

Sharing Strategies in San Francisco

What students learn in our classes includes a lot more than the works on the syllabus, the “content.” They are learning Tennyson or Jemisin or Madame de Tencin, to be sure, but in doing that they are also learning skills, values, and perspectives that will serve them for the rest of their lives. It is those skills, values, and perspectives we should be highlighting for them. Their grandparents are going to ask them what use that French major is if they don’t intend to teach French, and it’s up to us to give them the answers. Are you teaching them how to do research, how to synthesize information, how to ask iterative questions, how to evaluate sources, how to work in groups, construct an argument, give formative



feedback? If so, do they know that’s what they’ve learned, and can they demonstrate it—to a grandparent or a job interviewer?

The question of making connections between humanities coursework and careers is a tricky one, of course. Ours are not vocational majors, nor should they be. But neither are the things students learn in our classes divorced from the realities of work and life. At a program I ran in New England that looked at the connections between humanities coursework and careers, faculty members were surprised to discover—when they asked—that students could identify tons of skills they’d learned in their language classes that went beyond language comprehension; they could talk about ways

their values had shifted as a result of work they did in their English classes; and they were really articulate about what new perspectives they’d gained in their humanities classes and how much smarter they felt in their reading of the world around them as a result.

Connecting our courses and our majors to life beyond graduation will be essential to the future of our disciplines because the future of our disciplines lies in our ability to attract, retain, and graduate students who need to see the utility of their course of study. HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions are already doing their part, as are many community colleges, by inviting in and welcoming students of color, Pell Grant recipients, and first-generation college

students and giving them ways to understand that a passion for language and literature can lead to a great life, including great work.

Part of the job of a disciplinary association is to share the strategies of those who are successful. That’s what the MLA does through MLA Academic Program Services and its summer seminars for department leaders, and that’s what we do in our publications and webinars and at our annual convention. This coming January, we are super excited to meet in person in San Francisco, and thousands of your colleagues have already registered to reconvene in person, safely, after so long.

I want to invite you to the MLA’s 2023 Annual Convention in San Francisco for all the usual reasons: to present your research, to hear the latest work in your field and perhaps in some brand-new

fields, to reconnect with old colleagues and friends. And I also want to invite you to the convention to take advantage of the many sessions about the profession itself. These sessions—addressing enrollments, pedagogy, grants, advocacy, and much more—go beyond the smaller focus of your subdiscipline’s conference. They address questions of working conditions and of equity and of community-college transfer and of journal editing. At the convention, you can see yourself as a leader, as a worker, as a researcher, and as a teacher. You can see your friends, see a ton of new books in the exhibit hall, and see fabulous San Francisco. We’ll see you there!

Paula M. Krebs



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

The Perpetual Job Crisis Needs a National Strategy

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

YOU MIGHT KNOW THIS PERSON:

they are majoring in biology, political science, or economics, but a couple of great courses convince them to shift to English, writing, or East Asian studies. A professor tells them they could and should apply to doctoral programs. They do, and are admitted to at least one they like. They get a teaching package—and also a letter that says, “It is our duty to tell you that, in spite of the value of literary study, programs like ours face a declining number of permanent university jobs. We have just made you an offer; we advise you to consider rejecting it.”

I got one of those letters. I’d decided that literary criticism unveiled mysteries of consciousness that my STEM curriculum did not. I applied to get a PhD, was

erary scholars and is doing the same to the next.

There are always some jobs, but never nearly enough: every member of every MLA field is aware of the problem and is concerned. And yet after fifty years of employment “crisis,” we have no national policy specifically focused on increasing the number of tenure-track academic jobs.

We have tried to respond. We have shrunk our PhD programs and have encouraged our remaining students to consider nonacademic work. The shrinkage has not ended job shortfalls and has arguably encouraged them by showing we can always “do more with less.” Alt-ac policy looks for help in sectors that are often as precarious as our own. Graduate

Here are a few numbers on the problem. Between 1973 and 2008, the MLA *Job List* advertised 1,000 to 2,000 jobs per year in each of its two main categories of English and Languages Other Than English (LOTE). (Composition, rhetoric, and writing are listed under English.)

After the financial crisis of 2008, the *Job List* recovered somewhat; in 2011–12, the totals hit 1,235 in English and 1,128 in LOTE. But since that year, listings have fallen steadily. They have dropped through the previous floor of 1,000 jobs per year, ending at 728 and 683 in 2019–20, before the COVID-19 pandemic crushed them further. The decline of the 2010s is particularly alarming because it began from a valley rather than a peak.

The ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track jobs also got worse. Until the financial crisis, MLA English jobs were 75%–80% tenure-track; LOTE jobs were 60%–65% tenure-track. In 2019–20, those ratios were 55% and 43% tenure-track, respectively. The *Job List* showed 360 and 275 tenure-track jobs in English and LOTE, for a total of 635 tenure-track jobs that year. I don’t need to detail the suffering of MLA job candidates signaled by those numbers.

Meanwhile, PhD completions held fairly steady at around 1,500 per year in English and 500 per year in LOTE, or about 2,000 “MLA” doctorates per year. Between 1998 and 2008 there were more jobs than degrees. Since then, there have been more degrees than jobs.

Before anyone says, “So, we need to cut our doctoral output by another two-thirds to match current demand,” let’s

“The ‘job crisis’—the changing but permanent shortage of tenure-track jobs—has molded literary studies for half a century.”

admitted, got the warning letter, and treated it like the skull-and-crossbones notice on a cigarette pack. I lit up.

I mention this because that letter was written forty years ago. The job market in literary studies had collapsed ten years before that. The “job crisis”—the changing but permanent shortage of tenure-track jobs—has molded literary studies for half a century. It has damaged the careers of several generations of lit-

erary students have struggled to improve their working conditions through unionization campaigns across the country but obviously shouldn’t be asked to fix the overall job picture.

Faculty members have helped individual job candidates, but we have not fought a national campaign to get the higher ed sector to hire the right number of literary and language scholars with the right proportions of tenure.

look at the context. It shows that we must help identify and set demand rather than continue to adapt to it.

First, we are producing PhDs at a replacement rate at best. The United States has 1.3 million postsecondary instructors (“Postsecondary Teachers”), of which 58,480 are in English (“25-1123: English Language and Literature Teachers”) and 19,640 are in LOTE (“25-1124: Foreign Language and Literature Teachers”). Assuming that retirements run at 2.5% per year, academia needs to hire 1,462 PhDs just to replace English retirees, with deaths and career changes adding to that total. The same holds for LOTE: 500 PhDs a year matches an estimated annual retirement loss of 491. Two thousand MLA PhDs per year is a minimum number that keeps the profession’s lights on. These are also excessively cheap jobs: there should be 2,000 tenure-track posts, but only half actually are.

Second, this minimal hiring damages the intellectual health of our disciplines. The United States has around 4,300 higher education institutions. In the 2019–20 *Job List*, they collectively advertised the following numbers of tenure-track assistant professor positions: 11 in Arabic, 10 in Russian, 9 in Chinese, 3 in Korean, and 1 in Hebrew. “Big” European languages got 48, 22, and 106 posts (French, German, and Spanish). How about languages with ancient and dynamic cultures and many speakers in the United States—Persian, Vietnamese, Hindi, Urdu, Hausa, Xhosa? They share a total of 12 listings in “other languages.” These microscopic figures mark a de facto policy rejection of language competency and global scholarship outside of a tiny elite. They should inspire outrage and action, not consent to further PhD cuts.

Third, MLA job declines should not be traced directly to declines in undergraduate majoring and then naturalized as a response to market forces. The declines are real: the degree share of all humanities fields combined has fallen from 12% to 10.2% since 1987, for a decline of 15%. English majoring is down 28% from

its late 2000s peak; LOTE is down 26% (“Indicator II-03C”). But job declines exceeded major declines by 50%. Enrollment declines were a fraction of major declines—about one-third of major declines in the last published MLA survey of LOTE enrollments (Looney and Lusin). Enrollments better reflect actual teaching workloads. Hidden behind headline numbers of declining majors is a reality on many campuses of increasing workloads for the remaining literature and

the university—while implying that their main time is past, or that they are floundering, or that they are in some ways a deficient form of knowledge in the age of data science, and that students are rational to major elsewhere. We hear many variations on a regretful discourse of our autumnal passing.

This discourse translates into material administrative nonsupport for tenure-track instruction and internally funded research in literature, writing, and

“But these external factors have been made more toxic by an internal one: academic administrators’ policy of strategic ambiguity toward the value of majoring in literature and languages.”

language workforce. This threatens the quality of our teaching and the future of our scholarship.

Many factors have paralyzed our collective response to the fifty-year crisis. I want to close by encouraging us to break free of one particular internal factor, even as we continue to address external ones.

External factors include the culture wars’ renewed smearing of central MLA practices like teaching the literatures of slavery or abolition or queer sexualities or migration or Islam or even the Spanish language. They include a debt crisis that inhibits students’ ability to take risks on their true-love subjects that won’t maximize future income. But these external factors have been made more toxic by an internal one: academic administrators’ policy of strategic ambiguity toward the value of majoring in literature and languages.

Everyone from presidents to advisers agrees that the humanities are central to

language. It is not the only—but it is the immediate—cause of the new crash in job numbers and the new wave of adjunctification. This discourse is simply wrong about the intellectual, personal, and social value of research and teaching in MLA fields that will be central to building a future we’d like to inhabit, and yet it is steadily undermining that teaching and research.

We can’t by ourselves end the culture wars or reverse decades of perverse debt-based funding policy. But we can consult systematically with each other about the elimination of tenure-track positions and the downsizing or closure of programs in our fields. We can contest every single retreat from and underselling of the study of literature and languages at the thousands of locations where that occurs. We can develop alternative policies that would work better for our students, our societies, and our job seekers.

(continued on p. 4)

“. . . this minimal hiring damages the intellectual health of our disciplines.”

(continued from p. 3)

I propose the following steps to pursue over the next five to seven years:

- Develop a national information system for the state of the profession. This will mean calculating the strength of all subfields by type of appointment. We will be able to adapt the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) to our disciplines, once it is restarted through the CHIPS Act. This will also mean creating a map of the research-funding terrain. We could use data from an expansion of the existing National Science Foundation survey for research-and-development funding.
- Develop a national assessment of teaching and research needs in all subfields. This would enable us to describe our diverse scholarly goals while deriving budget requirements from these goals—instead of cutting these goals to fit preset budgets.
- Establish and affirm the principle of hiring 100% of our PhD output, with 75% of those on the tenure-track (following proposed federal legislation). We have cut our doctoral programs to the bone and have no surplus PhD holders. We must keep a running tab on “hiring gaps” and create a narrative of insufficient hiring that communicates teaching and research needs.

Our profession has never built a national infrastructure like this, and it won't be easy. But doing so can give us a policy visibility and weight that will make chronic underhiring more difficult and that will enable a process of rebuilding.

Christopher John Newfield

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Paula M. Krebs, Executive Director

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Labor, Advocacy, Organizing

Many current conversations around labor in the academy seek to make visible forms of historically undervalued work and call attention to systemic issues of inequity, contingency, and eroding trust. In each of these eight sessions taking place at the 2023 convention, speakers discuss advocacy, service, and organizing in the academic workplace.

28. ENGLISH PROFESSORS AND ACADEMIC UNION LEADERSHIP: THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Thursday, 5 January, 12:00 noon–1:15 p.m.

In Canada most university faculty members belong to unions, unlike in the United States, where unionization is much less prevalent. Scholars of literature have played an outsized role in the leadership of the Canadian academic union movement. Panelists aim for a pragmatic exchange about the strength of unionization as a strategy to address deteriorating working conditions based on Canadian experience and the role for literature scholars in the academic labor movement.

66. CONTINGENT FACULTY MEMBERS, LABOR EQUITY, AND THE COMMON READ IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

Thursday, 5 January, 1:45–3:00 p.m.

Panelists explore the working conditions of contingent faculty members who are required to integrate common read selections into first-year writing courses by asking how contingent instructors advocate for themselves and their students, how the labor of contingent faculty members is made visible through these programs, and which institutional supports have advanced equity and visibility of contingent faculty labor on university campuses.

231. CONTINGENT FACULTY MATTERS AND THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Friday, 6 January, 10:15–11:30 a.m.

Panelists examine approaches addressing ongoing inequities toward and contributions of contingent faculty members in English departments, focusing on stabilization of contracts, including benefits; participation in governance; teaching assignments across curricula, including writing, general education, and introductory courses, as well as advanced courses mentoring; nonteaching employment; and advocacy at school, university, and professional levels.

255. NEW THEORIES OF ACADEMIC LABOR

Friday, 6 January, 12:00 noon–1:15 p.m.

This session explores recent developments in the study of academic labor in the humanities. Presentations will investigate higher education as a producer of inequity, academic labor, academic freedom and unionism, first-year writing and the ethics of care, and the work of humanists beyond the university.

328. WOMEN AT WORK: FEMINIST ADMINISTRATION DURING HARD TIMES

Friday, 6 January, 3:30–4:45 p.m.

Women who hold leadership roles, whether as chairs, deans, or heads, discuss the ways feminist principles, activism, and collaboration make a difference in administration. Drawing on individual experience and expertise, speakers examine key questions about the function of diversity in leadership, strategic advocacy for shared governance while facing challenges ranging from COVID to legislatures, and effective planning for the future of the humanities.

352. GRADUATE UNION ORGANIZING AND SCHOLARSHIP

Friday, 6 January, 3:30–4:45 p.m.

The number of graduate workers in unions has doubled in the last twenty years, and union activity is flourishing. Graduate workers from a diverse set of universities discuss the reciprocity between day-to-day labor organizing and literary scholarship. Does organizing our workplace help us become better scholars? And can close reading poetry help us better bargain for health care?

622. ACADEMIC LABOR JUSTICE: HOW ADJUNCTIFICATION HURTS US ALL AND HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

Saturday, 7 January, 5:15–6:30 p.m.

Labor casualization has eroded higher education, creating a crisis that affects all academic workers. Contingency must be actively countered by everyone. Speakers at the forefront of the growing push for change share strategies for advocacy across roles (graduate students, adjuncts, tenure-stream faculty members, and more), ideas for individual and collective action, lessons learned from union organizing and bargaining, and resources for support.

623. CHANGING THE TERMS OF SERVICE: RETHINKING WHAT COUNTS AS INTELLECTUAL LABOR

Saturday, 7 January, 5:15–6:30 p.m.

Field-shaping intellectual work (peer and tenure review, editing, mentoring, hiring, curriculum development, administration, labor organizing) is undervalued as it operates outside spaces associated with research. Who is expected to do what kinds of service and whose scholarship flourishes, or not, as a result? Might faculty and program leaders balance aspects of faculty work by rethinking the terms of service, honoring its equivalent power?



Find more curated session lists for the 2023 MLA Annual Convention in the online program at mla23.org.

Snapshot: Language Study in Fall 2020

Between 2016 and 2020, total enrollments (undergraduate and graduate) in languages other than English dropped by 15.4%, according to the MLA's sample survey of enrollments in fall 2020.

Since 1958, the MLA has gathered and analyzed data on undergraduate and graduate course enrollments in languages other than English in United States colleges and universities. Because of the pandemic, the MLA postponed its full language enrollment census to fall 2021. But to get a sense of the state of language enrollments in the first year of the pandemic, we conducted a sample survey—a “snapshot”—of enrollments in fall 2020. There were 1,308 institutions in the snapshot compared with 2,547 institutions included in the previous census, conducted in 2016. Enrollment figures for 2020 were gathered from institutional websites. We included in the snapshot

only those institutions for which we had enrollments for both 2016 and 2020.

It is important to note that enrollments represent course enrollments and not students.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The 15.4% decline was the largest decrease in enrollments we've seen since the beginning of the census. Language enrollments had been steadily increasing between 1995 and 2009, when language enrollments peaked at 1,673,566, but have seen declines since 2009.

Spanish and French still lead as the two most studied languages (see fig. 1). American Sign Language continues to be third, having displaced German in 2013. In 2020, overall language enrollments showed great variability, from a 25.4% increase in Korean to a 32.2% decrease

in German, reflecting greater upheaval in enrollments than in previous years. Three of the fifteen most commonly taught languages in 2016 showed gains in enrollments in 2020: in addition to Korean, they are American Sign Language (4.6%) and Biblical Hebrew (10.3%). The aggregated less commonly taught languages also grew, showing a gain of 12.4%.

Notably among the less commonly taught languages, Hawai'ian did very well, increasing 24.1% to above 2,000 enrollments and becoming the first Indigenous language among the fifteen most commonly taught languages.

Although language enrollments dropped at a higher rate at two-year institutions than at four-year institutions, declines in language enrollments at two-year institutions mirrored declines in overall enrollments at these schools. At two-year institutions, language enroll-

Language	2016	2020	#Change	%Change
Spanish	464,966	394,170	-70,796	-15.2%
French	115,032	89,321	-25,711	-22.4%
American Sign Language (ASL)	65,595	68,590	2,995	4.6%
Japanese	46,936	43,268	-3,668	-7.8%
German	55,785	37,819	-17,966	-32.2%
Chinese	33,561	26,528	-7,033	-21.0%
Italian	34,549	26,116	-8,433	-24.4%
Arabic (all)	20,876	15,167	-5,709	-27.3%
Latin	16,476	12,955	-3,521	-21.4%
Korean	9,033	11,323	2,290	25.4%
Russian	13,740	10,434	-3,306	-24.1%
Greek, Ancient (all)	5,640	5,468	-172	-3.0%
Portuguese	6,288	5,105	-1,183	-18.8%
Hebrew, Modern	2,639	2,329	-310	-11.7%
Hawai'ian	1,696	2,104	408	24.1%
Hebrew, Biblical (all)	1,828	2,017	189	10.3%
All Languages	912,829	772,150	-140,679	-15.4%

FIGURE 1. Commonly Taught Languages in Order of 2020 Enrollments

ments dropped 17.2% between 2016 and 2020, compared with a 15.7% decline in overall student enrollments for these institutions reported by the National Student Clearinghouse (fig. 2). In contrast, language enrollments at four-year public and private nonprofit institutions decreased disproportionately, declining by 15.0% while overall student enrollments declined by only 0.4%. Looking at the entire picture, the 15.4% decline in language enrollments at all institutions far exceeded the 5.4% drop in overall student enrollments.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The snapshot figures represent language enrollments at the height of the pandemic. The MLA’s full census of lan-

guage enrollments covering fall 2021 is currently ongoing, and we anticipate having a better picture of how recent enrollment numbers fit into longer-term patterns.

For ideas about how to support language study on your campus, we encourage you to view the models included in *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report* (www.mla.org/Enrollment-Report). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) also has a wealth of materials on the importance of language study at www.leadwithlanguages.org. And use these *ADFL Bulletin* articles when talking with students and advocating for

your program with administrators (log-in needed):

Bousquet, Gilles, et al. “Career Trajectories of World Language Graduates: A *LinkedIn* Perspective.” *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2019, pp. 27–42, <https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.45.2.27>.

Duggan, Anne E., and Elena Past. “A (Relatively) Successful Campaign to Protect the Foreign Language Requirement.” *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 123–33, <https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.46.1.123>.

Wurst, Karin. “Foreign Languages Study as Advanced Competencies and Career Preparation.” *ADFL Bulletin*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2021, pp. 79–92, <https://doi.org/10.1632/adfl.46.2.79>.

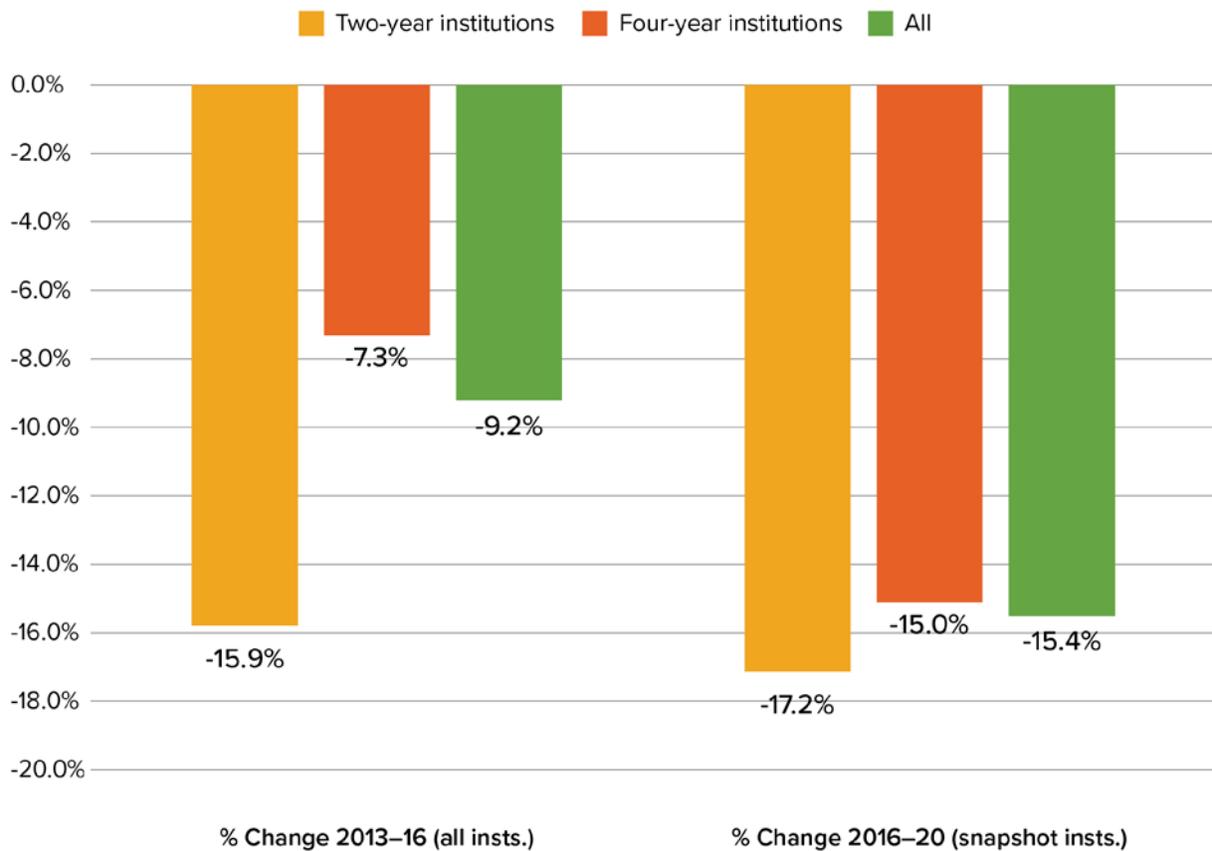


FIGURE 2. How Enrollments Changed in 2016–20

Sources: “Table 1: Estimated National Enrollment by Sector” (*Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Fall 2016*; National Student Clearinghouse, 2016, p. 3, ncesresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2016.pdf); “Table 1: Estimated National Enrollment by Institutional Sector: 2018 to 2020” (*Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Fall 2020*; National Student Clearinghouse, 2020, p. 4, ncesresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf).

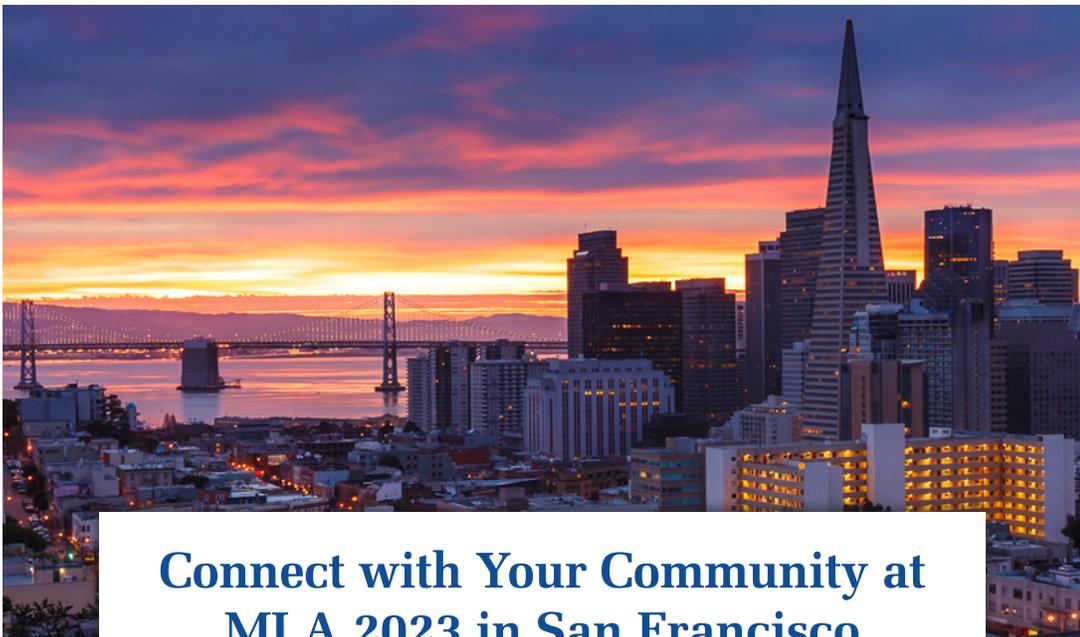


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IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 Sharing Strategies in San Francisco
- 2 President's Column: The Perpetual Job Crisis Needs a National Strategy
- 5 Labor, Advocacy, Organizing
- 6 Snapshot: Language Study in Fall 2020