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MLA Newsletter



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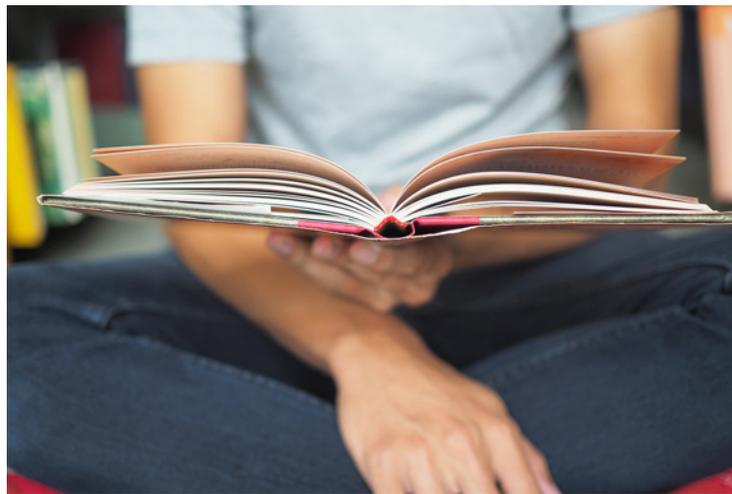
Acknowledging Humanities Expertise

The humanities are not the arts. You don't need to be reminded of this, but lots of other folks do—especially, sometimes, people who want to do interdisciplinary work to bring STEM fields into conversation with other parts of campus.

Lots of campuses have The Chemistry of Color or The Physics of Music courses. When I went to the 2018 Washington, DC, launch of the report *The Integration of the Humanities and Arts with Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Higher Education: Branches from the Same Tree*, I was struck by the poster presentations, which included projects that featured dance, music, art, and poetry. But not a single one of them included the humanities. Nothing analytical, critical, or interpretive. When “arts and humanities” is the framework being used, the humanities tend to disappear. It's easier to talk about the arts: everyone knows what music or poetry is. Humanists are trained in analysis and interpretation; they are not trained in aesthetic production. Sometimes it's harder to be concrete in talking about philosophy or literary criticism. But what philosophers and literary critics do is just as essential as what musicians or poets do: they enable us to interpret the world around us and to posit a better one.

So what I want to point out is the specific value of integrating humanities into science and engineering by rec-

ognizing the expertise of humanities practitioners. That expertise is in visual analysis (art history), ethics and problem-solving (philosophy), close reading and analysis (literary criticism), and interpretation of the past (history). The doctor who likes reading novels is probably not the right person to be teaching the narrative-medicine course when you



have experts in narrative theory on your campus. The most successful pedagogical interdisciplinary collaborations on the campus where I used to teach were ones that acknowledged expertise on all sides—that humanities majors brought expertise to computer science or biology classes that complemented the expertise of the CS or bio majors in the class. Close reading, cultural competency, attention to language and the ability to build an argument—these are the tools of humanists, and they partner very well with science and tech, especially in the burgeoning fields of environ-

mental humanities, health humanities, and critical technology studies.

In research as well as teaching, the humanities are valuable for more than providing a new perspective to STEM practitioners. STEM researchers achieve the best interdisciplinary work not when they apply a humanistic lens themselves but when they partner with those trained in humanities disciplines. I think, for example, of our fellow MLA member Jay Clayton, whose team of humanists at Vanderbilt University's Get PreCiSe Center for Genetic Privacy and Identity in Community Settings analyzes cultural treatments of genetics. How do novels, films, poems, and other cultural expressions address the moral and ethical consequences of developments in genetics, and what do those cultural texts tell us

about our society's changing sense of itself? How do such texts shape social attitudes?

These are humanities questions that call for humanities methodologies and humanities expertise. So perhaps the next step is for us to get bolder about advocating for the importance—to science and technology, certainly, but also to business and politics and everything else—of interpretation, analysis, critique, and the other tools of the humanist.

Paula M. Krebs



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Post-Automated Luxury Criticism

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

OUR PROFESSION'S PERPETUAL glory is the work done by our hundred thousand practitioners in classrooms and offices across the country and in every type of institution, often with little security, acknowledgment, or material support. Your work had additional care labor layered on during the pandemic, and this labor has not been removed. You've knocked yourself out to maintain educational quality in a year summarized by the headline "My College Students Are Not OK" (Malesic).

So the first thing I would like to do is honor and thank each and every one of you for the combination of brilliance, courage, and sheer determination you brought to the job this year, when full relief did not materialize. I wish I could snap

single mode of engagement. You've continued difficult teaching, but you've also worked overtime to sustain a flood of remarkable scholarship, whose range and creativity is as good or better than at any time I can remember. You've also continued to build deep relationships with the communities in which our colleges are embedded.

And many of you have intensified your relationships with your institution by going on strike, in New York and California and places in between. Graduate student employees and contingent faculty members have long been at the forefront of the fight for decent teaching and learning conditions at their colleges and universities. They need more help from tenured faculty members.

view, *Aeon*, *Full Stop*, *Literary Hub*, *Public Books*, *n+1*, among many others, where academic research meets nonacademic or postacademic readers. Another is the reciprocal model of public engagement, in which community-defined problems lead to the pooling of academic and nonacademic expertise. All the signs this year point toward a profession that understands these multiple and interactive modes of knowledge creation. These modes again raise the question of how they can receive proper support.

Which brings me to my favorite topic—support, and the need for support to take the form of structure. We have so much to celebrate at the end of 2022, starting with your remarkable work and inexhaustible inventiveness. And yet, now facing 2023, it's clear we'll need to spend the rest of the decade building, for the first time, a national structure that properly supports mid-twenty-first-century criticism.

Such a structure would do some essential things we can't do now. First, it would visualize the components of our profession as a whole. How does employment status vary by subfield, such as composition or language instruction, and by institutional type? Where is racial parity improving, and where is it not? Who allocates funding to humanities research and instructional development, how is this done, and to what extent are various subfields supported? What share of institutional funds do colleges and universities spend supporting scholarship in MLA disciplines? What contribution do humanities centers make? What is happening with national doctoral fel-

“And yet, now facing 2023, it's clear we'll need to spend the rest of the decade building, for the first time, a national structure that properly supports mid-twenty-first-century criticism.”

my fingers and make the media finally see your powers of experimentation and improvisation. I'd like to snap my other fingers to help them see the poor conditions under which you often work—and to help them see the need to improve those conditions.

I'm impressed too by the profession's collective refusal to hunker down into a

We are familiar with the three classic modes of teaching, research, and service, to which must be added the “humanities industries” with which we would like to improve relations. These modes are increasingly interactive and reciprocal. One hybrid mode is advanced public writing as reinvented in the past decade by the *LA Review of Books*, *Boston Re-*

lowship support? STEM disciplines have comprehensive, annual answers to such questions that their practitioners use for nonstop advocacy; literature and language fields need the same.

Second, a national humanities structure would allow cooperation among initiatives taking place in the country's hundreds of educational jurisdictions. Teaching, scholarship, and public engagement need to interact and also retain healthy, independent bases. For example, communities have learned that they cannot count on local universities to teach and research the issues uppermost in their minds. At the same time, forty years of cultural wars have taught academics that they cannot entrust their research questions to the goodwill of most communities. Once we know the relative proportions of funding, the distribution of topics and methods, and much more, we can have our first policy discussion about how our various academic and nonacademic modes can avoid competing with one another for the same limited funds and pools of official approval.

Third, a national humanities structure would allow us to set concrete goals for teaching and research health, to be pursued over time. High-cost disciplines focus relentlessly on sustaining their material conditions; disciplines that do not will fall behind.

Fourth, this structure would support a collaboration across multiple learned societies, associations, and foundations. The MLA can't develop national policy on its own and must think about the needs of literature and language scholars in relation to the rest of the humanities disciplines.

Only a national support structure can create solidarity and unification in a fragmented and hierarchical discipline. Only a large-scale approach will allow us to make progress on the existential issues we face.

We need to achieve racial parity within our disciplines. A new study in *Nature Human Behaviour* shows that faculty diversity increased from 2013 to

2020 by 0.23% per year—at this rate, it will never catch up to be representative of national demographics, even if we wait several more centuries. Contesting the “leaky pipeline” theory that focuses on retaining students and faculty members of color one institution at a time, the study further finds that, during those same years, “45,309 people from underrepresented groups who had PhDs granted by US higher education institutions were not hired into tenure-track

“High-cost disciplines focus relentlessly on sustaining their material conditions; disciplines that do not will fall behind.”

positions” (Matias et al.). Our profession should hire the PhDs that already exist (and de-emphasize alt-ac efforts to get other sectors to hire them). Only a national structure can build the necessary funding to do this and coordinate to avoid poaching one another's favored individuals, which is zero-sum for the profession.

Racial parity goes hand in hand with other existential issues I've discussed before: funding MLA fields as full research disciplines—that is, giving them their first material foundations scaled to the size of the country—and achieving a 2:1 ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track hiring. Our scholarly output model has turned on the luxury care and feeding of a small subset of tenured faculty members largely working at three to four dozen wealthy and prestigious private universities and public flagship universities. There is no ethical justification for limiting institutionally supported intellectual life to a portion of the 156 Carnegie R1 institutions while leaving the working masses of literature and language instructors out in the cold—and outside tenure. It also violates the definition of postsecondary

or university education, in which instruction always has some kind of connection to the research frontier. It also weakens our intellectual benefits to society, starting with the students who go to our most poorly funded community colleges. This fact—the necessarily up-to-date intellectuality of *all* college instruction—should translate into a profession consisting wholly of teacher-scholars, where all types of institutions sustain both teaching and research for everyone, in vary-

ing proportion. Getting there will require a national structure.

The luxury criticism of my title hinges on teacher-scholar support for all. My short list of basic elements includes the following:

- Paid research time in all types of institutions for frontier engagement with research. For many instructors, this will consist entirely of professional reading time. For others, it will enable fundamental research, public engagement, or both.
- Travel funds for exposure to and participation in communicating frontier scholarship at, say, two conferences per year.
- Research assistance (additional research, communications, collaboration with skills outside one's domain, doctoral training where applicable).

Does this sound expensive? Only if we take the current state as normal. A basic

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but complete package might run about \$20,000 per year for each of the nation's 166,070 postsecondary humanities faculty members. That would cost \$3.32 billion per year. This is one hundred times the current research budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities, but only one-third of the National Science Foundation's, even before its major Biden boost. It would add 0.5% to the expenditure of the overall postsecondary sector, which spent \$671 billion in 2019–20. Such a program could start at a lower figure: a national structure would develop an inclusive goal for all members of the profession and plan a multi-year approach to it, starting with \$2,000 a year or \$5,000 a year or somewhere. Humanities knowledge creation needs everyone involved: only a national structure can be properly inclusive.

Of course, this sounds impossible, but only because we've been thinking too small for too long. We need to build the support structure our remarkable teaching and scholarship and public involvements deserve. This is a good season to define luxury criticism. This is the time to start planning how to make it part of everyday working conditions for each and every member of the profession. This is a project not of getting but of giving a future to our profession.

Christopher John Newfield

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Upcoming Virtual Events

BUILDING INCLUSION AND EQUITY THROUGH INTERCULTURAL PRAXIS IN WORLD LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

7 February at 2:00 p.m. ET

Participate in a workshop focusing on intercultural learning as a foundation for creating more inclusive, equitable classrooms for all world language learners. Cofacilitators Tatjana Babic Williams and Aletha Stahl, from Purdue University's Center for Intercultural Learning, Mentorship, Assessment, and Research, will propose pedagogical practices and concrete learning activities that foster a sense of belonging and enhance learning outcomes.

MLA SIT AND WRITE SESSIONS

8 February, 8 March, 12 April, and 10 May at 3:00 p.m. ET

Connect with a community of writers this spring for the MLA Sit and Write sessions, virtual writing retreats designed to support members at all stages of their careers. These monthly ninety-minute sessions feature a solid hour of dedicated, quiet writing time for you to focus on your work in the (digital) company of other writers and begin with a prewriting "Snack," a bite-sized presentation offering suggestions and resources on topics such as creating a writing schedule, crafting your first article, and productive revision strategies.

PODCASTING FOR HUMANISTS

9 March at 2:00 p.m. ET

Join Rebecca Davis (Univ. of Delaware, Newark), Ana Garriga (Brown Univ.), Carmen Urbita (Brown Univ.), and Anna Williams (Birmingham-Southern Coll.) in a webinar moderated by Varsha Panjwani (New York Univ., London) as they discuss integrating podcasting with your other scholarly pursuits and reframing your research for listening publics.

Our virtual events are open to all MLA members. Visit the MLA website to learn more and participate.



The Great Untenuring

The MLA office of academic program services and professional development recently hosted The Great Untenuring, a webinar exploring the factors that threaten to end tenure and offering strategies and solutions to resist, advocate, and move forward. Five speakers—Amy Lynch-Binieck, Ani Kokobobo, Darryl Dickson-Carr, Jeffrey Drouin, and Lacey Wootton—shared their experiences with economic and legislative threats to tenure and observations on how the academic labor landscape has contributed to inequity and disengagement, as well as how they have activated processes of shared governance, fostered solidarity, and transformed the departmental climate.

In response to audience questions, several speakers agreed to continue the conversation beyond the webinar. Responses are tagged with each speaker's name and have been lightly edited for clarity.

Is restructuring—seen increasingly at both larger and smaller institutions—related to turning to external consultants?

Amy Lynch-Binieck: While context affects the answer, I think that much restructuring is related to a constellation of factors, including consultants, boards, chancellors, and other high-ranking administrators being chosen from corporate America. They often bring with them an ethos of efficiency and austerity that does not translate well into education, leading to understaffing, defunding, and program closures. In the [Pennsylvania] state system [known as PASSHE], we are

seeing this play out in the form of campus consolidations, college restructuring, and program eliminations that do not serve the students. In many cases, this strategy turns out *not* to save money, either, as the administration discovers that not all corporate strategies work well in education.

As a result of the loss of tenure-line faculty members, more labor has fallen on graduate students, many of whom do not earn a living wage. What recourse do graduate students have when this labor falls on them, especially given that speaking out might render them more vulnerable?

Lacey Wootton: Faculty members, especially mentors and advisers, bear significant responsibility here. First, they should educate all graduate students about academic labor, both locally and nationally. What are the labor conditions, opportunities, and challenges? Second, they should act as allies for graduate students, speaking out on their behalf as necessary, mentoring them in the politics and rhetoric of labor actions, modeling institutional labor advocacy, and explicitly protecting them when necessary. Graduate students themselves can look to examples of activism on the part of contingent faculty members; there's considerable literature offering paths to activism for precarious faculty members.

ALB: Graduate students should know that, despite efforts to the contrary, they are legally recognized as employees and can unionize.

Faculty members who work at large public university systems, particularly ones that have undergone restructuring and merging of campuses, see their workloads affected differently across those systems. Is it possible to effect change across a system without a lawsuit?

Darryl Dickson-Carr: One way to implement workload changes is for the system to define what the standard baseline workload is for full-time and part-time faculty members—and how faculty members will be granted releases, and why. For example, if the standard load is 4-4, then research-active faculty members would get a four-course release each year to get to 2-2. Part-time faculty members would be defined as those teaching X number of courses. The same could be applied to service work, whether within the university or outside it. That could be written into the system's faculty manual and contracts, with exceptions made for campuses with different missions or for faculty members with special assignments. Renewal, tenure, and salary increases would depend on meeting these basic standards. Overloads would be clearly defined and compensated.

To view a recording of the webinar and to find out about future events, visit webinars.mla.org. Our webinar programming is supported by MLA members. If you want to show your support for this programming, please join or renew at www.mla.org/join.