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Letters to the Editor

We're Not Attacking Western Culture

The Executive Council of the Modern Language Association has noted with dismay the recent appearance of a number of books and articles, including your May 3 and 23 editorials, that decry "political correctness" on American campuses. These texts charge that teachers of language and literature, with the support of the MLA, are eliminating the classics of Western civilization from the curriculum and making certain attitudes toward race, class, gender, sexual orientation or political affiliation the sole measure of a text's value. Some teachers, it is said, intimidate colleagues who do not comply with their own political agendas, and they subvert reason, truth and artistic standards in order to impose crude ideological dogmas on students. Normally, the MLA Executive Council would not comment on the approaches members use in their scholarly work or classrooms; however, recent statements call for a response.

The MLA, a century-old learned society, consists of almost 30,000 college and university scholars and teachers of the modern languages and literature representing a wide spectrum of histories, interests, scholarly methodologies and approaches to teaching. In view of their great diversity, it is unreasonable to suggest they are imposing a monolithic ideology on the college curriculum. Over the past decade, many have introduced new writers and raised new issues in their courses, and there is a lively debate within the field about the proper scope and focus of literary and language studies. But this debate is scarcely unprecedented; it is an extension of the legitimate process that has always made the college curriculum in the U.S. responsive to the changing interests of society and the changing shape of intellectual disciplines.

What is most disturbing in the attacks against the MLA and individual members is the persistent resort to misrepresentation and false labeling. While loudly invoking rational debate, open discussion and responsible scholarship, these attacks distort evidence and reduce complex issues to slogans and name-calling. Further, they fail to acknowledge the many differences in philosophical and other positions represented among proponents for curricular change who, whether or not one agrees with them, are raising important questions about culture, language and society.

Far from having discarded the established canon, most teachers of literature and language continue to teach the traditional works of Western culture, even as a growing number introduce new or ne-

glected works of Western and other cultures. Instead of attacking traditional works on political grounds, these teachers are re-enlivening the study of literature and language by raising challenging questions from new perspectives. Contrary to the charge that such questions and perspectives debase standards, they have stimulated students to think more critically, rigorously and creatively.

Changes in what we teach our students have never been free of controversy. In this context, it is useful to recall that the Modern Language Association arose in 1863 precisely out of such controversy—the opposition to adding the teaching of English and other modern languages and literatures to a curriculum dominated by Greek and Latin. The teaching of American literature, as distinct from English literature, evolved after World War I out of a similar dispute, in which many claimed that educational standards were being sacrificed to popular taste. And 50 years ago there was strong resistance to the introduction into literature classes of writers such as Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Garcia Lorca, and Faulkner.

Literature has always been a theater of contention over social, aesthetic and ethical values, and so has the study of literature and language. Recent changes in our culture have intensified these concerns in ways that need to be discussed in a spirit of mutual respect. The Modern Language Association will do everything it can to make the current controversy—at the moment so acrimonious—fruitful and genuinely educational.

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President

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