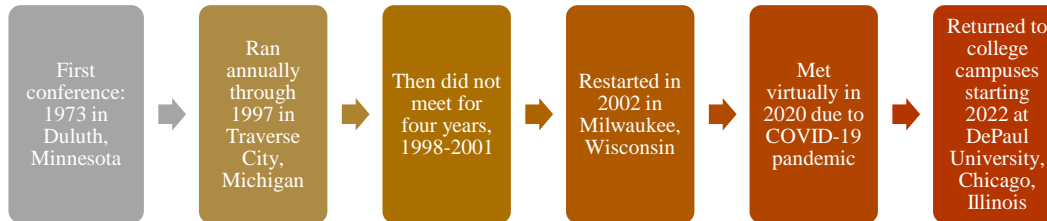


An Oral History on the Return of MPCA/ACA



The Initial Run

Gary Burns:¹ It's often stated that the American Culture Association was created by people in the 1970s so that people had a conference to go to where they could talk about popular culture without having to put that phrase on their resume. I don't see that as big of a problem as it used to be, but it probably still exists in some circles. I know people in my own department – and I received a lot of good support from my university – but some people thought I should have been interested in going to a more prestigious organization, like the International Communication Association. Part of what motivated Ray Browne, back at the beginning, was to value culture – not just elite culture – and to value ways of studying culture that were not just about putting a theory or method front and center.

Timothy Scheurer: We would get the blocks from hotels, and we would get decent prices, but then someone could find someplace cheaper. Then we weren't filling rooms, and the hotels are adamant to have a certain capacity. The hotels have been kind of problematic. I know Ray was always complaining about hotels and what we needed, even at the national level.

Gary Burns: If you look at the National Communication Association, they do sort of have regional affiliates: Central, Eastern, Southern, and Western. They divided the country into four regions, and the American Studies Association does that, too, which is, I'm sure, the model Ray Browne would have been more familiar with. He even had the idea – which I think was overreach, which Ray was prone to – for every state to have its own popular culture association. That ended up not happening, but there were some efforts at that kind of thing early in the Popular Culture Association's history.

¹ For more on Gary Burns reflections on MPCA's history, check out his essay in this issue.

Timothy Scheurer: Before Gary relaunched it, most of the MPCA conferences were held at universities. In fact, I ran one in Columbus, at a private college. Thankfully I had some nice colleagues who helped manage registration desks, and we had a public relations person who was more than willing to host a little get together one of the nights. But it was a lot of work. It was really awesome when it was done. But then over time, even Ray Browne couldn't keep it running.

Angela Spence Nelson: I remember attending the conferences in 1996 and 1997, and then we didn't have any meetings. Carl Holmberg organized the 1996 conference at Bowling Green State University, so I just attended because it was held on campus. Carl was MPCA Executive Secretary then, but he died in 2002.

Gary Burns: There was a conference in 1997 in Travers City Michigan, at Northwestern Michigan College, that was run by Garyn G. Roberts, who oversaw MPCA at the time. Then he scheduled one for the following year, 1998, at the Holiday Inn/Holidome in Crystal Lake, Illinois. What I got from Ray Browne at the time on why it did not end up happening is that there were not enough people registered for the conference. I actually did register for that one. I had not been going to MPCA, but that one was very close to where I am, so I signed up for it. But the problem was that it was in Crystal Lake, which is a far northwest suburb of Chicago. Garyn chose it because that is where Chester Gould's widow lived. Gould created the Dick Tracy comic strip, which was one of Garyn's research interests, and he wanted to connect the conference with her and Dick Tracy. Ray said Garyn even spent some amount of his own money on the conference and lost that money when it was cancelled.

The Pause

Gary Burns: So that one conference was cancelled and then, apparently, there was no effort by anybody to start one for the next year. I was President of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. One of my duties or perks, or combination of the two, was to travel to some of the regional conferences and say a few words. My term as President was ending, so I talked to Ray about doing something else. I wanted to stay involved, and I had the idea that I could do some fundraising. Ray said the most pressing thing that needed to be done was to revive the Midwest regional. This was about 1998, and I told Ray I would do that.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: Gary told me about MPCA and how it hadn't been around for a long time, like three or four years. And he gave me his opinion on why

– I don't know the exact facts, but I believe what he said is true. They used to go to larger cities, and then money became an issue and participants dried up. This is why I've been afraid to have the MPCA conference go back to universities. Because once they started moving the conference to universities, attendance died off, and pretty soon they were getting fewer and fewer people. They were choosing universities that were not easy to get to. So, like, I love Bowling Green State University – I mean, it's like the birthplace, right? But it's hard to get to. There are no good hotels within driving distance. Everything would have to be a shuttle. It was all work, and Gary was fairly certain that's why MPCA died off. It wasn't because of the scholarship, but travel became an issue for people.

Timothy Scheurer: I actually think the hotel is less of an issue than the place. In other words, when we had ours it was in downtown Columbus, so I could come up with a restaurant list, including a five-star restaurant, that was about three blocks from our campus, as we were right downtown. Now, downtown Columbus then is not like it is now. It's a little bit more vibrant now, but you didn't have to go very far to find a decent restaurant and other kinds of entertainment. With the hotels, it's just that everyone is in one place, but I think it's actually being in urban centers that matters. That's why I think Ray never wanted to get too far away from big colleges. Having it on a small college was not very appealing to people. Except for mine, where we sent out information about the downtown area when we provided information about the meeting. I would say it's less the hotel and more the place. I think maybe moving away from the hotels but making sure to be in urban centers is spot on.

Angela Spence Nelson: Maybe without Carl, they could not pull things together, or there weren't enough people that were a driving force behind it. I don't know if Carl just felt that he couldn't take the time anymore. I mean, I think it's sad, but I also think it's interesting in the sense that it demonstrates just how much academic institutions are created by people.

Gary Burns: There's a gap of three more years before it actually got revived, and that is because the first thing I tried to do was connect it with the Great Plains PCA. Great Plains was also in trouble, and we thought that by combining the two we could save both. But that ended up not happening. We were going to have a conference in Missouri, which is kind of Midwest and Great Plains, I guess. That would've been 1999, but it didn't work out either, because not enough people signed up. So, you start to see a little theme there.

Timothy Scheurer: The 1998 conference was going to be in northern Illinois somewhere, but when they saw the registration numbers, they decided to put a hold on the conference for a while. And then that hold just kept going until Gary said he was trying to bring it back. I do remember that there was some talk of trying to collaborate with the Great Plains PCA, but I actually don't know what happened in that regard. I do remember Gary contacting other regionals in the hopes that it would beef up the numbers for both regionals if they worked together.

Paul Booth: You know, it's possible that these things come in waves. Like when there's lots of students and attendees, and then none. We've been in a bit of a downturn recently, and maybe they were also in one back then. We were able to keep going during the pandemic because of Zoom, but not back then. Maybe they were just taking a little break to see what the interest is.

Cortney Barko: Sometimes in situations where you struggle, or where you have to rebuild, you encounter a problem, and you have to come together and figure it out. In those sorts of difficult situations, you can find that the organization comes together, and you feel proud of what you're doing to rebuild. Because you don't do it alone; you're always doing it with other people. We work as a team to get everything done; it's not like you have to be here to do all this stuff alone. We will make it work. We've got this, and we're going to figure it out. You never feel like you're by yourself doing that, including relaunching the association, and bringing the conference back.

Gary Burns: The next thing I tried to do, probably in 2000, is to connect with the Midwestern Conference on Literature, Language, and Media, which is run out of Northern Illinois University. Since I'm at NIU, I thought maybe there would be some interest in having a joint conference, connecting the two organizations. I don't exactly know the reason they were not interested in doing that. I then received a full year sabbatical in 2001, and I finally got it through my thick head that the only way to revive the organization was to try to relaunch it as an independent entity and forget about this business of trying to connect with something else. So, that's what I did.

The Return

Gary Burns: I used a lot of my sabbatical to do that relaunch, which is not what NIU would have wanted me to do, but I did it anyway. I had a teaching assistant that year, helping me edit *Popular Music and Society*. That was supposed to be her

assignment. And she did that, too, but I borrowed some of her time to help me re-establish the conference. I cannot overstate the contribution Lori Abels, now Lori Scharenbroich, made to getting MPCA back up and going.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: I went to Northern Illinois University to get my masters. I was actually paired up with a different advisor, and we got along well enough. But the person I actually connected with was Gary Burns from the first time I sat down in his research methods class. I hadn't done any of the reading for that first day of class – actually, I looked at the reading and thought what have I gotten myself into? So, I sat in class and the first thing he asked was, “What did everybody think of the reading?” Of course, I immediately try to avoid eye contact, but he finds me and asks me again.

I said, “Well, I have to be really honest. It was really difficult and dense to get through, and I didn't finish it all.” And he goes, “Perfect, because that's what that was supposed to teach all of you.” He liked my honest answer and went on to talk about how so much of this stuff is written in a way that not everyone can understand. He very much helped me find my voice, which was somewhat like more plain speaking, trying to talk through things to make it understandable to the average reader. From then on I took every single class that I could get my hands on from him, and we even started hanging out, including his now wife Janet, who I became very dear friends with. We would meet at this bar called Twins Tavern to drink and play cards.

Angela Spence Nelson: It seemed like a good number of Gary's graduate students at the time were helping with the organization: at the registration tables to help with setting up and all of that. It was nice to see the growth of the conference. Gary and his graduate students, a mix of masters and doctoral, were just so important to the whole thing, making sure that any problems were handled.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: Gary asked me to be his teaching assistant my second year, where I wouldn't have to teach but just help him with his journal, *Popular Music and Society*. He also said there were other projects that he wanted to get off the ground. I immediately said yes and even started working for him that summer. The idea was I would help him manage submissions, get things to reviewers, log things when they came back. After I was acclimated with that, he asks me, “What do you know about planning conferences?” I was like...nothing? I was twenty-two years old; what on Earth would I know about anything at that point in my life. So, I said, “I don't know anything,” and he said, “Do you want to learn?” I said sure, because of course I wanted to learn anything that he was willing to teach me.

Gary Burns: We spoke with Pat Browne on what had gone wrong, consulting on what to do and how to do it. Her suggestion was don't have it in places like Crystal Lake. It needs to be in a big city with an airport so that it's easy for people to come from some distance if they are interested. In a big city you can also have it in a hotel, making it an attractive destination so you'd probably have a pretty good turnout. So, I discussed it with Lori, and we settled on Milwaukee. We also figured out to set up the one after it so that we could announce it at the time of the Milwaukee conference and generate interest that way. Also, it would make it look like the conference was a going concern and that we knew what we were doing.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: Gary said he wanted to plan the first two together, because you need to pick a big city that has a major airport that people can get into. He said to think about cities that have a football team. Gary is not a football fan, to my knowledge, but that's what he knew was needed. He gave me the boundaries of the region, what Midwest states to think about. He said it needs to be at a nice hotel that has food and accommodations so everyone could stay in one spot. He also wanted the city to have enough culture so there would be other things for people to do that could possibly draw them in.

Angela Spence Nelson: I could remember going around and around on the Executive Council talking about whether to have it on a college campus. But people felt like we're better at a hotel and in a city that people would be interested in going to. Somewhere they can sightsee and tour as well as attend papers. The trick is going to be still keeping the conference in cities that people want to attend, and at colleges where you have the hotels and all of these accommodations nearby.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: Ray and Pat Browne were new names to me, and now they were people that I needed to call. So, I called Pat, who could not have been a more delightful human being. I told her that I was working with Gary, and she loved Gary to death, was ready to do anything she could to help him. So, she gave me a lot of tips on what to ask a hotel, what an RSP is, and really walked me through all these things that I just didn't know. She gave me a good instruction manual on how to do it. Gary was going to be the first Executive Secretary, and he started asking his friends and scholars in the area to be the first executive board. The hard part was that I always felt like a kid in the room with all these grown-ups who had written beautiful books and were major scholars in their area. And then here I was, this little graduate student following Gary around like, what do you need me to do?

Angela Spence Nelson: I think it was about one year before the relaunch, in October of 2001, I received an email from Gary Burns about wanting to relaunch

MPCA. I think he said to me that Ray Browne wanted him to do it, and so he was going to do it. He asked me to just select areas that I would be the area chair for, so I chose African American popular culture, teaching popular culture, and professional development. I did three areas for about eight to ten years.

Timothy Scheurer: Gary contacted me and said he was going to get it up and running. I had been the President of the national ACA, so he asked if I would be willing to just get us started by serving as MPCA president in the initial start-up. I said, sure, as I would do anything for Gary, quite frankly.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: The first event was actually held after I had graduated, but I still came along because I had been part of that. Gary insisted on paying me because I was no longer in academics – I had made a choice at that time that I didn't want to stay and get a PhD. So, we went to Milwaukee, at a Wyndham downtown, and I think we had like ninety-nine people show up. That was great! Gary and I manned the registration desk together. We just sat there, took checks and cash. Nothing was done electronically. I did build our first website, hand-coded, because it was all I knew at that time, and it was just like the bare bone details. People submitted their papers, and Gary handled all of them. He and I put together the first program where he printed out every panel on a sheet of paper and we sat at that bar and made a spreadsheet. By hand. We did that for the first five years, putting the program together by hand.

Timothy Scheurer: The difference that Gary did was that we're going to be meeting in hotels and not doing college campuses anymore. It was just too complicated. Gary worked very hard getting the hotel, and Lori was terrific helping. And his core people at NIU, they really helped him a lot. Everything really went pretty well. At the time, the biggest challenge I remember as President was finding some relatively notable speakers to come, because it was such a small conference. It was difficult, too, in terms of traveling, where people have X amount of funds and need to use it for bigger conferences. Going to regionals is always an issue. But we try to keep costs down for everybody, and they are attended pretty well. I think it helped being in the cities, not being on college campuses.

Cortney Barko: It was a friendly conference. It was in graduate school days, and I got to travel with my friends; here we're all practicing our presentations in the van and everything. We were nervous about the presentations, as we hadn't done many of them. But MPCA was a great starter conference for me as a graduate student. For all the years that I have been involved in the organization since, it started out with me as a lowly graduate student just looking to present some papers.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: I think my job mostly was to make sure that people had a good time. Because if they have a really great experience, they will want to come back. And it doesn't matter whether you're in academia or not. That's just a human lesson to learn. Treat people well and give them a good experience, and they'll continue to come back; and then, maybe next time they will bring a friend. And they did, from Milwaukee to Minneapolis. I think we had maybe 125 to 150 people that next year in downtown Minneapolis. That's where I met Paul Booth, Brendan Riley, and Kathleen Turner. I think that was their first MPCA adventure, and we became good, close friends.

Paul Booth: MPCA was the very first conference I ever went to, back in 2003, when I was in my master's program. I wrote this paper for a summer class on DVD extras and gave it to Gary. Gary said they were putting together a couple panels of students from that class and asked if I wanted to present. I was like, are you kidding, I've been a graduate student for only two months! But I thought it sounded like fun, and I'd literally never heard of academic conferences. So, my roommate and I got in a van, drove up to Minneapolis, and presented my paper. Well, I didn't know how long a conference presentation was, and I didn't have a laptop. So, I had printed off my twenty-page paper and was planning to read it. They said, no, it's like a fifteen minute presentation, which is five or seven pages tops. So, there was I was the night before, in my hotel room, literally cutting my paper up, rearranging paragraphs, and taping them to hotel stationery just to be able to present. Then the next year, Gary asked me if I wanted to be an area chair. I was so honored and, looking back, I'm sure they needed a lot of area chairs, but I don't think he would've asked if he didn't think I could do it.

The Importance of MPCA/ACA

Gary Burns: I think the regional organizations provide a service to people who, for whatever reason, can't come to the national conference or don't want to – because it would cost too much money, or they don't like to travel, or whatever. So, by having the regional associations, you have something for them to do, and then it serves as a kind of feeder system for the national. And not just for attendance. All the regional associations have their own organizational structure with officers and serving for them helps you learn how to run a conference. You become an officer in a regional organization and then, when it's time, if there's some need, you can serve at the national level.

Paul Booth: I think we could say that at this point, MPCA is proactive in creating this safer space for academic experiments. I think we all share a philosophy of throw spaghetti against the wall and see if it sticks. We are an incubator. We are a chance to try things out.

Gary Burns: They say the states are the laboratory for American democracy, and I do think the regional associations might be viewed in the same way as laboratories for different ways to do things. The regionals have a great amount of independence which, sometimes, I know frustrated people in the national association. But the regionals have always served an experimental function.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: Gary recognized that it was important to start bringing in young scholars after those first several years. This was a man nearing the end of his teaching career, but he still had a healthy respect for young scholars and making sure they were included, and their voices heard. He really wanted to make sure that young people were involved as well.

Timothy Scheurer: With Midwest, there was always this theme of people who were just kind of glad to be there. We had a lot of graduate students who were just cutting their teeth, and the last thing you want to do is sit up there and rake them over the coals on some petty point. I remember my very first presentation as a graduate student. My first paper presentation at a national meeting was on a panel called Unpopular Approaches to Popular Film. The room was packed, and I was ready to have somebody take my head off. I thought, oh, this is the way the rest of my academic career is going to go; I'm going to be in front of the firing squad. But then, at subsequent meetings I went to, there were more questions like "what do you think about so and so?" and "what do you think about this?" and "have you thought about this?" – but it wasn't "Well, I don't really agree with that point. I think you missed something vital." The MPCA is particularly good at encouraging graduate students. I know that professional development has been a rather consistent area.

Anthony Adah: There were two things that came out of my first MPCA attendance in 2009. One was that I decided to start an Indigenous Studies area that has been ongoing since and pulls in a large number of international participants, from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. The second thing was at the general business meeting, the discussion was on membership numbers going down.

So, I'm listening to them, and I suggested opening more to graduate students by helping them publish with an in-house journal.²

Darryl Clark: After my first presentation at MPCA was over, I walked up to Paul Booth, where I went, "Why isn't there a dance area here?" He looked at me and goes, "Why don't you make one?" And I said, "Well, okay, I will." And he said, "Well, then, do it!" We're just laughing all the time, and I went, "Wait! Did that just happen?" I went back to my university, and I was like, I think I just became the head of a dance area that I created. Yeah, I did that. It was fantastic that I just made that happen. And that's one reason why I've been so into this organization: it doesn't make scholarship something stodgy and privileged. It makes it something that is open to everyone to participate in and enjoy the results of their participation. To just to be able to like, walk up to the Vice-President of an organization and say something like that. I just don't think I would have asked that question to anybody else that way. I know I wouldn't have. I would be a little bit more restrained.

Cortney Barko: Right from the beginning, at the registration desk, people seemed generally happy to see me. Lori and the other people she had at the registration desk, they greeted you; they smiled at you, and they answered questions that I had along the way. The first people I remember meeting when I got to the conference were super nice. And then in the panels – I've been in many MPCA panels at this point, and there's always been a very collegial atmosphere. There's always been a friendly person who's panel chair, who welcomes and introduces you, and is even supportive of you throughout your presentation. And the discussions after you present a paper have always been really helpful and collegial as well.

Darryl Clark: When I was on faculty at Missouri State, I tried to bring as many undergraduates in particular with me as I possibly could, especially those that were interested in doing research and those that were good writers and presenters. I wanted them to be able to take their ideas to the next level or present them to an audience of people who are interested in learning about something else. They need to learn the value of talking about their ideas, sharing their ideas with people who don't know anything about their topic, and learning how they can be even better scholars by filling in those holes for people who are not dance practitioners. I feel like that happens there. It's a great environment to do that in.

Cortney Barko: As a graduate student, I really think you need that kind of extra support to get comfortable with presenting research. It was always just a very

² See the oral history on the PCSJ for more of this story.

welcoming group of people who legitimately wanted to be there to do good work. We genuinely care about the work we're doing. We don't get paid for what we do; we're doing it because we legitimately care about the association. And that caring is really important in creating that welcoming environment, that sense of comfort and collegiality. That's something that I think is rare in associations. I've presented my work at other conferences, both regional and national, and I've never felt that same sort of camaraderie as we have at MPCA. At other conferences, maybe you remember the location you went to, but at MPCA you remember the people, the conversations – you remember Brendan Riley in his regalia, collecting answer sheets from tables, and you remember sitting at the table with the keynote speaker who stayed after his presentation to take part in the quiz. I could sit in the hallway at any of those other conferences, and I don't think anyone even talked to me.

Gary Burns: It's always friendly and synergistic. I have never felt welcome at some conferences, like NCA. That feeling is completely different at PCA, and even more so at the regionals. MPCA is one of the things that I look forward to every year.

Timothy Scheurer: Ray's whole thing was a kind of democratization. In some cases, it sort of bothered me that the MPCA paper submissions were on what seemed to be odd topics. But then you get to the presentation and it's all fascinating. I do think national and especially the regional are good places for graduate students. Forty years in academia, and I have never attended a Modern Language Association meeting. And the only reason I ever went to a Conference on College Composition and Communication meeting is because I had to interview job candidates.

Jennifer Dunn: In terms of popular culture scholarship, everybody's at the in-between, and so you get to meet so many different people that you can talk to about the in-between spaces and the intersecting spaces. There's a lot more acceptance of work without having to define your disciplinary position. When I try to explain my research trajectory to someone in MPCA, they say it sounds like what they've done. I like that intersection. I like that acceptance and support of the work we do.

Nick Bestor: A lot of these disciplinary boundaries feel kind of silly to me. They ultimately overly silo us off from each other. I wish I had been exposed to more overtly popular culture studies and scholars who do not identify themselves in a specific silo. I think if I could do it all over again, I would get a degree in popular culture studies. That history of at least American academia and its need to legitimize so as to pushback against people who question why we are spending money researching something. That kind of more binary thinking has been in place

for so long. I think younger scholars are much more embracing of the both/and, and being interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. But popular culture studies, it's all welcome to our field! That's a problem of many academic fields needing to go through this process of defining, legitimizing, and then cordoning off and gatekeeping.

Malynnda Johnson: This is a conference that I absolutely love. It is fun, and I love celebrating nerdy research. This is a conference where you can grow and celebrate being nerdy together, which I love. I love how open we are to cultivating and supporting young researchers and independent researchers that you definitely don't see at other conferences. I think it's a great opportunity for young scholars and people trying to get their feet in administration. I can cut my teeth on what it means to be area chair, an at-large member, and all these different positions.

Nick Bestor: I don't remember who exactly put the CFP in my mailbox, but I got an email specifically talking about how this conference has a tabletop game study area. And I was like, well, that's a lot of what I do, so I submitted something from my dissertation. Especially as somebody who's an outsider, like outside the geographical area, and for someone with my specific academic niche, I feel like MPCA is a great little conference. One of the things I really loved is how y'all have been so welcoming. You all sort of went out of your way to make me feel welcome. I had several reasons to feel like a bit of an outsider at my first MPCA, but it's been such a welcoming conference to be a part of. Like, the very first year I was there, Paul Booth asked if I wanted to do an escape room with them – that was very nice, and I really appreciated it. There's more room for actual human connections at a conference the scale of MPCA.

Darryl Clark: You don't get the same type of "reviewer number two" criticism that you might get in the more prestigious conferences. I think that's part of the interesting thing about the PCA regions. At other associations, there was a certain amount of rigor that they wanted in their papers that people would present, and I realized that I wasn't that type of scholar. I don't think that that should hold a person back if they realized I don't write that way. I don't use that kind of language when I write. I don't want to go down that road, or either. I don't research that kind of way. I don't use those words. I don't use those phrases. Policing academic boundaries really does not make any sense. It just hurts the overall scholarship. People demoralize others for so many different reasons. But when academics do it to other academics, it's just really sad, because it seems so antithetical to what academia is supposed to be.

Paul Booth: MPCA was very formative for how I view scholarship and academia. I have almost never, in twenty odd years of going to MPCA, witnessed any kind of one-upmanship or “this is more of a comment than a question” or just being aggressive to young scholars. Everything I have seen has been friendly, engaging, and there to support people. I felt that when I was there as a young scholar and didn’t know what I was doing. There were people who helped me. There’s the giving back part of it and wanting to continue to foster an environment that’s friendly to graduate students and empowers them, because it was for me. Unless I’m misremembering, I don’t think we’ve ever had formal conversations about this. I don’t recall ever in an executive meeting sitting there and saying, “How do we create an environment that is friendly to young scholars?” I think it’s just assumed. I think if it wasn’t happening we would rush to correct it. We try to be friendly and engaging, and we don’t try to make someone feel bad for not knowing something. MPCA is small enough that, like, we can do trivia together. Something that’s just kind of fun. It shows you that academia and the academic way of life doesn’t have to be a grind. There are pleasures to be had in the academic community. We just need to change some long-seated issues and adjust the paradigm to align with the world.

Nick Bestor: Sometimes you see these talks at big flagship conferences where the person just published something and are reading a part of it. It’s like an ad for their book. As someone who is at a very different point in their research and career, I don’t know how helpful it is seeing someone present something that is fully formed. As someone who has struggled with the research side of academia lately, there’s something methodologically very nice about having that space for just sharing ideas and seeing how it connects. I really appreciate if anyone has any suggestions on something I’m missing – if there’s a bridge out there that I haven’t found in my research. I think I’ve always appreciated the more half-baked presentations. I always find they bring a really fun energy to the talk.

The Future of the Association

Lori Abels Scharenboich: There were points after Minneapolis when we had to ask the national for a loan, because we overspent at the hotel. We didn’t realize at the time that whenever someone presenting asked the hotel for help with the AV, the hotel would of course help, but did so without asking us if that was okay. So, we overran our bill quite a bit, and national bailed us out – never expecting us to pay them back. We tried, but they wouldn’t take our money. So, there were hard

days like that. And then we grew, and there were different challenges, such as the pandemic and that decision to go completely virtual – almost be bankrupted in 2020. But I think what's been great is that no one ever wanted to stop. No one ever thought, "Oh, maybe this organization has run its course." We've always been creative enough to figure out how to roll with the times.

Timothy Scheurer: Quite frankly I've been pleased to see that the national and regionals are still running. We had this debt initially, back in the 1970s, when Ray was getting the program started. I had a lot of confidence that Gary would get something up and running, and that he would make it a good organization. I just think it's great that it's still running. What I hear that MPCA is doing, that is essentially what I think needs to be done. I think it needs to be open. It needs to be very inclusive with a wide range of topics and people. We tried sometimes to reach out to high school teachers. We didn't get a lot, but we had some dedicated ones who even presented sometimes. We even had a teacher one time who brought his students: it's like an initiation, showing them what it's like going into academia. I know you have enough to do without worrying about any more outreach, but perhaps think about doing that, especially in English and Social Studies departments. Just sending out notices, see if you have students who may be interested in attending. I would say that might be helpful in building up the future.

Jennifer Dunn: I think one of the differences with MPCA is that you see a lot more students presenting – which you do see that at other conferences, but here I've seen full panels of student work, and I feel like that is really great to be able to give students that opportunity to be accepted and have that conference presentation experience. The flip side of that is some of them are not ready to present at a conference, and I wish there were more formative mechanisms to help them get better. Maybe area chairs can work to mentor students on emerging research and scholars' panels, where an established scholar is there to observe and give feedback to support students.

Anthony Adah: I had a special position where I was responsible for working with the winning graduate student paper to help them get it ready for publication. I don't know anyone who does that right now. There's no real communication with the student. I think we should really take care to invite the person who is working with student papers to the Executive Council meetings. I think that person needs to be a little more central to the structure of the association. But we also need to rethink how to schedule student presentations. I try to come to the conference with people, and this year I came with three undergraduate students – three of the four at the conference. But they were all programmed in the same panel. They're coming from

the same course, and most likely they would have heard some iteration of the papers. Why would they be in the same panel? Spread them out so they can interact and mingle with other people.

Cortney Barko: I would like to see more people nominate themselves for open positions like for Vice President. I can't recall a time when we've had any sort of large number of people who have either self-nominated or been nominated for those positions, and I would love to see new people come in and show interest in working in one of those positions. We need more people and new people to come into those roles and start taking positions in the Executive Council, because it's so important to get in new people. I know we don't get paid, but the perk is your professionalization and getting that experience serving on an executive council in a leadership role.

Lori Abels Scharenbroich: I feel like we've always been a decently diverse group, but I think we can always do more. I feel like we used to have a bigger queer studies area, and that's fallen off a bit. I'd like to bring that back. Sometimes it just depends on who's part of the group; when you have someone who really spearheaded an area and they're able to bring people along, well, when you lose them, it's sometimes hard to retain that diversity. I think we do a really good job of being accepting to those that come, but what kind of outreach are we doing? We need to go out there seeking people rather than just welcoming who wants to come in. I would love to see our organization be able to say that we helped women's and LGBTQ voices amplified in some way. I think that's a great vision for the future.

Paul Booth: I think right now we need to really innovate. We need to rethink what a conference looks like, because I don't think we're going to survive if we don't. We're doing okay. We are holding our own. We're going to make it this year, but now every year feels like that. We're non-profit, so we shouldn't be raking in millions of dollars, but we do need to be sustainable. The audience for conferences is shifting, and I think we need to figure out a way to make our conference more hybrid. I don't think we should go completely virtual, but I think we need to be hybrid.

Nick Bestor: I wish conferences were more like workshops. Honestly, I think that would be a really great way to approach them. And, again, I think a smaller conference like MPCA is a great space for workshopping work in progress. It's a specific mode of scholarly communication we can do. I really have come to hate when I go to a conference and all I'm doing is sitting there listening to someone talk about what they've done, and there's no interaction. That's a little why I have

liked virtual conferences, because I don't have to physically go somewhere to listen to someone information dump on me. I can just listen or watch it online, which makes a lot more sense. But then you miss out on the networking and human connections side of things. So, perhaps we just need to question what is the point of a conference? I think at a larger scale, they can go virtual because they are more of a one-to-many style of communication: like, here I am, and here is the information I am bestowing on the world. I can just watch that on my computer at home. Whereas a smaller conference, like MPCA, if the presentation is more just an idea, we can help each other be more productive. That type of collaboration is what I imagine a conference could be.