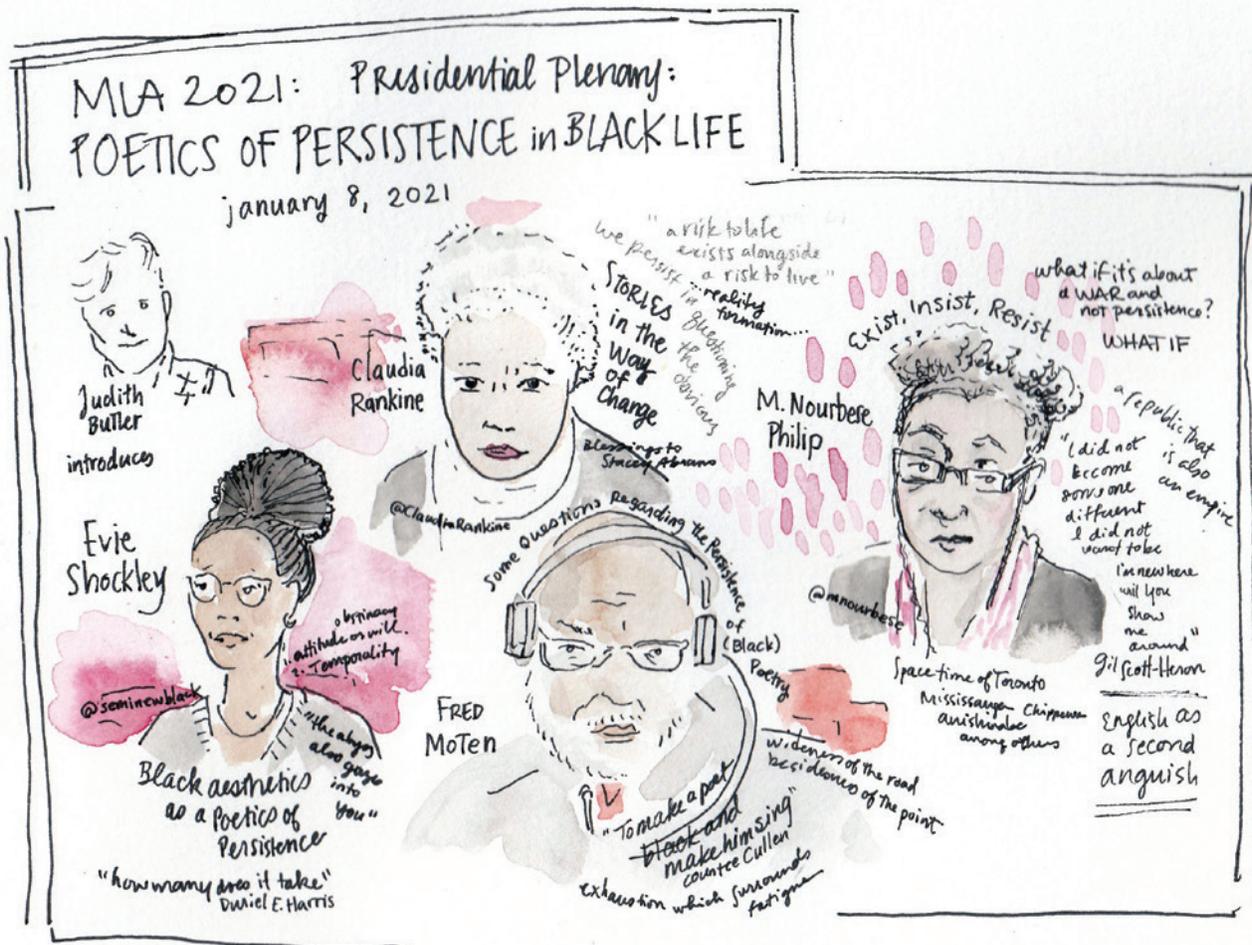
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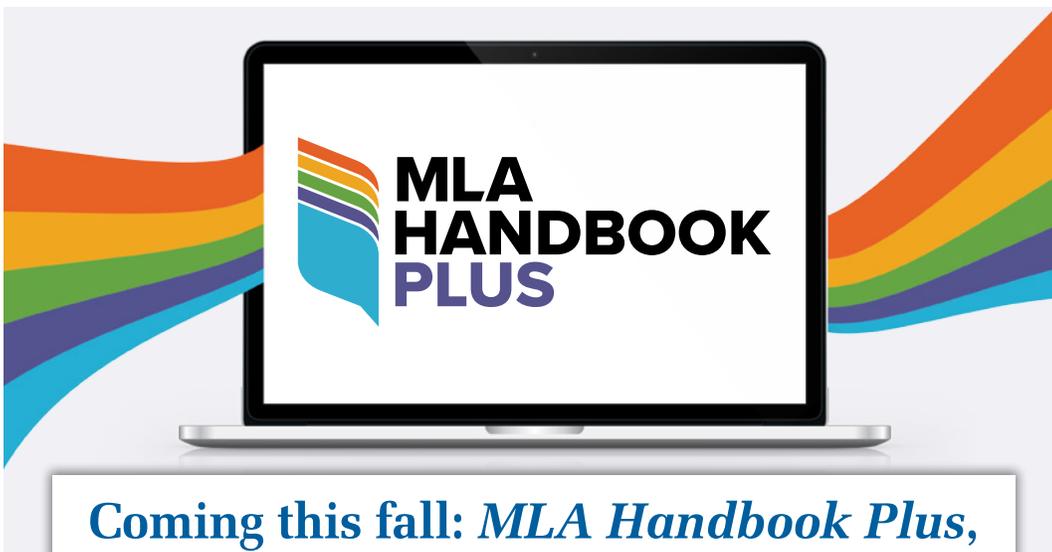
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Members can now access a recording of the presidential plenary, The Poetics of Persistence in Black Life, on the MLA website (mla.org/Presidential-Plenary-2021).

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MLA Newsletter



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