April 23, 2018

Concerns about Precarious Labor and the Crisis in Academic Labor
Highlighted at the Women’s Caucus Meeting, SCMS Conference, 2018

The following considerations reflect discussion initiated by the meeting’s informal panel, “Gendered Realities in Today’s Early Career Environments.”

This document outlines points for the SIGS, other caucuses, and SCMS Board to consider. It includes suggestions for various statements of best practice concerning positions in film/media studies that explicitly or implicitly involve teaching, research, and service. It does not address matters related to film/media production positions or secure instructor/lecturer positions that have no research expectations. Before turning to the specific suggestions, it seems important to note how the Women’s Caucus is using the term “best practices.”

The Women’s Caucus recognizes that statements of best practices are, by definition, simply guidelines, rather than enforceable regulations. It acknowledges that an organization (such as SCMS) has no legal authority to collect data from academic institutions or require that they adhere to best practice guidelines outlined by an organization. The caucus also recognizes that monitoring existing and ongoing institutional practices would involve massive costs, as would developing and enacting legislation that would serve as the basis for new regulations.

At the same time, the caucus believes that the American Association of University Professors provides models for ways to use best practice guidelines as a starting point for change: https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure https://www.aaup.org/our-programs/academic-freedom/censure-list

The Women’s Caucus also recognizes that any best practice statements must be grounded in extensive research and that they will be most effective if developed in coordination with organizations such as the American Council of Learned Societies, accrediting bodies (e.g., the National Association of Schools of Theatre), and institutions’ guidelines for program and department review. The caucus is also keenly aware that proposals outlined below serve primarily to highlight problems that statements of best practice would seek to address.

Still, even a sampling of information illuminates problems that SCMS faculty have identified. For example, USC’s Delphi Project is an initiative designed to show how the increasing reliance on non-TT faculty is affecting the quality of education: http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/.
The Project offers a $15,000 award annually to recognize faculty models that counteract these tendencies and support student success. Its first report is available at: https://pullias.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CHEA_Examination_Changing_Faculty_2013.pdf

Proposals for the SCMS Board and other Caucuses/Scholarly Interest Groups to Review

1a. SCMS and other academic organizations should develop and issue a statement of best practices concerning job searches, with the following as key elements: (a) the initial application should require no more than a vita, cover letter, and names of 3 references; (b) there should be a limited and standardized set of documents required for later stages of the process; (c) initial interviews should be conducted via telephone or video conference, rather than at conferences or on-site; (d) the interviewee should be given 10-14 days to prepare for a campus interview; (e) a single day of a campus interview should last no longer than 8 hours, and the candidate should be given regular breaks; (f) the interviewee should be given time to eat and regroup between interview sessions; (g) applicants should be informed in a timely fashion whether or not they have been placed on a short list; and (h) throughout the process, the actions of the institution should be guided by an awareness that many applicants are members of a precarious labor force that is in debt, overworked, underpaid, and already impacted by cycles of hope and despair.

1b. SCMS and other academic organizations should develop ways to collect anonymous data on job searches to ensure that violations against the agreed upon best practices are made public.

2a. SCMS should coordinate with other academic organizations to develop and issue a statement of best practices concerning adjunct and instructor positions, with the following as key elements: (a) if a department or program staffs any class or set of classes with adjunct instructors for 5 years, the institution should create a fulltime instructor or tenure-track position to teach the course or courses; and (b) if a department or program staffs any class or set of classes with fulltime instructors on year-to-year contracts for 5 years, the institution should create a tenure-track position to teach the course or courses.

2b. SCMS and other organizations should develop ways to collect data on positions filled by adjunct or fulltime instructors for more than 5 years, so that violations against the agreed upon best practices are made public.
2c. SCMS should also collect data on institutions’ use of secure instructor/lecturer positions, with special attention to: salaries, workloads, degree of job security, and shared-governance opportunities and obligations.

3a. SCMS should work with other academic organizations to collect and then circulate to the membership information concerning the last 10 years and the **annual number of students in humanities doctoral programs (institution by institution) and the annual number of searches for tenure-track humanities positions – range of study: countries in which SCMS members reside.**

3b. SCMS and other academic organizations should circulate the data on the number of annual searches versus the number of doctoral humanities students produced by individual institutions to ensure that institutions that contribute to the precarious labor situation are made visible.

3c. SCMS should coordinate with the Graduate Student Organization to develop a statement of best practices concerning curriculum for humanities graduate students. The statement should address the following considerations: (a) for what type of work, inside and outside of the academy, do doctoral humanities programs prepare students; (b) what are the implications of revising curriculum to address changing labor opportunities; (c) what are the implications of maintaining current research-focused curriculum and focusing instead on collective action to challenge the increased corporatization of higher education?

4a. SCMS and other academic organizations should develop and issue a **statement of best practices concerning independent scholars’ access to health care,** with the following key elements: (a) students who have defended their dissertations and graduated, or run out of funding before completing their degrees, should be eligible for healthcare through a COBRA-type plan offered by their institution; and (b), as with health insurance for university employees, insurance for graduate students who have graduated or run out of funding should be available for 3 years.

4b. SCMS and other academic organizations should collect and circulate data on institutions that violate the agreed upon best practices concerning independent scholars’ access to healthcare so that institutions’ infractions are made public.

5a. SCMS and other academic organizations should develop and issue a **statement of best practices concerning independent scholars’ access to libraries and other research venues.**
5b. SCMS and other academic organizations should collect and circulate data on institutions that violate the agreed upon best practices concerning independent scholars’ access to libraries and research venues so that institutions’ infractions are made public.

6a. SCMS and other academic organizations should develop and issue a **statement concerning best practices for dissertation chairs and committee members**.

6b. SCMS and other organizations should develop ways for students to use the best practices statement in negotiations with institutions that employ faculty who violate best practices.

7a. SCMS should coordinate with other academic organizations to collect and widely circulate **information that illuminates the experiences of students and faculty of color at academic institutions and in academic organizations**.

7b. SCMS should use this information to develop a statement of best practices that students and faculty can use in negotiations with institutions and organizations that violate best practices.

8a. SCMS should get the data from Oklahoma State University concerning (a) the **financial resources of institutions that employ its members and (b) the salaries of faculty in the humanities – in comparison with faculty in the sciences and social sciences**.

8b. SCMS should make this information available to the membership and develop a statement of best practices that faculty can use in negotiations with their institutions.

9a. There should be more research attention to the connections between the **precarious labor of academic labor and the precarious labor in the film/media/entertainment industry**.

9b. Caucus members and SIGS should develop and circulate proposals to stimulate research in this area, with early steps including the creation of informal panels and sponsorship of panels, workshops, and seminars.

10. **Immediate items for the SCMS board to consider:**
   (a) Develop ways to make the SCMS hardship fund more visible; only 63 of the roughly 3000 members contributed to the 2018 fund.
   (b) As with annual dues, create tiers in conference registration fees.
   (c) Create tiers in conference hotel lodging and work to hold the conference in cities with lower hotel and restaurant expenses.
(d) Allow graduate students and junior/contingent faculty whose papers have been accepted but who cannot afford to attend the conference to present their papers via Skype.
(e) To avoid the sigma of independent status, eliminate institutional affiliation on name tags.
(f) Update the 2010-2013 Career Center Report.