

## Community College Faculty and the MLA<sup>1</sup>

By Stacey Donohue

Colleagues often ask me why I still attend the Modern Language Association (MLA) annual convention. After all, they say, with 9000+ attendees, it is too big, especially compared to CCHA conferences; besides, you are not on the job market; and really, don't you just hate the way "those people" look askance once they see "community college" on your name tag?

Yes, smaller conferences have a few hundred attendees rather than thousands allowing for more interaction, fewer session conflicts, and a supportive environment for presenting work in progress.

But for those of us in literature and languages, attending the MLA convention is a way of engaging, as presenter or attendee, with colleagues in our discipline in the larger academic community. Participating in discussions about our discipline and our profession with colleagues working at a variety of institutions can be both personally and professionally rewarding. I look forward to the conversations I have, such as sharing ideas about my general education course on Autobiography with a colleague who teaches a graduate course on the same genre; I look forward to listening to the debates that happen during roundtable discussions, such as the one that occurred after a session challenging the first year language curriculum. And I look forward to the new ideas I collect that I can bring back to the classroom or to my colleagues.

Many of us joined CCHA because it is an organization where we know our expertise is valued. Admittedly, in the past, the MLA struggled to create a welcoming environment for community college faculty. Since the 1990s, when it became apparent that community colleges were more than the ugly stepsister in higher education, with escalating student enrollment and the availability of teaching positions for those with PhDs, the MLA has worked to entice more two year college faculty members. In addition to social events at the convention, workshops, and complimentary admittance to theme related sessions, the MLA established two groups: the Two Year College Discussion Group and the Committee on Community Colleges.

---

<sup>1</sup> Donohue, Stacey. "Community College Faculty and the MLA." *The Community College Humanist* 32.1 (Fall 2011): 1+. Print.

As a former member of the Committee on Community Colleges, and a former delegate representing two year colleges, I have been part of this shift within the MLA. Admittedly, it has been frustrating at times working in a culture that has historically not recognized community college teacher/scholars. For example, the 2008 Presidential Forum on The Way We Teach Now<sup>2</sup> neglected to include a speaker from a community college. But it has also been frustrating because so few of my community college colleagues in the discipline have chosen to participate in the MLA (or CCHA, but that is the subject of a different opinion piece).

According to a 2010 article<sup>3</sup> by then president of the MLA Sidonie Smith, there are 800 community college faculty members out of over 30,000 total MLA members, a miniscule percentage of the entire membership.

Understandably, the increasing reliance on part time faculty in higher education generally, the heavy teaching, advising and service requirements we have, and rare access to travel funds, all contribute to this apparent lack of engagement. However, we need more than 800 community college language and literature professionals engaged in our national disciplinary organization and, more importantly, our colleagues in the MLA need to hear from us. As fellow CCHA member, Emily Tai has noted at her disciplinary organization, the American Historical Association: "every time a two-year faculty member presents disciplinary research, they underscore the rationale for portable courses, that were taught by qualified faculty, and need not be retaken by a transferring student."

If you haven't attended the MLA convention since graduate school, you may be surprised at the changes. For the first time in decades, the convention is not in a mega city but in Seattle: those of us in the Pacific Northwest can actually drive. And, since the convention is now in January, holiday plans will not be disrupted. Concurrent panels end by dinner time, leaving evenings for social and cultural events. And many of those panels are now roundtable discussions and workshops, allowing for more conversations between speakers and the audience.

---

<sup>2</sup> MLA 2008 Convention, Presidential Forum Brochure: <http://www.mla.org/pdf/presforumbrochures1d.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> "One MLA Serving All Faculty Members": <http://www.mla.org/blog&topic=136>

Fear of getting lost in the crowd? Taking a cue from the smaller conferences, the MLA now organizes cultural events, as well as a cocktail hour “tweet-up” for those following along on Twitter (@mlaconvention). Not able to make a particular session? Some sessions are tweeted live, so you can follow along in real time (or later by searching online). Blogger/twitter/journalist tables are set up in the back of each conference room for just that purpose.

In addition to the usual array of scholarly presentations, sessions on professional issues such as shared governance and dual enrollment, and creative conversations with writers including Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki, the 2012 convention includes many sessions of interest, but certainly not limited to, community college faculty members: the CCHA sponsored roundtable on integrating literature and culture in the first year foreign language classroom, as well as sessions on online pedagogy, radical learning strategies, and responding to the high cost of textbooks.

Yes, the job interview scene at the MLA still adds an atmosphere of dread for those participating in that annual ritual, but as the job market is rapidly changing, and technology like Skype is replacing those hotel-room interviews, the MLA convention is also changing to meet the needs of all academics—tenured, adjunct, and graduate student; job secure and job searching; Research 1 and community college—invested in the fields of languages and literature specifically, and higher education and the humanities generally.

If you can, consider joining the few hundred community college instructors at the MLA in Seattle this January: we can wear our badges proudly once we show we are eager to engage and contribute to the conversations we all care about.

*Stacey Donohue teaches at Central Oregon Community College. She is the former editor of The Community College Humanist, a long-time member of several disciplinary organizations, including CCHA, MLA, NCTE and TYCA. Contact her at [sdonohue@cocc.edu](mailto:sdonohue@cocc.edu)*