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DA Update

In the last issue of *Workplace*, I wrote about the outcome of the 1998 Delegate Assembly meeting at the MLA's annual convention. Now, as we approach the 1999 annual convention, I offer an update on some of last year's initiatives and a summary of what the GSC is proposing for this year's DA meeting.

Our biggest move last year was proposing, and seeing through to passage, a motion calling for the MLA to solicit, collect, and publish detailed salary, benefits, and working conditions data for part-time faculty--including graduate assistant instructors--from the US's and Canada's 5,200 English, CompLit, and Foreign Language departments. I'm happy to report that the survey form is completed and was mailed during the first week of November. Results are expected to be available in December 2000.

The Executive Council (and the MLA's Executive Director) was initially somewhat resistant to doing the survey, on the grounds that it would be expensive and that departments might be reluctant to voluntarily report their data. Yet, after some spirited debate (led by good pal, Cary Nelson), the EC approved funding for the survey, and the MLA diligently followed through with setting it up and carrying it out. The result is, what I think to be an excellent vehicle for collecting these essential data. This survey puts the MLA in a position to lead other professional organizations by example, and the likelihood is that several others may conduct similar surveys based on the MLA's model. Despite the sometimes tense relations between MLA leadership and the GSC, this is a fine example of how we can work together to get something of critical importance done. That said, thanks must go to Phyllis Franklin, MLA's Executive Director, for overseeing this project and to Cary Nelson for powerfully advocating it and persuading the EC and Ms Franklin of its value.

Last year, we also passed motions recommending that graduate students be regularly nominated for the Executive Council and the Nominating Committee. Though our motions called for these nominations to be "made in earnest consultation with the GSC," no such consultation was made. Still, a graduate student, Wendy Eberle-Sinatra, of the University of Toronto, was nominated for the EC. Though i don't know Wendy personally (yet), as a graduate student, her candidacy deserves our support.

The motion passed last year calling for the MLA to draft model legislation for the conversion of part-time to full-time lines--though passed by the Delegate Assembly--was tabled by the Executive Council, owing to concerns about the cost of such drafting. Though this is pretty disappointing, I'm confident that once the part-time survey is completed and reported, we can recall this motion and begin the process within the MLA of setting goals and standards for hiring and staffing practices, goals and standards which then would have the strength of the survey results to support them.

6. This year's convention--thanks to our motion to reinstate it--will include a welcome session for new members, to be led by GSC president, Mark R. Kelley. In addition to Mark and myself, the MLA's first vice president, Linda Hutcheon, will speak at the session. The session--though some may argue it's of only

symbolic importance--affords us a much larger forum than our own GSC panels at which to address new members and try to recruit them to the GSC. Though it is expressly for new members, I urge all GSC activists and sympathizers to attend the session as a show of support for the GSC and to make themselves available to ask questions and interact with new MLA members.

Our legislative agenda this year isn't as ambitious in scope as last year's, but it includes some absolutely vital components. In part because of dissatisfaction with the compromise we made last year on the issue of grad student representation on the Executive Council and the Nominating Committee, we've proposed constitutional amendments that would require representation of grad student and life members (in addition to "regular" members) on the EC and on the NC. These motions, if passed by the Delegate Assembly, will be reviewed by the MLA's Amendment Committee and resubmitted for approval--in possibly revised form--to the DA at the 2000 convention. If the DA then votes to adopt the amendments, they will go to membership for ratification in Spring 2001. The purpose of these amendments is to try to achieve a more proportional representation of grad students on the EC and the NC. We hope that by doing so, we can continue the process of more fully integrating grad students into the MLA governance structure, an arena into which we've made undeniable headway but in which we still have much, much work to do.

Because many organizations and universities have resisted graduate students' efforts to achieve collective bargaining on the basis, in part, that graduate students are apprentices and are therefore not entitled to collective bargaining, we've proposed a resolution and motion that would

- require the MLA to refrain from the use of "apprentice" and "apprenticeship" as descriptions of graduate students in official MLA policy statements and
- require that the MLA assert that graduate students--when working as paid instructors for their departments or colleges--are employees.

This legislation is profoundly important to securing the rights of grad students to collectively bargain, as it will help take away the crutch of apprenticeship on which so many attacks against grad student unionization lean and on which justifications of sub-living wages and no benefits for grad students just as surely lean.

As a sort of follow-up motion to last year's opening of the Delegate Assembly discussion list year 'round, we have this year proposed that the experimental forum--set up on the MLA webpage last spring (for debate on last year's resolution about CUNY)--become a permanent feature of the webpage. We argue that the forum is an indispensable means by which MLA membership can communicate their thoughts on issues before the DA to members of the DA and to each other. This motion represents another means by which to help ensure that the DA is accountable to its constituents.

Because many departments require the submission of reams of supporting materials--often to be sent in multiple copies by express courier--of their job applicants, we are introducing motions calling for the MLA to adopt as its official policy the position that any departments requesting or requiring that materials be sent by express courier and in duplicate (or triplicate) reimburse candidates for the expenses of such shipping and duplication. As Steve Watt describes elsewhere in this issue, job applicants can very quickly rack up expenses in the hundreds of dollars in their job searches. Given how much grad students get paid, such expenses can be overwhelming, and imposing them on job applicants is unfair--especially considering the size of the institutional endowments behind many of the departments requiring express courier shipping and multiple copies of materials. That's why we want departments to reimburse applicants for shipping and duplication.

Finally, we will introduce an emergency resolution that will call for the MLA to adopt as official policy

open support of graduate students' right to choose to collectively bargain. As we all know, graduate students have often been denied even the right to vote on whether to unionize, so having the MLA officially support this right to choose can go a long way toward securing it.

I only have a few more comments. First, I urge everyone to communicate their support of GSC legislation to members of the Delegate Assembly, other grad students, and faculty. By speaking up on behalf of our motions and resolutions, we can hope to persuade DA members of the importance of our initiatives. Second, for those of you who have not yet voted in the MLA elections, I strongly urge you to do so. There are many graduate students running in various races, and the more support we can muster for them, the better. By exercising our right to vote, we can hope to change the face of MLA's governance and situate ourselves to continue making the progress we've already begun to make. Third, please do what you can to spread the word about the GSC to members of your department (students and faculty alike) who aren't yet in the know. It's only by continually refreshing the pool of talent on which we can draw that the GSC will continue to represent an active force in the evolution of the MLA. And finally, to those of you who are coming to Chicago, I can't stress strongly enough the importance of high visibility. We need all of you to come to GSC panels, to encourage others to come to GSC panels, to make sure that everyone we know is aware of the GSC. Sitting back and hoping or trusting that others will get the message isn't enough--we have to be active. And if we are, we can realistically expect to keep making a difference in how the MLA addresses the job crisis and moves forward in the coming years.

Take care, all, and Peace,
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