



Kelley, M. (1999). Response to Robert Weisbuch. *Workplace*, 3, 110-111.

## Response to Robert Weisbuch

Mark Kelley

I just returned from three days of (unpaid) committee meetings at MLA (the new Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession was holding its first session), and after consecutive nine hour sessions, replete with spirited debate, fatigue, and exhilaration, we sought common ground and achieved real progress. Upon my arrival I was disheartened to read Robert Weisbuch's portrayal of the Graduate Student Caucus as a mere grouching faction parroting the failures of the present academic establishment--the "losers' culture" as he put it (in "Six Proposals to Revive the Humanities" in the March 26 *Chronicle of Higher Education*). The statement implies the usual criticism leveled at us by former MLA officials that we should remain silent and obeisant. Yet at the December convention, we were anything but inactive or complaining. To the contrary, we presented, in a professional manner, more forums and motions for action than the MLA and those who attended our various sessions--including the Delegate Assembly--had ever before witnessed. (I emphasize the word "witnessed" here because it seems that the negative critiques invariably come from those who were not actually there--at our panel, at the Delegate Assembly, in San Francisco, and so forth).

The GSC and the Wilson Foundation are, I believe, allies working on two fronts of the same problem. While we do take issue with the MLA's making alternative careers its first priority over revising academe's job system (especially while the lives of thousands of MLA members are severely diminished by exploitative employment practices), we do not hold to a "reported" position that mirrors, as Weisbuch puts it rather too critically, our "elders' myopia" of "opposition to a new emphasis on meaningful careers beyond academe." Our concern is a matter of structural precedence. The MLA's constitution, for instance, specifies that the organization's responsibilities are to the profession, not to placing its graduate students in the corporate sector. This said, I want to reiterate that we fully acknowledge that there will always be graduate students who want to move out of academe, or who have no choice in the matter and must move out, and the MLA should assist however it can. But the greater part of MLA's limited financial and human capital should be dedicated to the Modern Languages and, more broadly, to seeking ways to improve our educational institutions to create opportunity for the next generation of scholars. Moreover, we have never contended that organizations like the Wilson Foundation should not be opening new channels for humanities Ph.D.s to the larger society--indeed, I would say (and have said to Elaine Showalter) that this is an important program not only for those frustrated Ph.D.s, but also for the wider culture and its future leadership. With graduate students and the MLA working to revitalize academe's interior, as it were, and well-funded organizations like the Wilson Foundation working to build relationships outside academe (this matrix mediated by the necessary intercommunication and support), we will indeed achieve a better future for all concerned.

Let me briefly review three of the twelve motions GSC presented in the Delegate Assembly meeting at the December convention as a means of countering the misleading charge that GSC does nothing but complain as well as establish certain areas of common ground--solutions we've proposed that are similar to those Weisbuch outlines in his essay. Our data collection motion, passed by the Assembly 126 to 3 (and which Bob Scholes called "the most important thing the MLA has ever done"), stipulates that the MLA collect data on salary, benefits, and courseload for part-time faculty from all 5,100 modern language

departments, and thus achieves precisely the result Weisbuch requests in his "Act on fact" proposal. Current national data, as we know, ignores part-timer and graduate student wages; it just reports figures for tenure-track faculty. The GSC's motion provides us with detailed information for a humanities discipline for the first time in history, information--facts--that we can act on. A few of the benefits that accrue from such action are the empowerment of those seeking jobs (they would have basic salary information at the time of application, rather than having to wait until a formal offer), and the potential for both part-time and full-time teachers to lobby their institution for equity raises and other basic improvements, using salary data to prove they are being undervalued when compared to teachers at equivalent institutions. If the GSC and the MLA can set an example for higher education by collecting and publishing discipline-based salary and employment data, other disciplinary organizations will follow. In our opinion, that's the kind of leadership we need to exercise.

Further, Weisbuch's important stipulation that "regular faculty members at large universities resume teaching those courses that many have shunned" or, if they cannot return to such courses, they should redesign and reassign them "not to exploited adjuncts or part-timers, but to newly created tenurable positions (at best) or postdoctoral fellowships" is a measure we've been advocating for years (see our December 18, 1998 Op Ed in the *Chronicle*). At the December convention, we passed by a wide margin a second motion calling for the MLA to draft a model bill--the "First Year Initiative"--that would require associate colleges and B.A.- and Ph.D.-granting institutions to restrict teaching of first-year writing and language courses by part-time faculty and graduate students in accordance with minimum standards recommended by the MLA Delegate Assembly. This bill would stipulate: 1) that associate colleges and B.A.- and Ph.D.-granting institutions require all first-year English and foreign language students to take at least two of their language, literature, or writing courses in sections of not more than eighteen students, each of these sections to be led by a full-time faculty member; 2) that associate colleges and B.A.- and Ph.D.-granting institutions add full-time instructors and sections sufficient to meet the above requirements; and 3) that the MLA distribute this bill, together with appropriate supporting information, to all appropriate academic institutions and departments. A third GSC motion, passed overwhelmingly, calls for the MLA to establish good practice minimum ratios of full-time/part-time employment at the various institutional types, as well as pro-rated compensation for all part-time academic workers, recognizing (as we do) that institutions will always have some percentage of adjunct faculty.

My point is that the Graduate Student Caucus, a 5,000 member collective of graduate students working on their own sharply restricted time--without pay, sleep, support, and recurrently in the face of severe criticism and condemnation from secure power--has been extremely active on the very problematics Weisbuch delineates. We have worked hard the past two years to act on our beliefs, to remain open to criticism and to modify our thinking as we learned more, to work with other organizations to achieve common goals, and to participate, finally, in rebuilding cohesion in our humanities departments rather than continue to subsidize fragmentation and the corollary internecine skirmishes that have cost all of us dearly. Have we made mistakes? Of course we have. But at the least we're out there talking about and acting on these sensitive, pivotal issues, eschewing passivity and accepting our response-ability as well as the inevitable criticism, informed and otherwise, that rebounds back at us. The GSC and the Wilson Foundation remain bound by our common desire to do something about the present crisis. At this critical juncture, when the issues are at last being debated in public space, I ask that we seek ways to cooperate--locate common ground and common solutions--rather than continue with semi-informed critiques of one another.

In Weisbuch's poignant and important terms, "the waste of human talent" that is the by-product of the present crisis in the humanities "becomes enormous, intolerable." I couldn't agree more.

*Mark Kelley, CUNY Graduate Center*