

Evaluating Public Humanities Scholarship

As part of its forthcoming report, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Valuing Public Humanities created guiding questions for assessing public humanities scholarship. The committee seeks to encourage public humanities work by offering guidelines for departments, institutions, and faculty members in languages and literatures for valuing and assessing research in the public humanities. The guidelines are grounded in an acknowledgment of the ethical responsibilities of public humanities work, which often involves engagement with communities, and of the wide array of forms that public humanities scholarship may take. Look for the full report on the MLA website.

The following questions will be broadly applicable to public humanities work, although they may require adjustment depending on the scope of the community engaged, the degree of collaboration involved, and the form a project might take:

- How does the project contribute to the well-being of the community, beyond its effect on the career of the faculty member developing it, the institution sponsoring it, and the financial interests of the business community?
- How has the faculty member identified and cultivated allies and partners for the common good and the furtherance of scholarship and ensured that this process has been undertaken ethically?
- How does the project contribute to student learning and the mentoring of students?
- How does the project contribute to the community's knowledge of itself

and its engagement with the wider world?

- How does the project acknowledge and contribute to the community's agency and not just its status as an object of study?
- How does the project contribute to the advancement of public humanities as an area of inquiry, and how does it interact with current disciplinary conversations and advance the fields it engages?



- How does the project demonstrate an awareness of current conversations in the field and explain how it advances or revises those conversations?
- How does the project contribute to the common good, adding something to the community's experience and resources that was not there before?

- How does the project foster intellectual community, recognizing that membership in an intellectual community is not simply a matter of credentials?
- What roles have community partners played in the design of the project at all stages (research question, methods, implementation, assessment, development of outcomes)?
- What are the milestones of the proposed project, including the timeline for various phases, and how much progress has been made in relation to the timeline?
- How has the project planned for accessibility, both in terms of disability and public engagement?
- How has the project been shared with public audiences?
- How has the project addressed harm reduction (e.g., safety, surveillance, respect for cultural protocols over what should be shared and with whom)?
- How has the project planned for potential reuse or for its use as a building block for future, cross-disciplinary projects?
- How are collaborative relationships developed in a way that allows them to be maintained over time?
- How does this project plan for sustainability beyond its initial funding or labor model?

The members of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Valuing Public Humanities are Herman Beavers, Toby Benis, Araceli Hernández-Laroche, Roopika Risam, Christian Rubio, and Brian Yothers.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

The Humanities Crisis Is a Funding Crisis

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

MY PREVIOUS COLUMN, “RESEARCH for All,” defined postsecondary education through a necessary combination of research and teaching and called for the gradual but relentless push to build our infrastructure—our working conditions—so that *all* college teachers have paid time for the scholarship they trained to do. Foregrounding diverse modes of research is also a necessary condition of expanding the share of jobs on the tenure track.

Of course, today our colleges and universities are going in the opposite (and I believe wrong) direction. Though the MLA houses a full spectrum of essential disciplines, our colleges and universities do not treat them as essential. Funding cuts and program closures are reducing language competency at yet another moment when such competency is desperately needed. The “global English”

nalizing an interest in a multilingual society that fits a massively multilingual planet by funding the federal government’s small Title VI and Fulbright-Hays budget, Congress cut it from \$125.9 million in 2010 to \$75.8 million the following year. In 2022 it had increased a bit to \$81.6 million, still well below its 2010 level.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* cover the cuts to humanities programs that have become routine. The problem in all such cases I’ve seen is this: a review of the intellectual and social costs of such cuts never happens, although these costs likely exceed the small savings achieved, and by a wide margin.

Were budget savings the only factor, administrators would save more by cutting fields that conduct sponsored research, which universities must subsidize with internal funds, or by cutting

This fiction of marginality has many familiar sources. Among the most important is one that we often ignore: our nearly nonexistent humanities research infrastructure. Humanities scholars produce abundant and often strikingly original research that has changed US culture. But we lack the material conditions to conduct and circulate research results at the scale established by the most prominent academic disciplines, nearly all of them in STEM.

The “crisis of the humanities” should be seen as a funding crisis. Exhibit A is federal research funding, which sets the national standard. In fiscal year 2022, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) had an overall budget of \$180 million, up \$12.5 million from the year before. Of that previous year’s total, \$167.5 million, under \$20 million, or a bit more than ten percent of its budget, went to research. Most of the rest was spent on wholly worthwhile public programs and on state regranting programs of various kinds. And yet the very small share allotted to basic humanities research signals that sponsoring research is not the main activity of the federal government’s only agency dedicated to the humanities.

In contrast, research results and their socioeconomic effects are the entire rationale for the much larger budgets of other federal agencies. The National Institute for Standards and Technology in the Department of Commerce, originally focused on measurement issues, has a 2022 budget of \$1.5 billion. The National Science Foundation (NSF) is spending \$7.16 billion on research in fiscal year 2022 out of a total budget of \$8.84 bil-

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assumption of the immediate post–Cold War period—that the whole world would speak to us in English—has been tossed out as both unworkable and neocolonial. And yet tenure-track hires in the MLA *Job List* category Languages Other Than English are in steady decline. Instead of sig-

other administrators. But college officials know that humanities research and teaching are seen as marginal to the economy, making it easier to cut the humanities than to fund them to teach all the students who need their knowledge and do all the research that needs doing.

lion that includes a billion dollars for STEM education. The National Institutes of Health budget is \$41.2 billion for 2022; the Office of the Director’s budget alone, at \$2.6 billion, is over 100 times larger than the NEH’s research budget. In total the federal government will spend about \$170 billion on its research agencies in fiscal year 2022. Assuming eighty percent of that goes directly to research, the NEH’s research programs budget is 0.015% of the federal total—which rounds to zero.

An essential piece of research infrastructure is funding data. The NSF administers detailed national surveys and

search continuously visible to politicians, research directors, and everyone else interested in the subject. Nothing like this exists for the arts, literature, or sociocultural fields: to the contrary, when the Congressional Research Service’s report “Federal Research and Development (R&D) Funding: FY2022” presents budgets for fourteen research agencies at the federal level, it leaves the NEH and the NEA off the list (4 [table 1]). Our crisis of funding support is deepened by its invisibility.

There is massive room for increases in humanities research funding in every type of institution. Increasing that fund-

For example, a recent report by British lung health associations noted, “Despite . . . being the third biggest cause of death in the UK, only 2% of publicly funded research is spent on lung conditions” (Gregory). They demanded improvements.

This is the time for us to do the same. The MLA should rally other humanities organizations to survey the research funding landscape and collect funding data, publish and circulate those data, and set collective targets for increases. Moving up to two percent of federal research-and-development funding for humanities fields would have a transformative effect on our disciplines.

The future of humanities scholarship can be much better than its present. But this future must be funded.

Christopher John Newfield

“The study of literature and language isn’t dying of declining interest or public insistence. It’s being quietly smothered by underfunding.”

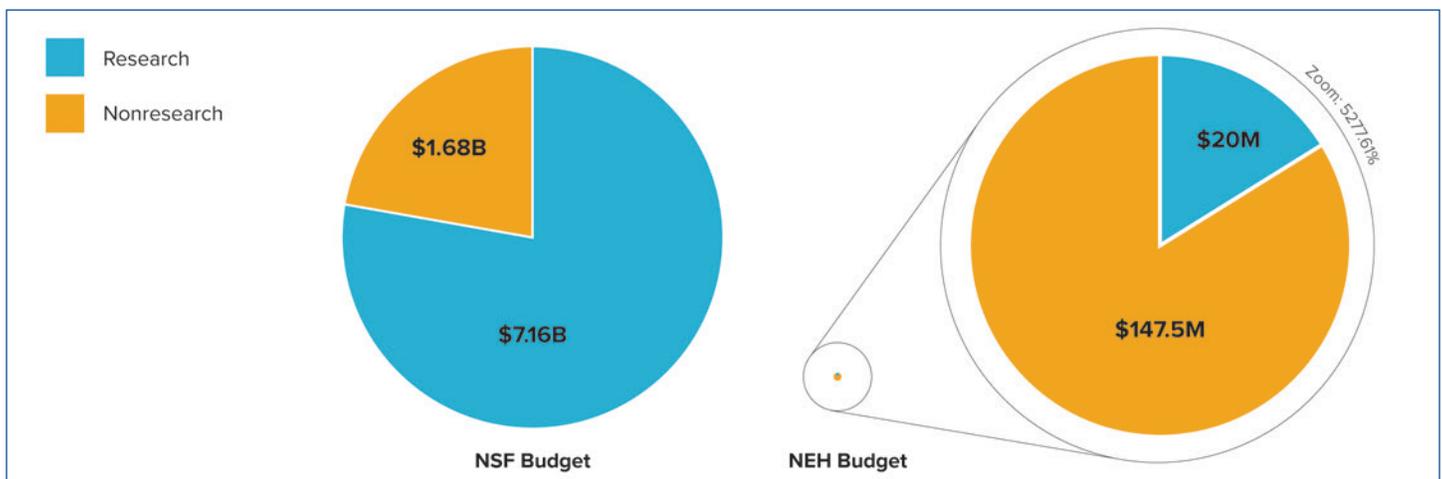
launches an armada of reports and tables, updated at least annually, all bearing on the issue of “The State of U.S. Science and Engineering” in a given year. Funding is broken out by university, by source, by discipline, and by many other factors. This makes the ups and downs and topic shifts in STEM re-

search would increase the public credibility and the social impact of our work. The study of literature and language isn’t dying of declining interest or public insistence. It’s being quietly smothered by underfunding.

All fields face this problem at one time or another, and many decide to fight it.

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Get Connected with *MLA Commons*

My name is Anatole Shukla, and I'm a recent graduate of Swarthmore College. Since March, I have been with the MLA's office of scholarly communication as an assistant publications coordinator. As a lifelong student of languages and literature, I am grateful for the opportunity to work with so many people who are passionate about their work and who advocate for the importance of the humanities. I always look forward to learning more about the world of humanities scholarship and exploring ways to encourage connections.

At the MLA, part of my work involves creating engagement strategies for *MLA Commons* (mla.hcommons.org), an online network on *Humanities Commons* where MLA members can share their work and connect with fellow members.

WHAT IS THE COMMONS?

MLA Commons currently serves a variety of roles for the MLA and its members. Since the *Commons* launched in 2012, the network has seen the development of over 400 sites and blogs, as well as the creation of over 450 groups and forums. The group for last year's MLA convention in Washington, DC, attracted more than 1,500 MLA members and included discussion threads from convention panelists and attendees. We're looking for ways to enhance the upcoming convention in San Francisco and keep the many rich conversations sure to take place there going throughout the year.

MLA Commons users have uploaded 2,500 items on *CORE*, a nonprofit repository designed by and for scholars of the humanities to increase the visibility of their work. On *CORE*, *MLA Commons*

members can upload scholarly materials ranging from maps and podcast episodes to dissertations. Works uploaded to *CORE* automatically receive a DOI (digital object identifier), get tagged with keywords, and can be easily shared with MLA forums and other groups—meaning that work in *CORE* is not only preserved but also highly discoverable by your colleagues.

MLA Commons is a versatile platform that offers scholars a nonprofit, open-source home for their online presences. Scholars have created sites to develop and promote new volumes as well as to share resources and advice for job seekers. Using the platform's sites feature, for example, you could use the Learning Space theme to develop a home page for your course or to share information about an upcoming conference. You can also create a group that shares abstracts for a conference or a group that serves as a dedicated space for an online writing group. In addition, members can join any MLA forum group and participate in conversations over shared academic and professional interests.

WHAT'S IN STORE

In the coming months, we will continue to develop these engagement efforts, reaching out to committees and forums so that we can better understand MLA members' view and usage of *MLA Commons*. We aim to use this information to create more resources for members, in-

cluding training guides and videos, and to make the network more easily navigable. In the near future, we also anticipate a refresh of the *MLA Commons* home page.

We plan on revitalizing the *Wire*, the site for *Commons* news, to showcase MLA members' accomplishments on and off *MLA Commons*. We will also create a regular email newsletter to share these profiles more widely. In addition to showcasing how MLA members are using the *Commons*, the *Wire* will bring back a popular feature that allows members to self-report professional accomplishments.

We will also work with forums and groups to host asynchronous week-long events that encourage MLA members to upload materials to the *CORE* repository and that spark conversation to strengthen connections between group and forum members. The model for these events builds on the successful "deposit party" of the Teaching Remotely Group, whose members, over the course of a week in July 2021, shared materials relating to instruction, including conference papers and syllabi for remote courses.

The MLA welcomes all feedback on *MLA Commons*. If you have helpful ideas on how to use the network, please write to us at mla@hcommons.org. We look forward to sharing these initiatives with you in the near future and to watching the growth and direction of *MLA Commons*!

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What You Need to Know about Educational Gag Orders

On 21 June 2022, the MLA's executive director, Paula Krebs, hosted a conversation with Jeremy C. Young, senior manager of free expression and education at PEN America, and Aaron Nisenson, senior counsel with the American Association of University Professors, about legislative threats to academic freedom and what faculty members can do to fight back. Excerpts from their conversation appear below. You can view a recording of the conversation and recordings of other MLA webinars at webinars.mla.org.

JEREMY YOUNG: PEN America is tracking book bans and found an almost 1000% increase in book bans in this past year [from] previous years.

AARON NISENSEN: [T]his is one of the first big attempts to have politicians start to dictate what is taught in the classroom. And that is obviously a supreme and almost existential threat to academic freedom. One of the core functions of all of this is to limit discussions about race and racism in our country and to stop the consideration of it in public education and public universities and in private [institutions of education] as well. When you start saying there are things you cannot discuss openly on a college campus, then we are really undermining one of the core principles—and tenets and benefits—of higher education, and that is a lot of what is happening behind this legislation.

JY: Over eighty percent of Americans oppose book bans across the country. The American Historical Association had a study last year that asked people, “Do you think that we should teach uncomfortable truths about race and slavery in the United States even if it makes some students uncomfortable?” Seventy-six percent of people said yes, including seventy-four percent of Re-

publicans. So the question we have to ask is not, “Why do most people think it’s OK to ban this stuff?” It’s more, “Why are more people not up in arms about it since they don’t support it?” To me the key is raising the salience of the issue for people who agree that it’s wrong to restrict what teachers are teaching and



what students are reading and learning. and they should vote based on this, and they should act based on this.

AN: One of the things we have been actively looking for is faculty members who have been directed not to teach certain material, and that’s necessary for legal reasons. Examples can be very powerful Stories are extremely powerful. Hearing from faculty members, not just in a “I am faculty member and it’s my academic freedom” but in a “This is what we teach and this is why it’s important. And this is why we should not be stopped from teaching.” It’s probably the most effective thing faculty members can do.

JY: One of the most important things that faculty members can do is not to react as a teacher but to react as a citizen. There is not a lot of advocacy going on against these bills on the grass-roots level. Faculty members are well-written, well-spoken people who have very few professional restrictions on what they can say as private citizens on matters of public concern. Write a letter to the editor, write an op-ed in your local paper, show up at a hearing and testify. Faculty members can be on the front lines of this as citizens. I think the main question people have who are watching this is, “What do I do? How do I respond to this?” Our argument

at PEN America is that there are essentially three capacities in which you can respond as a faculty member:

- One is as a citizen. Be an active citizen.
- Two is as a teacher, where the most important thing you can do is not do the censors’ work for them, not overinterpret these laws.
- And the third is through administrative channels at the university. Learn how your university works and find the levers you can push.

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**Join Us in San Francisco
for the 2023 MLA Convention
5–8 January 2023**

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