

MLA members debate when and how to take a stand on issues such as Israel boycott

Scott Jaschik

When to Take a Stand

https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/vancouverlogo_0.png

https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/vancouverlogo_0.png

January 12, 2015 - 3:00am

January 12, 2015 - 7:46am

Inside Higher Ed

Academic freedom

Humanities

MLA debates when and how it should enter political debates, and whether it should endorse boycott of Israeli universities -- with scholars on all sides invoking academic freedom.

VANCOUVER -- Leaders of the Modern Language Association were hoping that this year's Delegate Assembly would not be [as divisive or chaotic as last year's session](#), where debate over a resolution to criticize Israel at times featured personal attacks, disputes over the rules and plenty of anger -- both from those urging the MLA to condemn Israel and those opposed to the idea.

So MLA leaders convinced the sponsors of two resolutions submitted for consideration here -- one endorsing the boycott of Israeli universities and one opposing academic boycotts -- to withdraw their proposals. And the MLA's Delegate Assembly agreed not to consider Israel boycott measures (pro- or anti-) until the 2017 annual meeting. Instead of debating such measures, the MLA held a 90-minute discussion Saturday of general issues that have been raised in the boycott debate: Should the MLA take stands on controversial political issues? What academic freedom issues are raised by academic boycotts? Are professors being punished for political speech and, if so, what should the MLA do about it?

If the goal was to avoid back and forth on the proposed Israel boycott, the effort may have failed. Many speakers here began their statements by expressing support or opposition to the boycott. And few speakers even attempted to hide their framing of the broader questions the MLA set for discussion within their view in favor or opposed of the boycott of Israel.

Outside the Delegate Assembly meeting, which was dominated by the discussion, the MLA's annual meeting as a whole was much less focused than last year on Israeli-Palestinian issues. While there were sessions on the boycott, hallway chatter was more likely to be about the job market, adjuncts, the state of the humanities or any of the hundreds of language and literature specialties of attendees than it was of the Middle East.

In the Delegate Assembly, however, it was clear that for many members, the disagreement goes beyond the Middle East to the very idea of the MLA issuing statements on political issues. The MLA Delegate Assembly has over the years taken stands on issues that directly relate to the academic profession, such as the treatment of

adjuncts. But it has also weighed in on the Middle East and gun control. And some resolutions have attempted to bring literary and language scholars' expertise to the actions of politicians.

In 2003, for example, the Delegate Assembly adopted a resolution noting that its members are "committed to scrupulous inquiry into language and culture," and condemning the use of the phrase "war on terrorism" as a means to "stigmatize dissent" and "to underwrite military action anywhere in the world."

Refusing to Be Silent

Many scholars here spoke with pride that the MLA takes stands, and urged the association to be unafraid of those who urge it to stay out of politics. Kenneth Surin, professor of literature at Duke University, said he had learned as an undergraduate that "calls for civility can trump those who are disadvantaged and who suffer injustice." He said that he worried about those who narrowly define the role academics should play, and said that such limits "constrain us in ways that are constipating."

"Some of us are brawlers and will not be silenced," he said.

Grover Furr, a professor of English at Montclair State University and one of the organizers of the MLA's Radical Caucus (a frequent sponsor of resolutions), said that when he was a graduate student in the 1960s, the MLA "was seen as a stodgy organization dominated by senior faculty." That changed, he said, when the MLA took a stand against the Vietnam War. He asked attendees to think about what the MLA would have been like, and how it might have attracted more support, if it had boycotted segregated universities in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s -- and said that the MLA should always be looking for important political issues on which to speak out.

Other speakers, however, asked why it was that so many resolutions come from the Radical Caucus, and why others aren't submitting them.

Russell A. Berman, a professor of comparative literature and German studies at Stanford University, said it was time to "rethink the resolution process seriously." Berman said that the MLA Delegate Assembly has passed resolutions "that don't represent the will of the vast majority of MLA members."

In theory, the MLA deals with this issue with [a requirement adopted in 2011](#) that requires measures approved by the Delegate Assembly to be forwarded to the general membership for ratification. To be official MLA policy, the statements must then win the support of a majority of those voting, and that majority must make up at least 10 percent of the association's membership -- a threshold that has been met, but that also has resulted in measures that passed the Delegate Assembly ultimately failing.

Last year, for example, the Delegate Assembly narrowly adopted a resolution criticizing Israel. When the measure was sent to members for ratification, 1,560 backed ratification and 1,063 votes against. But the required minimum Yes votes was 2,390, so the resolution did not become MLA policy.

Patrick Gallagher, a professor of modern and classical language studies at Kent State University, said that the 10 percent requirement was wrong. Since Delegate Assembly members are elected, he said, they have the right to adopt measures on behalf of the MLA.

"I feel that the Delegate Assembly is the representative body of the Modern Language Association," he said. "We're hamstringing ourselves by the passive membership of the MLA." He said that "the relevancy of the MLA, of the humanities, of the liberal arts is only strengthened" when the association takes strong positions.

Salah D. Hassan, associate professor of postcolonial studies, Arab American and Muslim American studies at Michigan State University, said that it was "incoherent" to require 10 percent approval for resolutions and not for all MLA matters, such as elections to the Delegate Assembly. "If we set the bar at 10 percent for everything, we couldn't elect anyone."

Others, however, strongly backed the 10 percent threshold. Martin Shichtman, a professor of English language and literature at Eastern Michigan University, said that "what those who are against [the 10 percent requirement] are asking is that the loudest and most aggressive should rule. If those who are asking that we do away with 10 percent have backing, they should be able to galvanize opinion and they have been unable to do. So now they are asking to remove it." He said that if the requirement is eliminated "a tiny minority" would rule the MLA.

Sam Edelman, a retired professor from California State University at Chico, said that he favored the 10 percent rule because it helps the association avoid taking stands where it shouldn't. "What the MLA says about the Middle East is irrelevant," he said. The MLA should be speaking out more about adjuncts, and public education, and the curriculum and the state of graduate education, he said. "These things are being hijacked ... by a very small minority."

Of those who spoke on the 10 percent issue and who took or have previously taken public stands in the Israel boycott, all who favored the 10 percent minimum oppose the boycott and all who argued for eliminating the requirement back the boycott.

Sean M. Kennedy, a doctoral student in English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, said that the entire discussion Saturday was a veiled attempt to avoid the real issues.

"Let's be clear ... that the MLA is asking if we should engage in political issues as if the MLA isn't already political," he said. And he criticized the MLA for not bringing forward the two boycott resolutions, and said that the entire program was designed to avoid a debate on the boycott of Israeli academe, which he backs. "The Israeli state is being given overwhelmingly special treatment," he shouted, as the microphone was cut off because he had reached the time limit for his comments. "This a charade. Shame. Shame," he shouted, to applause. (The microphone was cut off on other speakers who exceeded their time as well, in what appeared to be equal enforcement of time limits on speakers of all sides.)

The Boycott Itself

In the discussion of academic boycotts, which for practical purposes here was a discussion of the boycott of Israeli universities, most of the arguments were not new. Supporters of the boycott spoke of the need to bolster Palestinian statehood and to oppose the Israeli government's policies toward Palestinians. Critics of the boycott proffered their view that academic freedom does not permit boycotts of universities or scholars for the policies of their governments. Both sides invoked academic freedom, but in different ways.

One scholar who studies Israel spoke about how the boycott would affect her. "I cannot do my academic work without using archives in Israel institutions, without hosting postdocs paid for by Israel universities," she said. "For my colleagues to limit my ability ... to conduct research is to take away our freedom as American scholars to understand the other from within."

After others said that she had illustrated the way a boycott limits academic freedom, that argument was challenged in a number of ways. Kennedy of CUNY said that it was important to distinguish between "academic privileges" and "academic freedom." Publishing papers and attending conferences, activities that might be limited by a boycott, "are privileges," he said. No Palestinian scholars in the West Bank or Gaza have any academic freedom, he said.

Jeffrey Sacks, associate professor of Arabic and comparative literature, said that it might be true that the academic freedom of some Israeli scholars could be limited by a boycott. But, he said, "maybe the limiting of their freedom will be a good thing. ... a gift to our Israeli colleagues to think a little bit differently about their situation."

The loudest and most sustained applause of the event (despite the participants being repeatedly told not to applaud) was for Steven Salaita,

"My name is Steven Salaita. I am an independent scholar," he began. He noted that he was an independent scholar because "because I was fired from a position for speaking against Israeli brutality in the Gaza Strip." (Salaita had resigned from his past position teaching English at Virginia Tech after being offered a job at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, [a position that was revoked](#).)

Salaita took a not-so-hidden barb at Cary Nelson, a professor at Illinois who has defended the university's decision to block Salaita's hire and who spoke here against academic boycotts.

Said Salaita: "Some of the folks who have expressed opposition to the boycott have also been at the forefront of cheering the university on in its decision" to block his hiring. "You will have to excuse me if I treat the argument against BDS [boycott, divestment, sanctions of Israel] on the grounds of academic freedom as crocodile tears," he said. To those raising concerns about academic freedom, "I look forward to you condemning the University of Illinois," he said.

Individuals or Institutions?

One point of repeated discussion was whether a boycott of Israeli academe would affect only institutions (as boycott proponents say) or individuals (as argued by critics of the boycott).

Both sides pointed to [guidelines](#), revised in July, from the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel.

Pro-boycott speakers noted that the guidelines explicitly indicate an emphasis on institutions and respect for academic freedom. And indeed the guidelines state that they back "the universal right to academic freedom" and that they reject "on principle boycotts of individuals based on their identity (such as citizenship, race, gender, or religion) or opinion."

But boycott critics noted that the document also refers to "common sense boycotts" of "egregious individual complicity in, responsibility for, or advocacy of violations of international law," which boycott critics noted is what many critics of Israel say of many of that country's academics.

Further, they noted that the guidelines include specific provisions that would discourage publication in Israeli journals (regardless of the views of the journal's editors or authors), and service on dissertation or tenure review committees of scholars at Israeli universities. While the guidelines state that some scholars may wish to do so in a personal capacity, they also state that people following the boycott can't send such letters to administrators of any Israeli universities.

Further, critics repeatedly said that because the top Israeli universities are all state-supported, the idea that they could interact with scholars in ways that did not touch Israeli government support in any way was unrealistic.

Speaking of unrealistic, one attendee quipped after the meeting that the significance of holding off on boycott resolutions until January 2017 was that this created a deadline for peace in the Middle East, in which case the resolutions would be moot.

Academic freedom