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FUEL FOR THE FIRE:

Survey Data Confirm What We've Known All Along

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Ever since I joined the Modern Language Association in '97 (or was it '96?—it's all a blur), I've been exhorting my graduate student colleagues in my department and on other campuses to join the MLA. I ask: "Are you happy with what passes for 'wages' that you get as an adjunct?" or "How's that healthcare you're not getting?" or "Have they given you an office yet that has your name on the door instead of 'Utility Closet'?"

Most often, the people of whom I ask such questions express indignation over the conditions under which they work, but that indignation is almost invariably drained by resignation: "It's part of being a grad student, you know? And besides, what's the MLA going to do about it? I'll join the MLA when I'm on the market, and once I get my high-paying job at a Research I right after I finish my dissertation, everything will be swell." Right.

Until the Winter of 2000, I didn't have a universally compelling answer to give people when they asked, "What can the MLA do about it?" I could point to the Committee on Professional Employment's 1997 Final Report ("fat lotta good that did," they might answer), and I'd mention the legislation passed by the Delegate Assembly in recent years in support of graduate students. But those examples usually resulted in sidelong glances of incredulity. What's different now—after the release of the MLA's and the Coalition on the Academic Workforce's staffing surveys conducted in Fall 1999—is that now, we all have something concrete to point to, something that's important and that can serve as powerful ammunition in the uphill battle to secure fair wages and at least minimal benefits for graduate student and other part-time instructors.

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After the MLA's '97 convention, I took over the chair of governance for the Graduate Student Caucus of the MLA, so it was my job to coordinate the assembly of the GSC's legislative package for presentation to the 1998 Delegate Assembly meeting. We had a lot of good things on our plate that year, suggested and drafted by several dedicated people. But the lynchpin of the whole package was an idea suggested to me by Cary Nelson, namely, to direct the MLA to conduct a staffing survey of member departments to determine several things, including ratios of grad student and part- to full-time tenured and tenure-track instructors, the proportion of undergrad courses they teach, and the average wages of, and benefits available to, grad student and part-time instructors. In the wake of the CPE Report, this made a lot of sense: the MLA had made several reasonable recommendations about how graduate students *should* be treated; now, let's find out, in a quantifiable way, how they *are* treated. Over several telephone conversations and fax exchanges (this was the pre-webmaster Cary), we finally came up with a series of

motions we thought could work, and after some laborious negotiations with the DA Organizing Committee, we had legislation ready to go to the floor in San Francisco. After sometimes heated debate, during which members of the GSC and the Radical Caucus, as well as allies not directly associated with the caucuses, passionately supported the motions, the motions passed the DA, and the Executive Council subsequently directed the MLA staff to prepare and conduct the survey. A survey instrument was designed, data were collected during Fall 1999, and the results were made public in December 2000.

I recount this brief history for one simple reason: It shows what the MLA can do when prompted by even just a handful of members of a vocal minority. Left to itself, I think it's not unfair to say that the MLA staff wouldn't have undertaken such a project. But once the motions got to the floor of the DA—once they gained support from the DA—the EC and the MLA staff made it happen. The lesson here is clear: the MLA—and any other disciplinary organization—can do meaningful things for its membership if its membership directs it to do so. One more time: it can work for us, if we insist that it works for us.

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The MLA surveyed the 5,245 English and Foreign Languages departments in its database, and the survey netted a response rate of 42% (searchable data for individual responding departments are available via the MLA's website, www.mla.org). The MLA's survey instrument also served as the model for the CAW's Collaborative Study of Undergraduate Faculty (survey results are available at www.theaha.org/caw/index.htm). In addition to English and Foreign Language departments, the CAW survey included Anthropology, Art History, Cinema Studies, freestanding Composition programs, History, Linguistics, Philology (classics), Philosophy, and (with qualification because of the use of a slightly different survey instrument) Political Science. The response rates for most disciplines surveyed ranged between 40% and 45%. For a survey of this type and scope, these response rates are remarkable, and because they are so great, they lend profound legitimacy to the results.

The picture the data paint is not pretty. According to the CAW's 22 November 2000 Press Release, "The student signing up for an introductory course in composition has a less than one in four chance of landing a spot in a classroom with a full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty member." This is nationally, and it includes private universities. Further, and "surprisingly," "graduate students comprised 15% to 25% of the instructional staff in the majority of the disciplines examined," and, according to the "Summary of Data From Surveys of the CAW," "Graduate students taught anywhere from 25% to 60% of the undergraduate classes at PhD programs in all of the reporting disciplines." Why should that be? Well, again from the Release, "Colleges and universities have been hiring part-time faculty members and graduate student teaching assistants because they are irresistibly cost-effective." Yet, says AHA president Eric Foner, "the conditions under which they work often make it impossible for them to act effectively as educators. In the long run, excessive reliance on part-time teachers compromises the nature of higher education." Why does "excessive reliance" "compromise" higher education? And what are those "conditions"? Maybe it has something to do with compensation. The Summary certainly suggests so: "part-time faculty members . . . receive so little compensation that they simply must take multiple jobs to maintain even a modest standard of living."

The Release asserts that "most of these [part-time] faculty members receive less than \$3,000 per course. . . . Nearly one third of them earn \$2,000, or less per course. . . . They could earn comparable [annual] salaries as fast-food workers, baggage porters, or theater lobby attendants." So much for any misinformational claims that the "anecdotes" decrying exploitation wages are just isolated cases. And if you are a part-timer or a graduate student instructor, don't expect any benefits: the median value of departments in all disciplines surveyed that *offer*—even for a fee—*no* benefits (health plan, retirement plan, life insurance) for part-time instructors paid by the course was 63.16% (over 77% of responding history departments reported offering *no* benefits). By the way, don't make plans to travel to that conference if you need help

paying for it. According to the Summary, "less than 26% of the programs with part-time faculty members paid by the course offered them travel support or ... research support." So much for helping those employees who need the most help.

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All right, so the situation really is as bad as we've been saying all these years. So what? As Ernst Benjamin, director of research for the AAUP, says in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1 December 2000), "People call me all the time for part-time salary data, and I can't give it to them. So for the first time, I can tell them that 25% make less than \$2,000." The importance of having these hard data can't be overestimated. How might parents paying tens of thousands of dollars in tuition react if they appreciated that their budding doctors, lawyers, CEOs were being taught by instructors valued so highly by the institutions for which they work that they are paid on a par with fast-food workers? by instructors who may not have email access or regular office hours, because they may not have offices or computers or who aren't listed in campus directories or catalogs because they may not have on-campus phones? by instructors who can be replaced at the whim of administrations?

In New York, the City University, which serves about 200,000 students, comes under lots of fire from its own board of trustees, the mayor, the governor, and a whole host of others. Standards are too low, they say. Students aren't coming out prepared for the demands of the new economy. The solutions they offer are to attempt to privatize remediation, to attempt to close admissions, to demonize the faculty as fat cats sitting around doing nothing but collecting overgenerous checks. I expect similar arguments are made in other contexts, though the solutions to such claimed problems may be different in those contexts. What these surveys suggest is that we might look at a different solution. Perhaps it might make sense to pay part-time instructors enough—and to compensate them with benefits, too—such that holding one job is adequate to meet their financial needs. That could be reasonably expected to increase student access to their instructors, for though no one is suggesting that part-time instructors are any less dedicated to or any less adept at teaching undergraduates, the unavoidable reality is that instructors who have to work more than one job on more than one site under the kinds of conditions described in the CAW's survey just aren't likely to be able to devote all the time required to meet all the needs of all their students.

The power of these surveys is that with the data they report, groups can go to college and university administrations, they can go to local and state legislators, they can go directly to the parents of students, and they can say, look, a disproportionate amount of courses are being taught by grossly underpaid, benefits-challenged part-time instructors. You want to improve the quality of education at our institution? You might begin by giving your instructors adequate personal and professional resources. If nothing else, it certainly won't hurt anything.

Lately, graduate students have been making meaningful inroads toward finally getting reasonable compensation at some institutions. The MLA has resolved that graduate students, when teaching or working as research assistants, are employees, not apprentices, and are entitled to vote to unionize if they so choose. The AAUP has drafted and publicized a graduate students' bill of rights. And the recent NYU ruling sets a seminal precedent confirming the rights of graduate students to unionize and collectively bargain. The data collected in these surveys strongly support all claims graduate student and other part-time instructors make to better conditions, better pay, and access to benefits.

For all the rhetoric we hear in the media of this person or that being an "education" president, governor, or mayor, what we don't hear is any talk from such persons about the over-reliance on part-time labor and the exploitation of that labor. The bottom line is still king, and we'll be damned if we're not ready to sacrifice education to tax cuts. Yet every public opinion poll suggests that Americans across the board view improvements in education as a higher priority than tax cuts. Here, with these surveys, we have the data to

mount grassroots campaigns to address the treatment of what the CAW's Summary calls "the second-class status of part-time and adjunct employees in the academy." No one can guarantee the success of any such campaigns, but the likelihood of success just got stronger thanks to these concrete, *self-reported* data (one can't make valid assumptions about conditions at institutions that declined to respond to the surveys, but ...). I urge every bargaining unit, whether nascent or extant, every disciplinary organization, every concerned citizen to use these data to advance their causes and to publicize them as widely as possible. Because these data, and the stark divide they paint between political rhetoric and meaningful educational commitment, do have the power to sway parents, administrations, and legislatures to recognize the very real threats posed to higher education by over reliance on exploited part-time workers.

Postscript: For the skeptics among us all who wonder what good can possibly come of these surveys, the data they collect, and the results they report, we can say this definitively: between the release of the MLA's survey results (at the end of December 2000) and the end of February 2001, at least 20 persons from departments across the country called MLA headquarters to thank the MLA for doing the survey. Why? Because these persons—one of whom had been solicited to make such calls, incidentally—said that they had used the MLA's results as a bargaining chip to negotiate pay increases for their departments' instructors. One full-time, non-tenure-track instructor, said that in their department, the negotiation resulted in pay raises of as much as \$6,000 per year. Here, we have clear evidence of an almost immediate (within two months of its release) and positively direct impact on hundreds of persons as a result of the MLA's actions. This alone should be able to convince even the harshest naysayer that a disciplinary organization can make a difference in its members' lives—provided it has the impetus to act.

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