

The annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in Chicago January 9-12, 2014 proved to be a great resource for graduate student attendees for a variety of reasons. Chief among these is the abundance of events that addressed what is collectively referred to as the “crisis in the humanities.” Nearly each timeslot over the four days of the conference featured panel and roundtable discussions that addressed critically the declining numbers of tenure track positions and the increasing need to address wanting graduate curricula, which do not adequately provide training that easily “translates” into the non-academic sector.

The convention events that addressed explicitly topics regarding “the profession” offered a welcoming environment for graduate students to engage with like-minded individuals in discussions about the future of the humanities. Quite a number of panels made it a point to feature graduate students in order to include them in the discussions that take place on our behalf—discussions that in the past excluded graduate student voices. MLA’s Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession (CSGSP) for instance organized a panel entitled “Graduate Student Perspectives on Reforming Doctoral Study;” panelists offered empirical data and anecdotal evidence as a response to a larger call to reform graduate studies to an audience that consisted not only of graduate students, but also featured faculty and even administrators. Panelist Gregory Brennen (Ph.D. candidate at Duke) conducted research on the nature of the profession and the Evolving Value of the Humanitie PhD. He and the other panelists signal that students are actively engaged in shaping the discussion about the need to reform graduate curricular.

The CSGSP’s newest publication, “Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations for Best Practices and Evaluative Questions,” offers a number of checklists for modern languages departments to conduct a survey about the adequacy of the various components of their graduate programs. This document was released during the annual convention and is intended as a starting point for evaluation of graduate curricular. Graduate students, faculty, and administrators are encouraged by the committee to participate in an on-going conversation about the contents of this document and other such endeavors that address the needs of graduate students. In order to make such a discussion possible, members of the CSGSP facilitate a discussion on MLAcommons.

The Graduate Student Caucus sponsored two such events: one was a roundtable discussion entitled “Negotiating, Compromising: Being a Graduate Student,” and a panel discussion entitled “Exile, Death, Sacrifice: The Poetics of Suffering in Francophone Literature.” The former addressed what it means to be a graduate student in times of a crisis in the humanities, while the latter provided a forum for graduate students to feature their research at the MLA on a specific topic.

A favorite feature of the annual convention are its pre-convention workshops for job seekers in English and foreign languages. These workshops cover the A-Zs of the job market and feature talks and advice sessions for job seekers both on the market and those anticipating to be on the market. Job seekers were also able to attend a number of workshops and other session formats on topics like “Navigating the Job Market” or “Demonstration Interviews for Job Seekers in Foreign Languages.”

Besides a great number of official information outlets for job seekers and graduate student attendees, the convention hotel bars proved to be a great resource for graduate students. At the bars, veteran job market candidates and those already in positions were able to meet and greet and exchange about the how-to's so often very difficult to come by in advising sessions at home institutions. These unofficial meeting spaces were almost as valuable as the official panels and workshops, because the relaxed setting offers a space to pose questions often deemed too inappropriate for public forums. So too were the coffee shops, particularly the coffee station at the book exhibit, where one was not unlikely to meet editors of journals and book series in a line for a hot beverage who were quite friendly and approachable.

Conventions of this sort are often financially implausible for most graduate students. A multi-day stay at a hotel downtown Chicago, a round-trip flight, and daily expenses can accumulate to quite the tab, one that is not easily covered by graduate student stipends. Despite these difficulties, many graduate students made their way to Chicago. Often they were able to manage by sharing hotel rooms with a couple of other convention participants. The MLA additionally offered travel assistance to graduate students, which provided \$ 300.00 to offset travel expenses.

Despite the anxiety and the hostility that one anticipates encountering at the conference, the actual conference proved to be much more welcoming and informative instead.