

Report of the MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education

MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education

Web publication, May 2020

© 2020 by The Modern Language Association of America

All material published by the Modern Language Association in any medium is protected by copyright. Users may link to the MLA Web page freely and may quote from MLA publications as allowed by the doctrine of fair use. Written permission is required for any other reproduction of material from any MLA publication.

Send requests for permission to reprint material to the MLA permissions manager by mail (85 Broad Street, Suite 500, New York, NY 10004-2434) or e-mail (permissions@mla.org).

Report of the MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education was appointed in response to both new and long-term problems faced by graduate students. Students' increased precarity and recent highly publicized instances of faculty members' harassment and sexual abuse of graduate students invite a larger look at graduate education, especially faculty-student relations. The 2018 MLA Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) surveyed MLA members on perceived problems with graduate education, especially those that arise from the unequal power relations between faculty members and graduate students. The survey results, discussed at the Delegate Assembly meeting in January 2019, demonstrate a wide range of concerns about not only precarity and sexual harassment but also issues such as mental health challenges, lack of transparency, favoritism and bias, and emotional and material exploitation. The survey shows marked dissatisfaction—but it also highlights structural problems in how we educate and professionalize graduate students and spotlights long-standing practices that invite abuse. The MLA Executive Council charged the task force with considering these issues and recommending guidelines aimed at eradicating abuses of power and exploitation.

In what follows, the members of the task force advocate for student-centered graduate education informed by an ethics of care. We emphasize the urgent obligation of faculty members to support the professional well-being of the graduate students they teach and whose research they supervise and call on programs and institutions to create a workplace culture in which students may thrive as they pursue diverse careers, including but not limited to college and university teaching. In many cases, graduate students themselves have taken the lead in requesting that departments and institutions recognize their needs and address abuses. We urge faculty members, graduate deans, and provosts to become more active in support of graduate students and to recognize the ethical responsibilities that come with training and employing graduate students in the context of increasing economic and professional uncertainty. Our report outlines the negative and minimum requirements—what should never occur and what must occur to satisfy professional obligations. More important, we call on all stakeholders in graduate education to reckon with the reality that our students face and to structure graduate education with that reality in mind.

The relationship between faculty members and graduate students is a special one. Ideally, it is intellectually stimulating, long-lasting, and reciprocally rewarding. Within that relationship, however, faculty members hold considerable power over the graduate students they teach and advise. Faculty members give or withhold not only professional licensure, in the forms of grades and approvals, but also their time (including whether they serve as a dissertation adviser or committee member).

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

They also grant or withhold various forms of patronage, including collaboration and recommendations for coveted fellowships or teaching opportunities. Graduate students depend on the good will and professionalism of the faculty members with whom they work. Faculty members must understand their principled care of graduate students as an ethical obligation central to their professional life and not abuse the considerable power they hold.

These issues fall within the broad ambit of graduate teaching. Yet because teaching is conducted within an educational community, our recommendations encompass institutional and departmental conduct along with that of faculty members. Departments, graduate schools, and universities share the responsibility to create a student-centered educational environment and a workplace culture in which graduate students can learn and develop. Graduate school culture should be addressed in any accounting of best practices.

The task force offers the following recommendations, designed to recognize and respond to the increasing precarity of graduate students. The recommendations move from those that fall most directly on individual faculty members in their interactions with graduate students to the responsibilities of programs and institutions.

1. **Institute forms of collaborative or networked advising.** Thoughtful alternatives to the single-adviser model will increase the range of professional possibilities for graduate students, reduce stress caused by reliance on single mentors, and provide a check on faculty abuses of power.
2. **Categorically reject all forms of sexual harassment and discriminatory behavior.** Faculty members have an obligation to understand what constitutes sexual harassment and discrimination in regard to race, gender, socioeconomic or educational background, sexuality, age, and ability status. Departments should establish, and faculty members should follow, basic guidelines for treating all students fairly. When sexual harassment claims are lodged, faculty members must refrain from public comment on the claims while they are adjudicated by university bodies charged with this task. Departments and programs should educate faculty members on bystander responsibility and on the need to guard against not only impropriety but also the appearance of impropriety, which affects workplace culture as well as individuals.
3. **Promote transparency to reduce bias and favoritism.** Faculty members should publicly set, revise, and apply, in a fair and professional way, clear criteria and procedures for all matters that affect graduate students and their progress through a program. Wherever possible, graduate students should be included in department meetings, deliberations, and committees bearing on matters affecting them.
4. **Establish clear rules for faculty members' responsiveness.** Faculty members should follow public and agreed-upon protocols for responding to papers, dissertation chapters, full dissertation drafts, and requests for letters of reference in a timely fashion, including when they are on leave.

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

5. **Offer graduate students professional training without exploiting them.** While departments and graduate schools may require service to the university as part of graduate student funding packages, workloads should prioritize students' timely progress through the program. Departments and individual faculty members should in no way impede graduate student unionization efforts.
6. **Provide professionalization opportunities and career guidance in line with the realities of the academic job market.** Graduate schools and departments—in collaboration with offices of career services, offices of development and alumni relations, and other institutional offices—should offer workshops and training for diverse humanities careers as well as for the varied possibilities within the academic job market. Students must be supported, and not stigmatized, when they explore diverse career paths.
7. **Meet the distinctive professional needs and welfare of master's students.** Master's students are not lesser versions of PhD students. The educational and professional goals of master's and PhD students differ. Master's students should be recognized as part of graduate student culture and should be provided with their own academic and professionalization opportunities as part of a thoughtfully structured program of study.
8. **Provide mental health services and supports for work-life balance for graduate students.** The structure of graduate education has created its own unique mental health crisis connected to graduate students' relative powerlessness and the catastrophic falling-off of tenure-track positions for PhDs. Mental health services should be part of the health benefits offered to graduate students.
9. **Within institutional constraints, strive to provide all graduate students with funding that enables them to live without taking on outside work.** Many graduate students in language and literature work outside the university because of economic necessity, sometimes in direct contravention of their institution's funding policy. Institutions should regularly survey their graduate students to gather information about their financial needs in order to provide adequate stipends and ensure a reasonable standard of living. They should establish clear and transparent funding policies, convey funding decisions in a timely fashion, and distribute student stipends according to a predictable schedule.

Report of the MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education

THE anger and disillusionment graduate students feel toward unresponsive or abusive faculty members came through forcefully in the responses to the informal survey sent out by the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) and the follow-up Delegate Assembly discussion at the 2019 MLA Annual Convention. Graduate students report that some faculty members act unprofessionally. They fail, for example, to return dissertation chapters for many months, to answer crucial e-mails, or to submit letters of recommendation in a timely fashion. In some instances, faculty members, of all genders, sexually harass graduate students or demand emotional or material labor of an unprofessional sort, such as proofreading faculty papers without compensation, collecting laundry, house-sitting, and pet care. Less obvious, but also injurious, are subtler forms of neglect, bias, or abuse, such as faculty members' pressuring students to choose them as their dissertation advisers or discriminating against students on the basis of race, ability status, age, or gender. All these behaviors increase the precarity felt by graduate students and impede their timely progress toward the degree. Added to these forms of unprofessional behavior are the stresses that arise from inadequate funding packages and lack of childcare or mental health benefits or appropriate job counseling and training. These responses stem not simply from anger in the present moment but also from frustration accumulated over years of inappropriate faculty and institutional practices and lax oversight. In what follows, we enumerate some of the key topics that the task force has identified as detrimental to student well-being and suggest remedies.

Precarity

Graduate students have always lived with limited resources, but a more diverse student population, coupled with a straitened academic job market, has led to varying experiences of precarity—including psychological stress, income insecurity, and food and medical insecurity—within student cohorts. Precarity is affected by marital and family status, wealth and class, gender, race, background, and prior education. The increase in cost of living across the United States, in addition to the unpredictable funding during pursuit of a degree and the reduced number of tenure-track jobs, exacerbates already known challenges during graduate study and beyond. Many students now anticipate that they will continue to experience forms of precarity after receiving their degree, and this sense of insecurity is a key factor in the mental health issues reported by students. Other problems that may contribute to graduate students' feelings of precarity include unresponsive advisers, unclear rules governing progress through the program, and insecurity arising from hostile teaching or learning environments. To address or minimize the material and psychological uncertainties that graduate students experience—and as part of an ethics of care—greater

attention should be paid to the many kinds of challenges graduate students face and the supports they need to meet those challenges, including such basic matters as paychecks that arrive on time.

Networked or Collaborative Advising

Group advising was repeatedly recommended in the survey feedback. Graduate students are not and should not be the private responsibility of a single adviser. Group advising at the thesis stage, in particular, can greatly enhance a graduate student's intellectual experience and check the behavior of rogue faculty members by increasing transparency. Group advising can take many forms; we recommend that departments and programs devise one that will work best for their own local culture.¹ The practice may include, for example, having all members of the dissertation committee present for the discussion of individual dissertation chapters. Students receive feedback from everyone at the same time, allowing for differences of opinion to be aired and discussed. Dissertation workshops attended by faculty members and graduate students from one field (or several) also allow students to see how their work is received by up-close and more distant intellectual interlocutors. Alternatively, departments may set up a colloquium series in which advanced students present their work and participate in practice interviews and job talks. When students share their work with a range of faculty members, they establish an expanded network from which to receive mentoring, advice, and references, and they reduce the chances of getting locked into an unproductive relationship with a single adviser. Group advising is particularly crucial when a student searches for jobs outside academia. Department placement committees and graduate school career counselors should supplement the career and job advice given by the dissertation director and other committee members and empower students seeking the full range of career options.

Avoiding Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

Faculty members must refrain from all forms of harassing and discriminatory behavior and actively support the increasing diversity of graduate student cohorts. Faculty members have an obligation to understand what constitutes sexual harassment and discrimination in regard to race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic or educational background, age, and ability status. Moreover, when a charge of harassment or discrimination is brought against a faculty member, other faculty members should refrain from public comment on the case. Adjudication of such charges must be handled by the procedures established and publicly set forth by each institution. Normative standards must exceed simply refraining from these behaviors; the appearance of impropriety (that is, the belief that sexual harassment or discrimination may be occurring based on a failure to maintain professional behaviors) may also harm the culture of a graduate program. In addition, faculty members must also understand their bystander responsibility, a legal as well as ethical obligation. Institutions and programs should convene discussions of bystander responsibility to educate both faculty members and students on this subject.

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

Transparency to Reduce Bias and Favoritism

Academic culture is a culture of evaluation, and it is therefore crucial that evaluation be performed fairly, transparently, and as openly as possible. Faculty members have a collective professional responsibility to publicly set, revise, and apply clear criteria and procedures for graduate student nominations, rankings, and evaluations leading to the award of department grants, graduate teaching and research appointments, summer funding, and admission packages, as well as for any postdoctoral positions or lectureships available within the institution. Rules (such as those governing time to degree) must be equitably and transparently enforced. Acts of bias, favoritism, scapegoating, or retaliation, as well as punitive or unrestrained behavior, are unacceptable and undermine graduate program culture and erode student trust. We recommend including graduate students on departmental committees that make policy on graduate student matters to further transparency and to facilitate direct representation of graduate student interests and perspectives. In addition, faculty members should avoid using language that demeans or stereotypes a category of student and should take care not to favor one subset of students (e.g., those from elite educational backgrounds) over another and honor student requests in regard to preferred forms of address.

Responsiveness

Graduate students work under institutionally mandated time constraints. Just as faculty members need to reserve time for their research and teaching, graduate students need their time to be recognized and respected. Students require timely responses to both their work and their career-related needs. Faculty members who teach and advise graduate students should post and follow protocols for responding to papers, dissertation chapters, full dissertation drafts, and requests for letters of reference. Typically, papers should be returned within two weeks and chapters and full drafts of dissertations within a month, and students should give faculty members at least two weeks' notice when requesting letters of reference. Faculty members should make publicly available, and faithfully keep, their weekly office hours and should establish a public policy for answering student e-mails within a reasonable period. Faculty members should expect to be in regular contact with their graduate student advisees when on leave and should communicate clearly in advance their availability for meetings by phone, videoconference, or other forms of contact. Faculty members who plan to relocate to a different institution should inform their advisees in a timely fashion. If the faculty member will remain in the advising role after a move, clear arrangements should be established with both institutions to ensure the adviser's continued accessibility.

Productive, Nonexploitative Educational Culture

Departments, programs, and graduate students share responsibility for students' professional development and proper support. The institution has a multilevel

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

responsibility to create a culture that supports graduate student progress. Graduate students pay a high opportunity cost for their studies, and they deserve a productive, equitable workplace with ample resources for career advancement of all kinds.²

Central to a supportive culture is the principle that *graduate students must not be exploited*. Departments and graduate schools often require service to the university in exchange for the funding graduate students receive. While this work lets students gain valuable teaching or other experience, it can become excessive. Graduate student workloads should be appropriate—that is, priority should be given to the students' timely progress through the program. In addition to institutionally mandated work, graduate faculty members, advisers, and department chairs can subtly pressure graduate students to agree to perform tasks, such as committee service, that might give students useful experience but also produce burdensome student workloads. Faculty members should take care to present all such opportunities in a way that allows students to say no without fear of falling out of favor or being overlooked for future tasks. Another form of exploitation of graduate students arises when they aid in the production of ideas and scholarship and are not credited for it. Faculty members should take special care to ensure that graduate students receive proper credit for their intellectual work.

Careers and Professionalization

Graduate schools and departments do not always prepare students sufficiently for the realities of the job market(s) that they will face. It is of course important to support students applying for academic jobs, from vetting cover letters through conducting practice interviews. However, given the drastic reduction in the number of tenure-track positions in recent years, schools must diversify the kinds of career training and counseling they offer, to include, for instance, helping students prepare for a range of humanities careers and providing information about relevant internships and postdoctoral positions. Students should be offered training in how to apply for jobs not only at research-intensive institutions but also at community colleges and other teaching-intensive institutions. Depending on the opportunity, such training and support may be provided by the department or by the graduate school. This effort may involve graduate career counselors, alumni resource networks, and other means of exposing students to a broad range of prospective employers. Faculty members must recognize that, in today's changing job market, not all students want or can get the kinds of jobs their mentors have enjoyed. Faculty members should not, directly or indirectly, demean students' decisions to seek humanities careers outside academia or to seek community college, high school, or other teaching-intensive positions. Students live the consequences of their decisions; faculty members should not simply tolerate but encourage the full range of student career choices.³

The Welfare of Master's Students

Master's (MA) students often occupy an unclear or purely instrumental place in the mission of a doctoral program. Master's degree students are frequently ignored

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

when graduate issues are addressed, but they are part of graduate student culture too. Programs that mix MA and PhD students too often overlook the need of MA students for a coherent curriculum, professionalization opportunities, and career advice appropriate to their experience. The lack of specific support for MA students can make their transitions—whether to a doctoral program or to employment outside academia—unnecessarily difficult. Programs should develop curricula, policies, and support that recognize the distinctive needs of MA students.

Mental Health

The structure of graduate education has created its own unique mental health crisis. The root cause is the relative powerlessness of graduate students even as they are increasingly—and rightly—expected to take charge of their own education and professional development. There is a central tension between a so-called apprenticeship model—which implies professional role-modeling, protection, and support until the apprenticeship is complete—and the reality of graduate student lives. Graduate students in language and literature typically undertake concurrent classroom responsibilities as teacher and student. At the same time, they face pressure to professionalize, to publish before completing the terminal degree, and to navigate multiple job markets for positions that may be unfamiliar to the faculty member(s) advising them. These factors contribute to stress and often to mental health issues. A recent study provides evidence that graduate students suffer from significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression than the general population; this finding was true across genders and was associated with lack of work-life balance and inadequate mentoring (Evans et al. 282).

Funding

Many doctoral students are not given a stipend sufficient to sustain themselves without other employment. Institutions should survey current students and recent graduates to collect information on their economic circumstances and needs. As far as possible, schools and departments should provide graduate stipends that cover students' basic cost of living. Like any group of workers, graduate students need to know what to expect in order to do financial planning. Programs should provide all students, from the moment they arrive, with clear and transparent policies regarding student stipends, tuition waivers, summer support, travel grants, and all other forms of financial support available to graduate students. Many students live from paycheck to paycheck. Payment should be made to students on time according to publicly established rules and deadlines. Whenever possible, institutions should allocate funds for travel to conferences, research trips, emergencies, and childcare support as part of graduate student benefit packages.

This is not the first time the MLA has focused on the welfare of graduate students in the profession. In 2013, the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession established guidelines for improving the institutional circumstances

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

of graduate students in languages and literatures by identifying “areas of policy and practice where progress has been made and areas where change can and should be sought” (1). In 2014, the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature concluded that the success of doctoral programs required “drawing on the resources of the whole university through collaborations with scholars from other disciplines and with professional staff members often outside departments” to achieve goals in four main areas: maintaining academic excellence, preserving accessibility, broadening career paths, and focusing on the needs of graduate students (1). But as the DAOC’s 2018 survey and the 2019 Delegate Assembly discussion revealed, the lives of graduate students have become more precarious, and they are frequently dissatisfied with their graduate experience and uncertain about their future in the profession.

We hope that this report will help programs engage in student-centered graduate education informed by an ethics of care. The specific recommendations in this report address areas of graduate life that lay outside the primary focus of earlier reports, including the sense of precarity felt by many graduate students as the academic job market has worsened and the failure of some departments and faculty members to address long-standing problems of harassment, bias, and unprofessional behavior. Our recommendations aim to help departments, graduate schools, and universities establish guidelines and practices that promote inclusion and create sustainable communities that will equitably support graduate students of all backgrounds. We know that many departments around the country have already adopted some of the practices and guidelines provided in our report, but today’s graduate students face unique problems that demand the urgent attention of every faculty member, department, and graduate school. An ethics of care, a commitment to professional responsibility, and a clear understanding of institutional changes and transformations must inform graduate education in the twenty-first century.

Task Force Members

Michelle Brazier, Raritan Valley Community College, NJ

Leonard Cassuto, Fordham University

Barbra Chin, Howard University

Barbara Fuchs, University of California, Los Angeles

Simon Gikandi (chair), Princeton University

Jean Howard, Columbia University

Rafael Ramirez Mendoza, Emory University

Yinyin Xue, Kenyon College

*Report of the MLA Task
Force on Ethical Conduct
in Graduate Education*

Notes

1. One example: Columbia University's Department of English and Comparative Literature has instituted a successful practice of dissertation advisement by committee, in which all three committee members share power and responsibility.
2. The PLAN program at the University of Louisville offers an outstanding example of a supportive culture that integrates institutional- and program-level efforts to prepare students for a full range of careers both inside and beyond academia; see louisville.edu/graduate/plan/.
3. Lehigh University's English department offers a valuable example of a student-centered educational culture that promotes diverse opportunities for graduate students; see Cassuto.

Works Cited

- Cassuto, Leonard. "Outcomes-Based Graduate School: The Humanities Edition." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 June 2019, www.chronicle.com/article/Outcomes-Based-Graduate/246501.
- Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession. *Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations for Best Practices and Evaluative Questions*. Modern Language Association, Jan. 2013, www.mla.org/Graduate-Best-Practices.
- Evans, Teresa M., et al. "Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education." *Nature Biotechnology*, vol. 36, no. 3, Mar. 2018, pp. 282–84.
- MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature. *Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*. Modern Language Association, May 2014, www.mla.org/doctoral-study-2014.