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## Report on the 1997 MLA Convention, Toronto, Canada

The 1997 MLA Convention in Toronto began with a lunch meeting of the Graduate Student Caucus, arranged by Heather Julien and Mary Refling and attended by graduate student leaders from the nearly forty member departments in North America. The historic rise in GSC membership—from 375 last spring to 4,000 presently—was manifest in the excitement of the participants, many of them meeting for the first time outside the virtual community. Laura Sullivan, GSC president, commenced with the strategic agenda for 199

The significance of the GSC meeting was highlighted by the MLA "Welcome Session." The tones of the two meetings could not have been more different: the GSC gathering displayed a mixture of idealism tempered with aggressive calls to action, while the MLA session (with the notable exception of the two graduate student speakers) was remarkably condescending. Wendy Martin, Chair of the Claremont Graduate School English Department, set the tone when she exhorted graduate students to consider "alternative careers" in the corporate arena that would require "alternative skills" such as time-management techniques and making telephone calls for foundations. Martin, to the stunned disbelief of GSC members, went on to praise a sort of passive pragmatism, where graduate students simply make the best of an increasingly bad situation by not complaining too much and looking for other types of employment. She somewhat vaguely discussed the technological employment possibilities of distance learning, apparently unaware that such techno-fixes are one of the excuses universities use to justify hiring fewer full-time instructors. And this profoundly demoralizing rhetoric was followed by Martha Banta, who urged that graduate students locate a "friendly professor" who would help them redress their apparent ignorance of the difference between a seminar paper and a PMLA submission, and David Bartholomae, who murmured in what seemed a rehearsed monotone that the MLA convention was really neat because it permitted him to meet up with his friends once a year. As the "Welcome Session" sputtered out, the only thing one came away with was the distinct sense of being *unwelcome* in a moribund organization. Marc Bousquet's suggestion that "activism builds character"—inversely corroborated by the establishment speakers—felt more deeply true than ever before.

The Delegate Assembly Meeting of 29 December, 1997, was, conversely, a resounding success for the GSC. Areas of particular concern to graduate students and part-time academic workers are as follows:

Election of new members to the Elections Committee. Three GSC-supported petition candidates were voted onto the Elections Committee: Joe Aimone, former GSC president, Laura Sullivan, current GSC president, and the activist Paul Lauter. The election was a breakthrough for graduate students and part-time academic workers as the eight person Elections Committee selects the candidates for the Delegate Assembly, the central governing body of the MLA.

The 41 page "final report" from the Committee on Professional Employment contends that the number of part-time instructors at colleges and universities has nearly doubled since 1970, and that the trend of hiring part-time labor to save money "threatens the quality of higher education." Herbert Lindenberger, President of the MLA, urged that reversing the trend, in which part-timers made up 40 percent of faculty members last year, up from 22 percent in 1970, "must become a priority for policy-making on all levels." The report was approved by the Delegate Assembly 126 to 1

The Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-Time and Adjunct Faculty held 26-28 September 1997 in Washington, DC and organized by the American Historical Association (AHA) and ten other organizations, including the MLA, concludes that "meeting the increasing need for access to higher education in the next century" will require attention to the "growing use of part-time and adjunct faculty." The action agenda contained in the statement, structured to reverse the increasing reliance on part-time faculty, was approved by the Delegate Assembly 138 to

Items of old business: all motions from last year's agenda that could not be voted once a quorum was lost and not enough delegates were present to have a binding vote. Motion 7-2, submitted by the Graduate Student Caucus, asserts that with the proportion of part-time teachers accelerating to unacceptable levels, a trend threatening academic freedom, faculty self-governance, democratic access to the profession, reduction of the opportunity for student-faculty interaction, and the disabling of the production of new knowledge in the discipline, the MLA is to determine minimum standards of acceptable full-time/part-time ratios by various institutional circumstances, and report those standards by the next convention. The motion, opposed by members of the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee, was passed by the Delegate Assembly 95 to 1

Motion 7-3, submitted by Bousquet on behalf of the GSC, recommends that the MLA direct substantial efforts to convincing accreditation agencies that educationally sound full-time/part-time faculty ratios (measured on a department-by-department basis) should be a determining factor in the accreditation process. The motion was passed by the Delegate Assembly 85 to 2

Motion 7-4, submitted by the GSC, argues that because working conditions in the academy are directly affected by social policy, and because the MLA already devotes resources to public relations, the MLA should direct substantial public relations resources toward the immediate task of making the public aware of the educational advantages of reconverting part-time work to full-time jobs. The motion was passed by the Delegate Assembly (with the apparently obligatory objections from EC and DAOC members), 89 to 2

Motion 7-5, submitted by the GSC, contends that whereas the MLA has recently acted to provide proportional representation for graduate students in the Delegate Assembly, and whereas the principle of "fair representation" in the Executive Council is already established with respect to the variety of modern languages represented by the membership, and whereas graduate students and adjunct faculty do more than 40 percent of all higher education teaching, the MLA should extend the principles of fair and proportional representation to the Executive Council and standing committees of the association to include graduate students and adjunct faculty in proportion to their membership in the association. Members of the DAOC argued that should they extend equal representation to graduate students and part-time faculty they would necessarily have to extend it to all "special interest" groups of the MLA. This argument is, of course, specious as graduate students already represent all other "special interests." Motion 7-5 was ruled out of order by the chair of the meeting, Elaine Showalter, suddenly and without further discussion. As a result no vote was allowed. It was evident to all in attendance, however, considering the previous vote margins on GSC related motions, that 7-5 had overwhelming support had it been allowed on the floor. It was a culminating moment wherein insiders of MLA governance were revealed as less than democratic, and hostile to graduate-student and part-time faculty initiatives.

Resolution 8(a)-3, submitted by the GSC, contends that whereas the principles of open dialogue, affirmative representation, access and inclusiveness have long been observed by this association, be it resolved that the principle of affirmative representation to which the association adheres in its recruitment of candidates for nomination to ad-hoc committees, standing committees and executive council in future be extended to include the diversity of workplace experience and status. After a brief series of amendments to the language, the resolution was approved by the Delegate Assembly 58 to

To sum up: MLA leadership exhibited throughout the session their unwillingness to comprehend the reality of graduate student and part-time experience. It was apparent to all, however—full-time faculty and students alike—just how far out of touch this leadership is from the dire state of the profession and its own membership. Yet viewed another way this demonstrated unwillingness to engage has provided the GSC with a tremendous opportunity—or, more to the point obligation—to direct the MLA in the years ahead into a more progressive, activist posture in setting standards of ethical treatment of graduate students and part-timer workers in institutions of higher education, and in so doing creating a more equitable professional future for all. As Cary Nelson cracked half-humorously over dinner one night: the MLA's a real nice ship, it's just that there's no one at the helm.

The standing-room-only GSC Cash Bar proved a lively hour during which new members and crashers drank wine and conversed with one another about various issues—prominently the GSC's increasingly important role nationally and at individual institutions. It was the largest gathering of people in the annual GSC Cash Bar history, and the excitement in the air was electric as it was evident to all that the GSC was on the map in a big way. The only downside was that the time seemed to fly past, and thus several groups of new and old acquaintances ventured out into the Toronto night to explore the great restaurants and pubs and thereby continue their conversations (usually at the guidance of expert resident Vicky Smallman). And finally, on the last day of the convention, the GSC-sponsored panel "Organizing Locally, Acting (Inter)Nationally" merged with the Marxist Literary Group and attended to such issues as student organizing in California (all nine state schools), lobbying the Texas Legislature, renovating the CUNY house of labor, and, of course, the need for more "flirting" and "sex" in GSC organizing activities. The individual talks emphasized action, but perhaps more importantly they were personal and moving, exhibiting qualities absent from so much of the academic world, and this warm reminder from the panel brought home an aspect of the GSC that to our experience has made it unique. The 97 Toronto Convention was, by any measure, a very big success for the GSC. It is now crucially important that members of the Caucus build on this success in preparation for San Francisco by becoming actively engaged, with whatever time can be afforded, in committee and/or other work.

The following are the 1998 GSC Committees.

**Membership Committee:** Continues the remarkably successful work of reaching out to graduate programs throughout North America. Heather Julien (CUNY), Chair; Anne Rascon (Cornell); Patty Suppes (UNC Chapel Hill); Rick Lee (Rutgers); Ellie Kennedy (Queens—Canada). Sonja Streuber (UC Davis); Le'a Kent (U of Washington).

**Publicity Committee:** Acts as the public relations arm of the GSC, disseminating press releases, writing GSC-related articles, and creating new projects such as videography. Rick Magee (Fordham), Chair; Christian Gregory (U of Florida); Jean Murley (CUNY).

**Elections Committee:** Facilitates GSC internal elections as well as coordinates GSC members to run and vote in MLA elections. Kate Burns (UC San Diego) and Eric Grekowicz (Michigan State), Co-Chairs; Vicky Smallman (McMaster).

Governance Committee: Structures internal GSC issues as well as motions and resolutions brought before the MLA. Greg Bezkorovainy (CUNY) and Jonathan Singer (UC Irvine), Co-Chairs; Leo Parascandola (CUNY); Margaret Loose (U of Iowa—summer).

Electronic Organizing Committee: Structures the GSC virtual community and implements cyber-design, including the GSC website and WORKPLACE. Kent Puckett (Columbia) and Matt Kirschenbaum (Virginia), Co-Chairs; Matthew Gold (CUNY); Arnab Chakladar (USC).

Treasurer/Fundraising Committee: Oversees GSC banking practices, tracks membership and dues, and engages in fundraising. Jennifer Lemberg (CUNY), Chair; Rebecca Hussey (Fordham); Eliza Comodromos (Rutgers).

Liaison Committee: Defines the GSC's role in communicating with and reaching out to affiliated organizations and non-MLA groups. Bill Pannapacker (Harvard), Chair; Julie Schmid (U of Iowa).

MLA Delegate Assembly Members: Promotes GSC concerns in the DA and reports back to GSC membership. Mark Kelley (CUNY); Marc Bousquet (Indiana); Joe Aimone (UC Davis); and Eric Grekowitz (Michigan State) are elected members of the DA.

MLA Executive Council. Kirsten Christiansen (U of Texas) is an elected member of the EC.

MLA Elections Committee. Laura Sullivan (U of Florida); Joe Aimone (UC Davis); and Paul Lauter (Trinity) are elected members of the Elections Committee.

Mary Refling (Columbia) will serve her first term as Godmother to the "organization."

Brilliant ideas, suggestions for new committees, thoughts on ways the GSC can help at your home institution, and queries are encouraged and should be directed to Mark Kelley, First VP-GSC (mkell@cuny.campus.mci.net), Bill Pannapacker(pannapac@fas.harvard.edu), and/or Mary Refling (mkr4@columbia.edu).

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