MLA Personnel Characteristics, 2016: Continuity, Change, and Concerns

Few issues are more important to any organization than understanding its constituents. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that efforts to assess the qualities of the membership of the Music Library Association (MLA) go back at least half a century.¹ Several other assessments—including the survey this article is based upon (see https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/?page=mlapublications)—have measured personnel characteristics and opinions to determine member needs and desires for the future of the Association.² Past studies have informed MLA on the planning of meetings, expansion of educational offerings, and the development of strategic initiatives, such as increasing minority representation. Further, MLA groups including the Membership Committee, Career Advisory Committee, and Diversity Committee have relied on these findings to shape their agendas.

Given the decline in membership over the past decades, the data from studies like the present one are all the more valuable, as the organization considers current needs, trends in the field, and directions for the future.³ This article builds on personnel studies from 1997 and 2009 and references findings from a 1969 survey.⁴ In addition to employing past questions, the 2016 instrument makes new inquiries about professional development, changes in organizational size and staffing levels, current library trends, and strategies for addressing the
ongoing transformation of the information landscape. A summary and analysis of those results follow.

**Methodology**

The authors distributed the questionnaire electronically via Qualtrics to 953 unique email addresses of current or recent (since 2013) MLA members. The survey ran from August 8 through October 4, 2016 and amassed 391 respondents. When analyzing data, the investigators only included completed questionnaires (n=267). This survey updated previous queries regarding scholarship, creative activities, sexual orientation, and gender; it also posed new ones concerning library trends and strategies. The authors used Qualtrics, Excel, and SPSS for data analysis. An Excel file with the data has been uploaded to the MLA website, minus some free responses due to privacy concerns. All percentages were rounded up.

**Education, Professional Development, and Language Proficiencies**

MLA members remain highly educated with the vast majority holding multiple degrees. Library science and music degrees are by far the most common degrees held by recent and current members. The majority of music bachelors degrees are in instrumental fields followed by music education and general music. Musicology bachelors make up the next largest segment (38 individuals) but this is a decrease from 2009 when most members within the undergraduate category
held a musicology degree. Perhaps more successful MLA outreach to performance and education majors is responsible for the proportional growth in those members. Music departments may also have experienced a decrease in undergraduate enrollment in liberal arts areas, thereby impacting the pipeline for music librarians.

The number of members holding masters degrees in music has held reasonably steady since 1997, with the greatest number in musicology. Those holding doctorates increased from a low in 2009, yet were still below the one-in-five mark from 1997 (and, again, most were in musicology). The number of doctoral degrees differs considerably from the Filter and Marco study of 1969, when approximately one-third of MLA members had PhDs, and nearly all were in music. The change may be part of a nation-wide trend toward library science professionalization rather than subject specialization. Among those with a library science master’s, two-thirds hold the MLS or equivalent without any music coursework or specialization. The remaining third indicated that their MLS work included a music concentration. A minority of respondents are in the process of securing another degree—primarily an MLS—while a few are working toward various certifications or doctorates.

Most respondents believe that continuing education activities are important, very important, or essential to their professional development and advancement. Regarding out-of-unit development, the most popular activities are...
regional/national professional meetings followed by webinars and local/state association meetings. Journals are the top choice for professional literature sources, followed by listservs and blogs/podcasts.

Language proficiencies among MLA members has shifted in interesting ways. German language proficiency is still the most common, but numbers are down significantly from 1997 (see table 1). The number of people espousing reading knowledge of French also dropped considerably, whereas Spanish has narrowly overtaken Italian as the third most commonly known language. The decline in the three languages (German, French, and Italian) central to most art music reference and literature sources may signal that libraries feel there is less of a need to staff polyglots. This could also reflect that current music librarians are more likely to have matriculated at colleges with less restrictive language requirements. It is perhaps not surprising that Spanish, which is commonly taught in United States high schools and particularly useful in a country with large populations of first and second generation Latin Americans, should rank so highly.

Insert Table 1

**Employment**

In spite of the recession of 2008 and subsequent sluggish economic growth, the 2016 employment statistics initially appear to be remarkably similar
to 2009. Nine out of ten respondents work in libraries and archives, and a small portion are students, unemployed, or hold positions in the commercial sector.\textsuperscript{8} Further consideration of these numbers may indicate cause for concern, however: there was a slight uptick (1 percent) in both the student and unemployed categories. In the “other” category, free responses such as “self-employed” and “adjunct instructor” may indicate underemployment. Percentages are also consistent between 2016 and 2009 among those who worked in public, academic, or conservatory libraries (see table 2).

**Insert Table 2**

Most of the 2016 respondents’ responsibilities are largely related to music (60 percent). Ten percent say that they do not work primarily with music, and the remainder split their duties. Yet these numbers have shrunk since 2009, when 69 percent of the respondents claimed that music was their first concern and only 6 percent were focused on areas outside of music. The current average percentage of music-related job responsibilities is 71 percent with half of the respondents working in a branch music library, about a quarter in a separate area within a larger library, and slightly fewer in an integrated collection.

The proportion of members entering the profession or accepting new positions has increased since 2009. The number of years respondents have worked in their current position grew considerably, in the 1 to 5 year range (40 percent compared to 31 percent in 2009). The number of individuals who remained in
their positions more than 20 years stayed the same. We asked specifically how many years those respondents had been in their current position; the average is 31 years, with the highest at 45 years. The average full-time equivalency (FTE) of all respondents in their current position is 93 percent (worded differently from 2009 when the “average hours assigned” was 38 hours).

Position status (e.g., tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty, permanent or continuing faculty, professional staff, paraprofessional, and so on) has not deviated much since 2009. However, union representation increased by a small but significant margin, which had already increased from 1997. The 2016 average salary for those represented by a bargaining unit or union is $73,551, compared to $63,774 for those not represented. This gap was also the case in 2009, when “…salaries for union members [trended] higher than those for nonunion members.”

Figure 1 shows 2016 salary ranges. While there was an increase, the average 2016 salary, $65,314, did not keep pace with inflation compared to 2009 ($58,209). There was also a gender pay gap. Males average $69,405 a year in 2016, while females average $62,737. This finding differs from both the 1997 and 2009 studies. Lesniaski wrote that in the 1997 study that “there is no difference in salary by gender; men and women earn—statistically speaking—the same amount.” Cleveland and Puente also found that gender “seems to have little bearing upon salary, with men and women earning roughly the same amounts.”

Insert Fig. 1
A little over half of those who have earned or are earning an MLS previously worked as library clerks or paraprofessionals before earning an MLS, and a small portion have continued to do so after obtaining the degree. Most student respondents either hold a graduate assistantship in a music or non-music library or archive. Likewise, a majority have either participated in a practicum/internship for professional development or completed a mentoring program—many in an MLA affiliated activity (ARL/MLA Diversity Inclusion Initiative, MLA conference mentorship program, etc.). Nearly half have received some kind of leadership training. Fewer than half have sought the assistance of MLA’s placement or resume service, and even fewer have used those same services through ALA.

**Strategies and trends**

This survey introduced several new questions related to staffing, strategies, and trends in the profession. When asked to “list the top three strategies that your library/unit is pursuing during the next three years,” 144 replied (54 percent). Several topics emerge as especially resonant, including collections, library space, instruction/information literacy, and outreach/programming. Themes surrounding collections revolved around the transition from physical to electronic resources, promotion and increase of holdings, and interest in the digital humanities. Library space was also a prominent topic, particularly space
analysis and renovation. The other major areas included instruction/information literacy and outreach/programming, with an emphasis on improved online instruction and better marketing approaches.

**Insert Table 3**

Almost twice as many general library and commercial organizations have downsized compared to those that have expanded or remained the same. In terms of outlook, most respondents either believe that their organization will stay about the same size or are unsure of the future. They express somewhat greater confidence that the staffing of their music branch will remain stable; however, a significant proportion voiced uncertainty, foreseeing contraction.

Concern also seems to be reflected in responses to our query regarding what trends respondents anticipate. Only the “ability to demonstrate the value of your service” received more than half of the responses, although “funding cuts” came close. “New publishing formats” was the next most popular selection; perhaps this signals optimism around demonstrating value through new services to avoid cuts and develop new services. Yet “retirements,” and “competition from internet resources” completed the top five (see table 3), indicating contraction rather than expansion. These concepts, coupled with those capturing the sense that one’s importance is not a given and that a decline in financial support is in the offering, suggest the view of the future is far from rosy.
Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Service

Scholarly activities fluctuated relatively little between 1997 and 2009; in both of those surveys a consistent majority of respondents had published reviews, for example. In the current survey that number fell to a slim majority (see table 4). Two-thirds of the 2016 respondents had published a journal article or book chapter compared to 54 percent in 1997 and 71 percent in 2009. The number of book publications is the same as in 2009, but reflects a decrease since 1997. More respondents report editing a book compared to 1997; however, this figure is down from 2009. Most members have presented at least once at regional and national conferences, but few have given a poster or webinar. In terms of service, nearly half have participated in or chaired one to three committees. Many have served as board members at least once, and approximately half have been special officers.

Insert Table 4

Responding members also described their creative activities within the last five years (see table 5). A substantial majority have performed in public venues. Less than 1 in 10 reported publishing and premiering compositions. Slightly more have received grants, commissions, or other awards for their artistic work.

Insert Table 5
Demographics

The 2016 survey data indicate that on the whole MLA is growing younger: the mean age of respondents is 46.6 years old (47 median), which is down from 49 in 1997 and is also significantly lower than the median age of 51 years for American Library Association (ALA) members.\textsuperscript{14} Compared with the 2009 results, current data reveal a nine-point growth in the 31-40 year-old range, and six points in the 61-70 range. There was a four-point decrease among 18-30 year-olds. The makeup of males and females closely resembles the 2009 survey results (see table 6). Compared to membership of the ALA, which has 4 women for every 1 man, the gender balance of MLA is much more even, reflecting a history that at one point maintained more male than female members.\textsuperscript{15} Transgender, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer individuals made up 1.6 percent of respondents compared to an estimated 0.6% of the US population who identify as transgender.\textsuperscript{16}

Insert Table 6

This survey asked new questions regarding whether individuals believe that their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability have negatively impacted their careers.\textsuperscript{17} One in ten respondents feel that their gender, gender identity, or gender expression has negatively affected their employment and another twelve percent were uncertain whether it had. Overwhelmingly these were female respondents who expressed concerns about being taken seriously,
earning less than male counterparts, and being passed over for promotions in favor of less-qualified men. A small number of men suggested that they had been overlooked in favor of females or that somehow because librarianship has a high proportion of women, sexism is not a problem. This conclusion is faulty, as evinced, for example, by the gender pay gap; however, it also shows discontent among a small number of individuals. A few noted that their gender identity or expression had hurt their job searches.

A smaller majority identify as straight or heterosexual compared to 2009, and there is a larger proportion of bisexual and lesbian, gay, and queer respondents. One percent believe their sexual orientation has negatively affected their employment, while 6 percent are unsure. Several of the latter respondents voiced concerns about potential ramifications if their orientation was revealed to their employers.

In 2009, 95 percent of the survey respondents identified as White. Less than one percent was African-American. The 2016 numbers reflect a more diverse group: 90 percent identify as White, 4 percent as Asian, 3 percent as African American, 3 percent as Latino or Latin American, and less than 1 percent as Pacific Islander or Native American (see table 6). MLA demographics now more closely align with those of ALA, which has a slightly smaller proportion of members who identify as White and Native American, and a slightly larger proportion who identify as African American and Latino._statistics_for_asians
and Pacific Islanders are nearly identical. But the numbers still lag behind national demographics.

Five percent of respondents believe their employment has been negatively affected as a result of their race or ethnic origin; another 6 percent are unsure. Fewer than 2 percent of respondents who identify as White complained of reverse discrimination, but the overwhelming number of Whites in MLA suggests that people of color have not received much preferential treatment in terms of hiring. Indeed, despite the still small number of minorities who completed the survey (n=33) a slightly larger number of individuals expressed concerns about discrimination against them due to their ethnicity. Given the heated political atmosphere surrounding race in recent years, MLA should continue to work to educate members on why fostering diversity is healthy for the organization and the field of music librarianship.

Previous surveys had not explored the population of abled and disabled individuals in MLA. Nearly one in ten respondents report one of the six Federal Census Bureau categories of disabilities. Nine individuals report having hearing difficult and nine indicate they suffer ambulatory problems. Seven report a cognitive disability. A smaller portion report vision difficulties, and even fewer have independent living impediments due to a physical, mental, or emotional problem.
The average number of years of member participation in MLA has increased, with over a quarter being members for more than 20 years. There are slight declines in almost every other category since 2009, however. Most 2016 survey participants rate the value of MLA membership as excellent (57 percent), and most of the others regard it as good. Approximately half of the respondents indicate that contact with other members is the most important factor in becoming or remaining an MLA member. Conference attendance and the journal *Notes* are also highly-rated benefits, which is similar to previous surveys. State and regional library associations as well as other professional or academic associations also rank highly; nearly half of respondents paid membership dues to these kinds of organizations (see table 7). About one third of MLA members also held membership in ALA.

**Insert Table 7**

**Further Study and Conclusions**

The results of the 2016 personnel survey sent to current and former MLA members reveal change and continuity. The characteristics that witnessed the most significant rates of change between 1997 to 2009—such as doctorates earned, public library employment, and scholarly activities—appear to have stabilized in 2016. MLA members remain highly educated and active in service and scholarship. The group is more ethnically diverse than in the past, but still out
of sync with the demographics of similar organizations like ALA and United States society in general. This present study indicates members’ concern over the ability to demonstrate value of their library’s services, funding cuts, and competition from the internet. Their employers are reassessing collections, spaces, and services, and many libraries have downsized in the last five years. Almost two-thirds of respondents indicate that continuing education was either essential or very important for their professional development.

While the vast majority of survey respondents value their MLA membership, the Association should think carefully about how to better assess (and thus address) the needs of those who have canceled their memberships or who are possibly interested in joining. Such data might assist in the development of programming and services aimed at recruitment and retention. Future studies should monitor the new data points included in this survey (such as emerging trends, disabilities, and gender identity), including how retirements and increased responsibilities outside of music affect music librarianship and membership in the association. Changes in accepted terminology for race/ethnicity will likely occur with the subsequent US Census in 2020. Surveys of personnel characteristics should be sent out at regular intervals, such as every year or every three years, so that trends can be measured more accurately, either as a standing responsibility of an existing committee (or committees) or one that is newly-created.
ABSTRACT

The authors discuss results of the 2016 MLA Survey of Personnel Characteristics and compare them to previous studies. We distributed the questionnaire electronically via Qualtrics to 953 unique email addresses of current or recent (since 2013) MLA members. In addition to asking many of the same questions from past surveys, we updated queries regarding scholarship, creative activities, and sexual and gender orientation, and posed new ones about library trends and professional organizations. The decline of public librarians as a proportion of the membership has remained consistent since the large shift experienced between 1997 and 2009. Results suggest a decline in German language familiarity, but more reading knowledge of other languages. Areas of progress include a larger proportion of ethnic and racial minorities. Causes for concern include diminishing budgets and worry that positions vacated due to retirements will remain unfilled.
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3 MLA has experienced years of declining membership. When comparing current membership to numbers circa the last two personnel characteristics studies (1997 and 2009), this decrease is concerning. The 1998 Boston MLA Business Meeting minutes report a total membership (individual and institutional) of 1,743, which was down by 63 the previous year (Music Library Association, “Annual Business Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, 14 February 1998,” accessed June 8, 2017, http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/resource/collection/501D5DB8-58D4-4D8A-9696-4ED4A276ED7B/1998-boston-mlabusiness.pdf). Minutes from the 2010 MLA Business Meeting in San Jose indicated that membership in early 2010 was at 1,356 members and subscribers, a decrease of


5 Note that method of disseminating the survey has differed every year. The 2009 survey was distributed to MLA-L and on-site at the annual meeting in Chicago; the 1997 questionnaire was sent to 380 randomly selected MLA members.


8 The numbers add up to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one answer. No respondents chose the option “Unemployed (not job seeking).”

9 Authors calculated the average salaries by establishing midpoints for each salary range, multiplied each midpoint by the number of respondents in each range, and divided the sum of all products by the total number of respondents. For ranges with two figures, the midpoints were between the two figures.
(for example, $55,000 was the established midpoint between $50,000 and $60,000), and the average used for under $20,000 was $15,000 and for over $100,000, it was $105,000.


11 Inflation rate calculated using the online Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator at: https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm, accessed June 5, 2017. Authors calculated the average salaries in this section described in note 9, and the 2016 average salary was $724 short of the 2009 average.


17 The previous survey did not ask for gender identity or gender expression. Two respondents identified as cisgender without specifying male or female.

19 Ibid.


21 An error in the questionnaire prevented the display of the question asking whether respondents believed disability had affected their employment.