



Nelson, C. (1999). Should the MLA censure departments or universities? *Workplace*, 3, 100-105.

Should the MLA Censure Departments or Universities?

Cary Nelson

"On a clear morning, when it lies broad and colored under a white sky, with the mountains standing far back on either side, you can imagine it's the promised land.

Maybe it is for a few. But for every air-conditioned ranch-house with its swimming pool and private landing strip, there are dozens of tin-sided shacks and broken-down trailers where the lost tribes of the migrant workers live."

This passage comes from the opening of Ross MacDonald's 1961 novel *The Wycherly Woman*. He is describing a California valley, but of course it could as well be the terrain of the English profession. Between the most distinguished tenured faculty and the thousands of part-timers scrabbling for a living falls a gulf almost as wide as that MacDonald records. All that is missing is the landing strip, though access to air travel could certainly feature among the class differences we would cite when we survey the promised land of literariness.

Part-timers in English typically show some self-consciousness when making such comparisons themselves. "Of course *we* don't have it as bad as migrant workers!" Yet I am not sure that the differences between the two migrant, expendable work forces are actually decisive. When an English part-timer, Ph.D. in hand, shops for second-hand clothes and goes home to a standard dinner of rice and beans, while a business professor may earn a million a year between salary and consultantships, systematic exploitation like that in agriculture seems very much at issue.

It was awareness of these disparities, and of the price not only part-time faculty but also undergraduates pay for them, that led the MLA's Radical Caucus to propose that the English profession's disciplinary organization begin censuring institutions that rely too heavily on part-time instruction. The proposal came in the form of a motion considered by the Delegate Assembly at the MLA's annual convention in December, 1998.

The motion did not specify what the target ratio between full- and part-time faculty should be. That ambiguity, however, was a virtue, since the association had yet to consider carefully whether community colleges should have different ratios than four-year colleges and universities. Nor had anyone quite decided how instruction delivered by graduate students should figure in the equation. Marc Bousquet and I successfully amended the motion to read that schools would only be censured after three years of noncompliance. That provided a critical opportunity--for institutions facing censure to reform their employment practices, a crucial element of any censure program whose first aim is actually to improve working conditions rather than to penalize offenders. Nonetheless the motion failed narrowly, by a vote of 73 for and 80 against the motion. So the Delegate Assembly came very close to approving a significant new role for the association.

Despite real misgivings, I voted for the motion. It seemed to me that the time required to debate and set

realistic target ratios would leave room for enough rethinking and revision to keep the effort from becoming a major failure for the profession and for all those the motion's framers sought to help. But the risks were (and are) that large. As a way of opening more extended discussion of the issues involved, let me identify what I see as some of the problems and potential benefits of censuring schools that employ unfair employment practices.

The first problem, which can now be overcome, is that the Delegate Assembly did not have sufficient time to reflect on this motion. We needed at least six months of discussion, not the two weeks provided by a web site only opened in December. Since the Delegate Assembly at the same meeting approved a Graduate Student Caucus motion requiring the web site to remain open all year, we now have that opportunity. Censuring departments is a major step for the MLA and it requires more widespread consensus within the Delegate Assembly and more input from the rest of the members.

There are in fact several conceptual aporias located between MLA members' present self-image and self-understanding and this level of professional activism. Many full-time faculty take umbrage at the suggestion that they should be personally penalized for the actions of their department, let alone actions they see as imposed on them by a higher administration. Yet some of these same potentially outraged members have not even troubled themselves to find out what part-timers are paid in their own departments, let alone made a serious effort to improve their working conditions. They benefit from a grossly unequal allocation of departmental resources, yet see themselves as innocently in service of a higher calling. A debate over this and similar motions might begin to make senior faculty see the systemic inequities in their departments and their own complicity in maintaining them. There are some moral systems where simple knowledge of an injustice cannot be met with inaction without taking on a degree of responsibility, but we are far past that here. Full-time faculty need to realize that the system with its structural inequities helps maintain their privileges; that is not to say that their status is either unfair or unearned, but rather that it should not be financed by the underpaid labor of their colleagues. On the other side of such a moment of simultaneous personal and institutional understanding lies the possibility of collective action for change.

I am not convinced, however, that the ratio of full- to part-time positions is the best area for an actual system of penalties based primarily on censure. Those ratios are critical to institutional health and to the ability to deliver high quality and intellectually independent instruction. As has been repeatedly suggested over the last year, staffing ratios are a sound basis for raising questions about accreditation. They are also an appropriate basis of legislative lobbying and public opinion campaigns. They must, in short, be a major arena for political action. Yet the worst injustices, I believe, come from salaries, benefits, and working conditions. If, for example, part-timers' salaries reached something approaching parity with full-time faculty, the worst part of the problem would largely be solved. Even if part-timers routinely earned a starting salary of, say, \$6,000 per full-semester course at a university and \$3,000 per course at a community college, the ratio of part-time to full-time teaching would be less critical.

At present there are both community colleges and universities paying part-time faculty \$1,000 to \$1,200 per course. Compliance with the association's recommended employment ratios, whatever level we set them at, does nothing to alter the sweatshop wages many part-timers now receive. It does nothing to improve their lives. What's more, full-time salaries, as Steve Watt and I point out in *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (Routledge 1999), are in relative decline at a number of institutions, partly as an opportunistic response to the brutally competitive job market of the last three decades. What is a full-time tenure-track position really worth if you are teaching ten courses a year for \$22,000? Without taking a stand on salaries, the association accomplishes very little. What do our exploited colleagues actually gain from a decision to put most of our energy into a struggle over penalties for employment ratios?

Of course there are other reasons to be concerned about over-reliance on part-time faculty. It short-

changes students, a claim supported by evidence that part-timers have less time for preparation or advising. It undermines academic freedom by eliminating that core of tenured faculty protected from termination for speaking frankly and controversially. It reduces or eliminates disciplinary control over the curriculum, shifting authority for course offerings and course content to administrators. As fewer and fewer full-time faculty are available to do advising, hiring, and other departmental tasks, a speedup inevitably occurs in which full-time faculty become overworked and less effective.

Thus there is good reason for the MLA to set both ideal and minimally acceptable ratios for employment of full-time faculty. Indeed both setting and publicizing such ratios will give faculty in individual institutions leverage in lobbying their own administrations to fund better practices. The ratios can also be a negotiating point during collective bargaining. A given ratio can be contractually guaranteed.

The decision to censure schools for failing to meet acceptable full-time / part-time faculty ratios, moreover, would run up against one further problem--our present lack of exact knowledge of existing ratios across the country. In short it is politically unwise to embark on a punitive program without having a fairly clear idea of just how many schools would be penalized. A list of 500 or 1,000 censured schools risks just the opposite effect from what we would want. Far from identifying rogue institutions, it might merely set the norm for a certain class of schools. There is also safety in numbers. Being one of 1,000 censured schools brings little shame and little incentive to correct the problem.

The limited data we do have certainly suggests the problem is more serious and more pervasive than some MLA members may realize. Perry Robinson's *Part-Time Faculty Issues*, a 56-page report issued by the American Federation of Teachers in 1996, lists those states where the reliance on part-time teachers in community colleges is most excessive:

- Vermont--100%
- Nevada--85%
- Colorado--71%
- Illinois--76%
- Pennsylvania--73%
- Ohio--77%
- California--65%

Community colleges in Florida, North Carolina, Michigan, Texas, New York, and Wisconsin rely on average for more than 65% of their teaching on part-time faculty. North Dakota by contrast uses part-timers for only 25% of its teaching, but a censure list of hundreds of community colleges is obviously a real possibility. If instruction by graduate students is included, then many research universities may qualify for censure.

This is a problem that besets the issue of fair compensation as well. I am concerned that there may be hundreds of schools paying sweatshop wages of \$1,000 or \$1,200 per course or less. At this point we have no real way of knowing. The MLA survey of salaries and benefits for part-timers, to be set in motion as a result of a proposal put forward by the Graduate Student Caucus and its faculty allies, will give us this data for the first time. It should then be possible to know whether it would be possible to design a strategically effective program to censure those schools making indentured servants of their faculty. If the numbers are too large, then we may need to turn to regional programs, perhaps a Roll Call of Shame for the northwest, or a Chicago-area Harvest of Shame. Much to the MLA's credit, the association's *Newsletter* is now publicizing good practices in hiring part-timers. We need as well to find a way of embarrassing and isolating those schools working the other side of the territory.

It is worth remembering in this context that the American Association of University Professors keeps its list of censured institutions fairly short. Their main effort is to get schools to change their practices so as

to avoid being censured. That is usually the best outcome for the students and faculty most directly effected. Indeed more prestigious institutions often work hard to correct abuses and avoid an AAUP vote of censure. Thus the censure list usually does not look like an honor roll of America's best schools; quite to the contrary. A long list has the potential to trivialize the offenses that warranted being censured. The AAUP, moreover, only censures a school after an investigating team writes a detailed report and the institution has a chance to respond. Then both the organization's National Council and those in attendance at its annual meeting must vote to confirm the decision to censure. There is real gravity and solemnity to each of these votes.

There are injustices in the job system that would lend themselves to a more modest list of censured schools. One example is those few schools that make candidates pay travel expenses for campus visits. That is an activity the organization should consider seriously unprofessional. A school that did this and then refused to reimburse the candidate after an MLA inquiry should be censured. Such a vote of censure should carry penalties for all the school's full-time faculty and administrators. The censure could only be lifted if the school reimbursed job candidates and publicly changed its policy.

Fake job searches--advertising a job and interviewing candidates at MLA when the candidate of choice is already known--would also merit censure. In that case it would often be the department and its faculty, not the entire institution, that would be censured and penalized, unless an investigation showed that upper-level administrators were involved in the deceit. Such cases would often be difficult to prove. They would require a site visit and extensive interviews by an investigating team. Yet the deterrent value of a few such successful investigations and votes of censure could be considerable. The most severe violation would be actually conducting fake convention interviews for a job; in such cases, penalties should include full travel reimbursement for all interviewees, even if they had other interviews at the convention. For any candidate who interviewed *only* at that school, actual punitive damages might be assessed by the association.

Certainly if we are to make the decision to penalize faculty, we are better off working through the experience for a small group of schools before trying anything on a large scale. Penalizing faculty at hundreds of schools would throw the organization into a serious crisis, especially when we cannot be certain the membership either supports or even understands such a concept of faculty responsibility.

MLA members who have protested bad practices at their institutions, for example, will have difficulty accepting personal penalties. Indeed most faculty hold themselves blameless for anything the dean or department head does. The truth is that many of us share responsibility for the present grossly unfair job system, but few have reached full understanding of that fact. Complicity with the system is almost unavoidable, and some of its worst elements--such as the excessive reliance on part-timers--have developed gradually. The degradation of the professoriate has come through a war of attrition, not in a decisive battle. Thus there was often no clear moment in which to mount effective resistance. Looking back on my own department's history and the loss of over thirty full-time faculty lines in as many years, I can say now we should have chosen a time and held a strike. But even with hindsight I cannot identify a time when a sufficient sense of crisis could have made it possible to mobilize faculty for such an action.

Yet over the last few years a professoriate and a disciplinary organization in denial have together come to admit there is a job crisis. That is a major step. The closeness of the Delegate Assembly's vote suggests the issue of censuring schools may return. The imminence of censure would certainly bring many departments to a healthy sense of crisis, perhaps one in which tenured faculty would ask whether they have any professional and community responsibility for those of their colleagues living in those "tin-sided shacks and broken-down trailers." If they did arrive at such a sense of responsibility, they might be able to understand why even those who have protested their institution's treatment of part-timers remain responsible for that treatment so long as it is in effect.

The greatest responsibility resides with individual humanities departments, even though their members are

often not the prime beneficiaries of substandard wages for graduate students and part-timers. In the economy of a college or university, the business professor or football coach who earns several hundred thousand dollars a year is reaping more benefits from indentured composition teachers than any literature professor will now or in the future. Realizing this often makes department members feel powerless, but the knowledge is essential, not only because economic ignorance is counterproductive but also because false claims about how senior members of the department benefit are destructive to department morale. Yet the sense of moral crisis will never reach a critical level in the business college. That can realistically only happen in the departments where labor is actually exploited. Attention from a national disciplinary organization might well make the difference between a faculty ignoring or confronting the realities of its workplace.

The other reason why national disciplinary organizations should take up these issues and begin to take responsibility for employment practices in their own fields is that employment practices are often notably discipline specific. As we argue in detail in *Academic Keywords*, English and foreign language departments have both the largest number and the largest percentage of part-time faculty actually trying to live on their teaching income. The discipline of English has pioneered the concept of the subminimum wage faculty member. As a national discipline, therefore, we represent a significant structural component of the labor crisis in the academy. As a national discipline, we also have a moral, economic, and professional responsibility to begin dealing with what we have wrought.

For my part, I would like to see schools paying sweatshop wages censured and their full-time staff penalized in whatever way the association can manage. I would not bar them from advertizing for full-time positions in the job list, but I would at least raise conference registration fees for department members at those schools and assess them an extra fee for hotel rooms. But if the number of schools affected is to be large, then I would break the ice with a more modest program of censure like those outlined above. We need to educate a largely self-interested and self-important professoriate about group responsibility before we can expect them to tolerate its consequences.

To do so it is almost certainly necessary for the MLA to establish a commission to set appropriate minimum salaries for graduate students, part-time faculty, and tenure track faculty in literature and language departments. Such a commission would have to set different per course standards for different kinds of institutions because of varying teaching loads, adjust for semester length, and probably take account of major cost of living differences like those between urban and rural campuses. This is not a small task. But the amount of wage slavery in higher education will otherwise steadily increase. No platitudes about "diversity" in higher education justify paying people less than a living wage. A salary of \$1,000 a course is just as unethical for a community college as it is for a research university. Once figures are set, we must call attention to those schools who deny a basic standard of living to their teachers. That probably means finding an effective mechanism for public censure.

Just how we can best do so is yet to be determined. Indeed the dissemination of both minimum salary and benefit standards and actual salaries for part-time faculty across the country will open up a wide range of possible actions. Other professional organizations--not just the MLA--will be free to use this data for public statements and campaigns. Allied organizations like the Graduate Student Caucus could choose to issue a list of censured schools. The MLA might join with other disciplinary organizations in isolating and criticizing rogue institutions, especially if other groups follow suit and confirm salary levels for part-timers in their fields. Many of us meanwhile can use the data to focus our professional research and commentary. As we enter into a new era of responsible and collective professionalism, the possibilities for action will multiply. Having lost so many recent battles, it is heartening to realize there are many fronts on which reform can be pursued.

Yet it is probably both impossible and inappropriate for the MLA to censure a school on the basis of data collected from a neutral survey. The MLA has no way to pressure a school to provide data on salaries or

staffing ratios. Cooperation will be voluntary. Some schools that mistreat their staff may be less likely to give us the data we need, the many institutions with substandard wages will be on ashamed of the fact and willing to comply (considering their wages typical of peer institutions). But MLA has a professional, moral (in perhaps legal) responsibility to inform institutions how will be using the data it gathers. It cannot censure institutions without warning them it may do so when it seeks their cooperation. "Please send us this information so we can consider censuring you" is perhaps not an approach likely to be successful. MLA can carefully describe and specify both good practices and unacceptable ones, but will almost certainly have to be a top mere distributor of the data it collects about individual schools. The job of criticizing institutions by name for sweatshop wages will have to fall to others.

Cary Nelson, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign