

Report of the MLA-L Task Force to the Board of Directors of the Music Library Association

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Our Task Force was charged by the MLA Board as follows:

“The MLA-L Task Force is charged with exploring ways to facilitate communication among members of the Music Library Association in a more formal way, and in a manner that better promotes collegiality and civility among contributors, with the possibility of creating a code of conduct and ways to discourage abusive, bullying, or inappropriate behavior. The Task Force will examine the feasibility of creating a more formal relationship between the Association and MLA-L that will still maintain the longstanding independence that MLA-L has enjoyed. The Task Force should employ procedures for receiving input from MLA members and MLA-L subscribers that best ensure openness and transparency. The outcome of the Task Force’s work will be a final report to the Board that presents recommendations on the best path forward with these considerations, including options for other forms of communication in addition to or instead of MLA-L.”

The Task Force was established by the MLA Board in August of 2018. Since that time, the Task Force has communicated by email, and has established the following values for how we will conduct our work:

- Open Communication
- Room for Respectful Disagreement, Debate, and Criticism
- Transparency of Process
- Freedom from Harassment, Flaming, or Bullying
- Empathy
- Collegiality, Professionalism, Civility, and Support

On Saturday, February 23, 2019, the Task Force held a forum at the MLA Annual Meeting in St. Louis, MO. At this forum, the Task Force presented our Charge, our Values, established ground rules for conversation in the forum, and reminded forum participants of the MLA Code of Conduct. Several attendees at the forum expressed concerns about the following issues relevant to MLA-L (the notes from the forum can be found at <https://goo.gl/KGMxrz>):

1. Concern that MLA is overreacting to problems related to MLA-L
2. Attendee has received personal attacks related to MLA-L
3. “MLA should take ownership”
4. Inappropriate behavior off-list related to MLA-L
5. Desire for a code of conduct
6. Desire for MLA to “back users up”

From June 21 to August 1, 2019, the Task Force conducted an online survey via the MLA SurveyMonkey account. This survey was approved by the MLA Board and the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Western Michigan University.

Below, we summarize the survey. The questions, and quantitative answers are given. Comments are given selectively, representing those comments suggestive of a need to change MLA's approach to MLA-L. While most respondents do not indicate problems with the status quo in responses to all questions except for Question 7, enough express discomfort with the current state of the climate of MLA-L to suggest that a significant number of respondents are currently not comfortable with MLA-L.

The Survey Questions were:

1. Do you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age? (survey participants were required to be at least 18 years old to participate) – 176 respondents answered yes, 4 skipped
2. Do you affirm that you have subscribed to the MLA-L email discussion list during the last two years? (survey participants were required to have participated in MLA-L during the last two years to participate) – 169 respondents answered yes, 7 respondents answered no, 4 skipped
3. Have you been a member of the Music Library Association during the past two years? – 148 respondents answered yes, 7 respondents answered no, 25 skipped
4. Do you feel like you can communicate freely on MLA-L, and with members of the list? – 124 respondents answered yes, 27 respondents answered no, 29 skipped, and 29 respondents provided comments
 - a. Representative Comments indicating the need for change:
 - i. *"I can, although I often feel anxiety about posting (and usually don't)"*
 - ii. *"Observation of discussion threads has shown me that contributing could open me up to condescension, disdain and even thinly-veiled ridicule. The experience of some of my colleagues includes off-list bullying and backstabbing."*
 - iii. *"I am comfortable sending out information on the list but not seeking feedback, which is what seems to set off the bullying and flaming"*
 - iv. *"I have rarely posted to the list, and I am very reluctant to post anything other than strict business-type announcements."*
 - v. *"I find myself carefully reviewing anything I say for fear of being attacked."*
 - vi. *"I feel that many of the responses I see on MLA-L are highly opinionated and confrontational."*
5. In the past two years, have you felt like participants on MLA-L have created an environment of respectful disagreement, debate, and criticism? – 120 respondents answered yes, 31 respondents answered no, 29 skipped, and 65 respondents provided comments
 - a. Representative Comments indicating the need for change:
 - i. *"Some participants have *tried* to create a respectful environment, and been derailed by those who are only interested in argument and belittling."*
 - ii. *"There are certain users who publicly attack those with whom they do not agree in ugly and personal ways. These attacks often target women. There is also a tendency by some to continue these attacks off-list."*
 - iii. *"Yes and no. Most people have, but I have also noticed individuals who definitely do not."*
 - iv. *"Sometimes, but not consistently. I think when things get contentious, it can go either way, and that it depends more on the people involved than anything. When folks become disrespectful, it is left to fellow members to step in and try to mediate (usually to little effect) because of a lack of moderation, oversight, or code of conduct on the list."*

- v. *“There are many--mostly those who seem to position themselves as progressives but whose statements illustrate little tolerance for others--who seem to bully people they disagree with, rather than engaging in respectful communication.”*
6. Do you feel like the professional experiences you share on MLA-L have been validated by the community of MLA-L subscribers when you have posted or responded on MLA-L? – 128 respondents answered yes, 17 respondents answered no, 35 skipped, and 27 respondents provided comments
- a. Representative Comments indicating the need for change:
 - i. *“I don't post about my professional experiences for the reasons previously stated.”*
 - ii. *“Because of previously mentioned concern about reactions to posts, I currently only post when I have concrete knowledge or experience with the topic at hand - not when I need assistance. So, I suppose my professional experiences on MLA-L could be described as a life “half-lived.””*
 - iii. *“Blackballing type behavior from the listserv MLA-L isn't an example of the best of music Librarianship.”*
7. Have there been instances when you have witnessed or received communication on MLA-L or from list members that was less than collegial, professional, civil, or supportive? – 88 respondents answered yes, 66 respondents answered no, 26 skipped, and 46 respondents provided comments
- a. Representative Comments indicating the need for change:
 - i. *“Only as a witness. These normally center around political comments that veer away from MLA's mission and the purpose of the list.”*
 - ii. *“Unfortunately, my impression is that most of the disrespectful comments have come from individuals who would consider themselves to be champions of diversity and inclusion and were critical of comments or decisions that did not correspond with their beliefs or political agenda. I cannot supply any specific examples, however, but that is the general impression I have”*
 - iii. *“It's unusual, but there have been a few times when people felt really upset or attacked for bringing up issues.”*
 - iv. *“I was not involved in the conversations in the summer of 2017 that surrounded the scheduling of national MLA meetings (in particular MLA 2019 in St. Louis), but that was pretty uncomfortable to witness. I feel like MLA-L is for professional inquiries and discourse, and I felt like that conversation went beyond the bounds of what MLA-L was supposed to be for. I didn't feel like that thread represented our values as an organization, and as a student at the time, I was a little weirded out by it.”*
 - v. *“Sure. Most commonly when things turn political or when there are local arrangements bumps with the annual meeting. Often it's the same people in either case. I just ignore them. I don't want someone tightly policing MLA-L. On the convention problems, I do feel really bad for the convention managers. They are just trying their best and when you travel, something is bound to go wrong.”*
 - vi. *“The most notable instance of this was when one member was seeking survey participants for a research study on microaggressions, which some members felt compelled to respond dismissively (ironically, using microaggressions themselves).”*
 - vii. *“I have seen numerous sexist/misogynist comments over the years (usually from the same men each time). I've also seen discourse that is extremely classiest and*

ableist, tone dead to the struggles of those in the profession who are struggling in our current economy. These types of comments and discussions have been made not just by regular members, but also by board members, and once in my memory, by the MLA President."

- viii. *"A number of our male members feel the need to "correct" information from female colleagues. Phrases like "Jane Doe is mostly correct, but...." This is always a one-way street: men asserting authority over female members. I never see it taking any other directions."*
 - ix. *"I believe that as a professional listserv, the conversations that take place on the listserv should be directly related to the Music Library Association's mission. While MLA is certainly a left-leaning organization (and I am left-leaning politically and socially myself) there seems to always be an assumption that everyone on MLA-L shares this political leaning and that political discussions are welcome on MLA-L. As a non-political organization, I do not believe that these discussions belong on this particular professional listserv unless they directly relate to our work. I welcome discussions on copyright, for example, but not on political leadership in general. There are other listservs for those discussions. In years past, I used to get a little annoyed with the "Friday Funnies" because I felt like they were somewhat unprofessional but at least they were on topic!"*
 - x. *"Sometimes folks "flame off" on topics on MLA-L instead of going directly to the source (MLA Board, specific officer (Convention Manager), etc.), as if stirring up "outrage" is more important than calmly and sincerely looking for an answer/justification/background. The "assume honest intent" is missing. That's not to say issues can't or shouldn't be posted on MLA-L, just that the tenor of the post needn't be hostile"*
 - xi. *"I know of one MLA-L subscriber who sent disparaging personal emails to individuals based on what they had said on the list."*
8. Have you been a recipient of or a witness to harassment, flaming, or bullying on MLA-L or from list members? – 38 respondents answered yes, 115 respondents answered no, 27 skipped, and 25 respondents provided comments
- a. Representative Comments indicating the need for change:
 - i. *"When people hit "reply all" we can see very harsh remarks by certain individuals. It would be helpful to have criteria that says if you break our code of conduct, you will be removed."*
 - ii. *"I would say less harrassment than flaming--it's generally people who need to check their privilege and realize that theirs are not the only experience that other people or music librarians face."*
 - iii. *"It's often been an admonishment of persons who are older by those who are newer to the profession. There is an aspect of ageism in those interactions, and yes, sometimes from both sides."*
 - iv. *"It was actually off-list, in response to my comments on the list."*
 - v. *"I have certainly witnessed enough of it to change the way I interact with the list. Comments about members being incompetent fall within this category. And what I've witnessed is always white men perpetrating this against women and members of color."*
 - vi. *"I have seen highly derisive comments and beginnings of what I would call flame wars where people on both sides of the argument are acting in unprofessional ways. This has made me very uncomfortable and I have considered leaving the*

- listserv because of exactly this kind of behavior. If it weren't for the fact that I have a responsibility to share legitimate information that is received on this listserv to others at my institution, I would have signed off a few years ago."*
- vii. *"One person objected to the spelling of a word I posted, and contacted me off list. We had quite the exchange."*

The notable responses, in the opinion of the Task Force, are these:

1. From Question 4, we learned that 17.88% of the respondents (n=27) answered no to "Do you feel like you can communicate freely on MLA-L, and with members of the list?"
2. From Question 5, we learned that 20.53% of the respondents (n=31) answered no to "In the past two years, have you felt like participants on MLA-L have created an environment of respectful disagreement, debate, and criticism?"
3. From Question 6, we learned that 11.72% of the respondents (n=17) answered no to "Do you feel like the professional experiences you share on MLA-L have been validated by the community of MLA-L subscribers when you have posted or responded on MLA-L?"
4. From Question 7, we learned that **57.14% of the respondents (n=88) answered yes** to "Have there been instances when you have witnessed or received communication on MLA-L or from list members that was less than collegial, professional, civil, or supportive?"
5. From Question 8, we learned that **24.84% of the respondents (n=38) answered yes** to "Have you been a recipient of or a witness to harassment, flaming, or bullying on MLA-L or from list members?"

The last two statistics (4 and 5), point to a situation that is unacceptable in terms of encouraging our professional community to communicate openly. We recommend that the MLA Board should take positive steps to change this.

More than half of our survey respondents have received or witnessed communication contrary to the Task Force value, "Collegiality, Professionalism, Civility, and Support" from MLA-L members or on the list, and almost one quarter of our respondents have received or witnessed communication contrary to the value, "Freedom from Harassment, Flaming, or Bullying."

We recommend the MLA Board address this by

- Moving MLA-L under the auspices of the Music Library Association, and assigning list moderators.
- Establishing a code of conduct on the list and a means of registering complaints

Other communication forms

- We considered other forms of communication, namely the MLA group on Humanities Commons, but found that it doesn't have the same draw as MLA-L and we do not recommend that as an alternative. Some members communicate via groups on social media, such as the MLA Facebook Page and the Music Librarians Facebook Group.

These recommendations would give list members a way to report transgressions, and a policy for warning and banning list members for violating the code would give MLA a way to enforce better behavior in the hopes that more of our membership would feel comfortable communicating on the list.