

I cannot help feeling that Gilman's "mentoring" suggestion is primarily a symbolic way to infantilize postdoctoral fellows, making it seem appropriate for them to be paid less and receive fewer benefits. Many of the postdocs I know—with teaching experience in twenty to thirty courses, sometimes at two or more schools, and with books or articles to their credit—do not need mentoring; they need a job. Postdocs, receiving ten or twenty thousand dollars less than their identically qualified classmates who happened to get jobs, are not always the happiest employees. Indeed, the postdocs who never get permanent jobs may end up spending ten or twelve or more years at the same level before an abrupt and premature career termination that may leave them even more wounded and rudderless than new PhDs who fail to find employment. Such human consequences merit more reflection than Gilman's proposal appears to manifest.

To raise these necessary issues is not to betray the profession or the MLA but to seek to reform them. The job crisis has lasted for a quarter century; throughout that time the MLA has been part of the problem, not part of the solution. It has concentrated on offering publication and speaking opportunities to its members, ignoring the deepening funding crisis in higher education. Its main response to joblessness has been to deny its existence or to collect statistics in such a way as to minimize the problem and put the profession in the best possible light. I believe that record is a good deal less than honorable or exemplary. But if I were "disaffected," as Sandra Gilbert, in the *MLA Newsletter*, has claimed I am, I would not be writing this letter.

CARY NELSON
University of Illinois, Urbana

To the Editor:

Pleased though I was to see that Sander L. Gilman used his Presidential Address to discuss the problems of the proliferating tribe of underemployed PhDs, I was distressed to see that his solution comes down to advocating still more underemployment. A two-year teaching postdoc does not solve the problems of the individual job seeker but only delays for a couple years the inevitable decision whether to keep searching or to give up. For the pool of job seekers as a whole, his plan would exacerbate the problem, creating an ever-growing backlog of job applicants, further cutting the chances of any seeker to land a job, and thus creating an ever-greater need for the stopgaps Gilman advocates. From my experience in temporary appointments, I can testify to the demoralizing effect of finding oneself in a position where achievements

we are taught to value as professionals—the appreciation of one's students, the respect of one's colleagues, and the publication of one's scholarship—count for nothing. Gilman actually encourages the practice, already in force in many places, of two-tier hiring, where these achievements are for some hires rewarded with tenure, promotion, and raises while for others the same accomplishments earn no material professional reward. Gilman notes that an institution could turn two graduate assistantships into one teaching postdoc; however, it would be much more useful to the career aspirations of graduate students to consolidate the money from a few assistantships into the salary for one new assistant professor.

JAMES D. SULLIVAN
Illinois Central College, East Peoria

Reply:

I am pleased by the prompt and insightful comments of Cary Nelson and James D. Sullivan. My proposal for postdoctoral fellowships is only one response to the job situation. Many more proposals have been and need to be made. I am aware of the difficulties and perils of the postdoctoral mentored-teaching proposal, but I believe that it can be done now with the resources the academy already possesses.

As professor of psychiatry for fifteen years at the Cornell Medical College and for the past two years at the Pritzker Medical School, I know that everything is not rosy for graduate and professional students outside the humanities. Traditionally, however, the postdoctoral structures in the sciences have not resulted in the reduction of academic positions and have permitted graduate students a productive period of research before going on the job market.

My proposal is but a quick response to the immediate situation. Our debates must not stop us from pursuing as many different approaches as possible to providing jobs now. Let us work together to accomplish our goal of creating more positions in more institutions for younger humanists. My fear is that debate will take the place of action. The end result of inaction will be the loss of first-rate younger professors from the academy.

These debates should not bog down into name-calling. I have been horrified by the sight of academics attacking one another in a tone that can only give aid and comfort to the enemies of higher education, who quote us as proof of the bankruptcy of the system.

SANDER L. GILMAN
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