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Report from the Delegate Assembly

Gregory Bezkorovainy

This year's Delegate Assembly meeting at the MLA's annual convention was a watershed. Though it didn't provide the fireworks that some of the media may have been hoping for, it was decidedly productive from a GSC stance.

In case anyone doesn't know yet, Cary Nelson, of the University of Illinois, was elected to the Executive Council (his candidacy was by GSC petition). Between Cary and our own Kirsten Christensen, we now have two members of the EC who are decidedly in the GSC camp. We also ran two petition candidates for the MLA's Nominating Committee, which is responsible for nominating candidates for the second vice presidency and for the Executive Council. At the DA meeting, Michael Bžrubž, of the University of Illinois, was elected to the Nominating Committee (I was our other candidate, and I lost). We can now reasonably look forward to actually having GSC-endorsed candidates nominated to the EC without always having to resort to petitions.

The GSC's 1998 legislative agenda was ambitious. For 6 weeks in September and early October, the governance committee and veterans of the Delegate Assembly wars worked hard on coming up with initiatives that would help us begin to realign the MLA's leadership into a position more consistent with the GSC's concerns and goals. i'm not overstating the case when I say our efforts paid off in a big—and in at least one unexpected—way.

Motion 1998-5 calls for the MLA to collect and publish salary and benefits data for part-time, Ph.D. instructors and to collect and publish course-load data for part-time, grad student, and full-time (tenure track and non-tenure track) instructors. The motion is important because with these data, the salary and benefits data to be collected on graduate students under the aegis of the CPE, and data on full-time instructors already collected by other associations, the MLA will be able to publicize the differences between the ranks and highlight the exploitation of part-timers and grad students that has become such a prominent part of the job system. Once the data are published and compared, the MLA will also be better able to recommend national minimum standards for wages and benefits due graduate student and part-time instructors.

We had to work hard on this motion behind the scenes to get it onto the agenda, because the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee was against this motion in its original form. Ultimately, we were able to work out a compromise with the Executive Director, Phyllis Franklin, and an agreement on what turned out to be the final form of the motion. For the first time—and this is the unexpected thing—because of the compromise, the DAOC signed on to a GSC motion as a co-sponsor. i'm particularly encouraged by the outcome here: Even though we've clashed with the DAOC in the past, because of our growing prominence and our willingness this year to work with them rather than just against them, they agreed to work with us, and we achieved our goal of getting the motion on the agenda and getting it passed by an overwhelming margin of 126 for, 3 against, and 1 abstain. As we move forward in our efforts to reform the MLA, it's to this cooperative model I think we should turn.

Motions 1998-6 and 1998-7 call for the nomination, in earnest consultation with the GSC, of grad students to the Executive Council and to the Nominating Committee, respectively. In their original forms, the motions proposed guaranteeing two seats for grad students on the EC and on the NC, but the DAOC countered that the motions were unconstitutional (we argued that they weren't, but we lost that argument). The DAOC was going to exclude the motions from the agenda on these grounds. But we were again able to strike a compromise, and though in this case, the motions definitely aren't as strong as we would have wanted, we were able to take a concrete step toward achieving greater representation of grad students on the EC and the NC.

The keys to these motions are that the Nominating Committee, of which GSC ally Michael Bžrubž is now a member, is charged with consulting the GSC's officers on nominations to the EC, and the MLA's president and vice presidents are charged with consulting us on nominations to the NC. With these provisos, we can help assure that graduate students nominated to the EC and to the NC will share our collective vision of how the MLA should proceed in its attempts to change the job system and to address other issues of import to grad students. The motions passed 77-45-6 and 76-39-1, respectively.

Motions 1998-8 and 1998-9 call for the MLA to draft model bills for distribution to municipal, state, provincial, and federal legislators, the media, and other higher-education professional organizations. Given that public higher education is under profound duress from budget cuts and cost-saving measures, the governance committee felt that the MLA ought to provide models for education-friendly legislators that would give them guidance on how they could introduce legislation that would help improve education and lead toward the conversion of part-time lines into full-time lines. Heretofore, the MLA—even though it ostensibly decries budget cuts and the sacrifice they make of education to the bottom line—hasn't really done much to work toward changing the mind set of government toward higher education. Now, though, we have reason to hope that the MLA will become more active in this arena.

1998-8 mandates the drafting of model legislation that would require colleges and universities to restrict teaching by part-time instructors and graduate students in accordance with minimum standards recommended by the MLA. The reasoning behind drafting such a model bill is clear: Everyone tacitly agrees that part-time instructors who have to shuttle between jobs at several different campuses and grad students who don't have office space much less compensation for office hours aren't in the best position to best serve their students. By legislatively limiting the amount of teaching that can be done by part-timers and grad students, colleges and universities that over-rely on part-timers and grad students would have to convert, by law, part-time and grad student teaching lines into full-time faculty lines, and legislatures would have to fund those conversions. Granted, drafting and distributing such a model bill is no guarantee that any legislature will adopt it or even use it, but it is a step in the right direction. The motion passed 67-39-7.

1998-9 failed to pass (16-94-2). It would have called for the drafting of a model bill that would limit the amount of teaching of first-year writing and language courses by part-time and by graduate student instructors (the obvious flip side to that is that full-time and even tenured faculty would have to help shoulder that load). It also called for the model bill to mandate that all first-year language and lit students take at least two of their language, lit, or writing courses in sections of not more than 18 students and that these sections be led by full-time faculty (the benefits to students are pretty clear). Finally, the model bill would direct the legislatures to fund colleges and universities sufficiently to ensure that they had enough full-time faculty to meet the requirements of the bill.

The main objections were: 1) that if such a bill were passed in a legislature, it would invite interference in higher education by politicians (it might, but isn't drastically cutting higher education funding to pay for tax cuts to the rich "interference" by politicians in higher education? of course it is); 2) Tenured faculty didn't want anybody imposing staffing requirements on them (ie, they didn't want to be told that they would have to teach freshman comp); and 3) That many colleges don't have adequate numbers of full-time

faculty to meet any minimum standards the MLA might propose (well, that's exactly what the model bill would be designed to change). Though the motion did fall in the face of these objections, we might want to re-introduce it, maybe in an emended form, next year, because the issues such model legislation would address are right at the core of the job crisis: Over-reliance on exploited labor for the sake of budgetary expedience. That's the very dragon against which we're fighting, and that's what we'll need to continue fighting if we intend to meaningfully change the job system.

We withdrew Motion 1998-10 on forming a committee to monitor the progress of implementing the recommendations of the CPE report. The Executive Director of the MLA was against forming another committee because of the costs associated with it, but we proposed it anyway, because we wanted to make sure there was a lasting charge to the MLA to follow-up the Committee's recommendations. When the Executive Director went on record in the Assembly minutes saying that the MLA staff had been charged with and funded for that duty by the Executive Council, the need for the proposed committee was obviated, and we felt that withdrawing the motion was a reasonable concession we could make in light of the progress we made in 1998 in working more cooperatively with the Executive Director.

Motion 1998-11 was concerned with the DA discussion list-serve. The idea behind the list-serve is that once motions and other business are received by the MLA (on or before 15 October), the service would be open to DA members to discuss the merits and language of business items. This year, the list-serve didn't open until about two weeks before the convention, which gave DA members scant time to discuss the items on the agenda. We moved that it be maintained year 'round and that it be open to non-DA members of the Association. As precedent, we pointed to the open hearings on motions and resolutions held each convention the day before the DA meeting.

No one objected to maintaining the list-serve year 'round, but there were scores of objections—first offered by Virginia Wexman—to opening it to the membership at large, because DA members feared they'd be inundated with e-mails. At the open hearings, at which there were maybe 40 people, including the members of the DAOC, I noted that if attendance at the hearings was any indication, the likelihood that the list-serve would become swamped seemed small. Still, the "I-get-too-many-e-mails-already" people carried the day, and the motion was split into two on the suggestion of Heather Dubrow of the DAOC. The new Motion 1998-11(a)—to maintain the list-serve year 'round—passed 71-24-2. The new Motion 1998-11(b)—to open the list-serve—was defeated 14-84-1. I still think opening the list-serve to members who would have to subscribe is a good idea, and I expect we'll re-introduce the motion next year.

For a while now, the MLA web people have been telling us they would provide links on the MLA website to the GSC website and to Workplace. By the due date for motions, they still hadn't, so we moved, in Motion 1998-12, that the MLA establish links to any allied and affiliated organizations that request links. The Executive Director assured us that links were in the works, and the motion passed 84-4-5.

Everyone who has been subscribed to e-grad since the 1997 convention will remember the often rancorous discussions about the new-member welcome session in Toronto and then-president Showalter's decision to discontinue it. (Because the welcome session was a discretionary event under control of the president, Ms Showalter had the power to cancel it at her whim.) In Motion 1998-13, we proposed the permanent establishment of a welcome session for new members, the organization of which would be the duty of the president. The program would be made in consultation with GSC officers, and it would include at least two speakers from the GSC.

As we expected, there were the typical objections: "If we mandate a welcome session, it will privilege grad students, and then every special interest will want a mandated session." (Why is it that so many MLA people assume any action they take will lead to a tidal wave of reaction?) We made the argument that a session welcoming new members privileges no one and can be useful for first-time attendees of

conventions. Further, including representatives of the GSC on the program was simply a matter of common sense, as most new members in any given year are grad students. To think that any other special interest could make the same case and demand similar sessions is absurd. We ended up carrying the day, 51-30, and next year's convention will have a new-member welcome session.

We introduced one final, relatively minor issue, Motion 1998-14, calling for the increase of the word limit of candidates' statements from 100 to 250 words. Though there were objections to the heightened printing costs that increasing the word limit would engender, the motion passed.

All in all, it was a very successful meeting for the GSC—just about everything we proposed passed—and we've got plenty of momentum to carry us into the new year. Given our successes, it's absolutely vital that we don't drop the ball. To keep the GSC going strong, we need volunteers to step forward for committee responsibilities. I strongly urge anyone interested in taking on committee duties to contact me off list at gbkinch@aol.com. Also, I urge everyone to try to enlist the support of sympathetic faculty members, most especially those who serve on the DA or any of the MLA's committees. With more widespread and open faculty support, we can increase our chances of voting in our candidates and of passing our legislation at next year's convention. Finally, please canvas the grad students in your department to try to find out how many are members of the MLA, and please encourage those who aren't members of the MLA to join. Given the low voter turnout in MLA elections, the more votes we can count on at election time, the stronger our position.

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