COMMON CORE STANDARDS: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

As an organization of teachers and scholars devoted to the study of language and literature, MLA should be deeply involved in the debate about the Common Core standards.

The Common Core standards were developed in 2009 and released in 2010. Within a matter of months, they had been endorsed by 45 states and the District of Columbia. At present, publishers are aligning their materials with the Common Core, technology companies are creating software and curriculum aligned with the Common Core, and two federally-funded consortia have created online tests of the Common Core.

What are the Common Core standards? Who produced them? Why are they controversial? How did their adoption happen so quickly?

As scholars of the humanities, you are well aware that every historical event is subject to interpretation. There are different ways to answer the questions I just posed. Originally, this session was designed to be a discussion between me and David Coleman, who is generally acknowledged as the architect of the Common Core standards. Some months ago, we both agreed on the date and format. But Mr. Coleman, now president of the College Board, discovered that he had a conflicting meeting and could not be here.

So, unfortunately, you will hear only my narrative, not his, which would be quite different. I have no doubt that you will have no difficulty getting access to his version of the narrative, which is the same as Secretary Arne Duncan's.

He would tell you that the standards were created by the states, that they were widely and quickly embraced because so many educators wanted common standards for teaching language, literature, and mathematics. But he would not be able to explain why so many educators and parents are now opposed to the standards and are reacting angrily to the testing that accompanies them.

I will try to do that.

I will begin by setting the context for the development of the standards.

They arrive at a time when American public education and its teachers are under attack. Never have public schools been as subject to upheaval, assault, and chaos as they are today. Unlike modern corporations, which extol creative disruption, schools need stability, not constant turnover and change. Yet for the past dozen years, ill-advised federal and state policies have rained down on students, teachers, principals, and schools.

George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind and Barack Obama's Race to the Top have combined to impose a punitive regime of standardized testing on the schools. NCLB was passed by Congress in 2001 and signed into law in 2002. NCLB law required schools to test every child in grades 3-8 every year; by 2014, said the law, every child must be "proficient" or schools would face escalating sanctions. The ultimate sanction for failure to raise test scores was firing the staff and closing the school.

Because the stakes were so high, NCLB encouraged teachers to teach to the test. In many schools, the curriculum was narrowed; the only subjects that mattered were reading and mathematics. What was not tested—the arts, history, civics,

literature, geography, science, physical education—didn't count. Some states, like New York, gamed the system by dropping the passing mark each year, giving the impression that its students were making phenomenal progress when they were not. Some districts, like Atlanta, El Paso, and the District of Columbia, were caught up in cheating scandals. In response to this relentless pressure, test scores rose, but not as much as they had before the adoption of NCLB.

Then along came the Obama administration, with its signature program called Race to the Top. In response to the economic crisis of 2008, Congress gave the U.S. Department of Education $5 billion to promote "reform." Secretary Duncan launched a competition for states called "Race to the Top." If states wanted any part of that money, they had to agree to certain conditions. They had to agree to evaluate teachers to a significant degree by the rise or fall of their students' test scores; they had to agree to increase the number of privately managed charter schools; they had to agree to adopt "college and career ready standards," which were understood to be the not-yet-finished Common Core standards; they had to agree to "turnaround" low-performing schools by such tactics as firing the principal and part or all of the school staff; and they had to agree to collect unprecedented amounts of personally identifiable information about every student and store it in a data warehouse. It became an article of faith in Washington and in state capitols, with the help of propagandistic films like "Waiting for Superman," that if students had low scores, it must be the fault of bad teachers. Poverty, we heard again and again from people like Bill Gates, Joel Klein, and Michelle Rhee, was just an excuse for bad teachers, who should be fired without delay or due process.

These two federal programs, which both rely heavily on standardized testing, has produced a massive demoralization of educators; an unprecedented exodus of experienced educators, who were replaced in many districts by young, inexperienced, low-wage teachers; the closure of many public schools, especially in poor and minority districts; the opening of thousands of privately managed charters; an increase in low-quality for-profit charter schools and low-quality online charter schools; a widespread attack on teachers' due process rights and collective bargaining rights; the near-collapse of public education in urban districts like Detroit and Philadelphia, as public schools are replaced by privately managed charter schools; a burgeoning educational-industrial complex of testing corporations, charter chains, and technology companies that view public education as an emerging market. Hedge funds, entrepreneurs, and real estate investment corporations invest enthusiastically in this emerging market, encouraged by federal tax credits, lavish fees, and the prospect of huge profits from taxpayer dollars. Celebrities, tennis stars, basketball stars, and football stars are opening their own name-brand schools with public dollars, even though they know nothing about education.

No other nation in the world has inflicted so many changes or imposed so many mandates on its teachers and public schools as we have in the past dozen years. No other nation tests every student every year as we do. Our students are the most over-tested in the world. No other nation—at least no high-performing nation—judges the quality of teachers by the test scores of their students. Most researchers agree that this methodology is fundamentally flawed, that it is

inaccurate, unreliable, and unstable, that the highest ratings will go to teachers with the most affluent students and the lowest ratings will go to teachers of English learners, teachers of students with disabilities, and teachers in high-poverty schools. Nonetheless, the U.S. Department of Education wants every state and every district to do it. Because of these federal programs, our schools have become obsessed with standardized testing, and have turned over to the testing corporations the responsibility for rating, ranking, and labeling our students, our teachers, and our schools.

The Pearson Corporation has become the ultimate arbiter of the fate of students, teachers, and schools.

This is the policy context in which the Common Core standards were developed. Five years ago, when they were written, major corporations, major foundations, and the key policymakers at the Department of Education agreed that public education was a disaster and that the only salvation for it was a combination of school choice—including privately managed charters and vouchers-- national standards, and a weakening or elimination of such protections as collective bargaining, tenure, and seniority. At the same time, the political and philanthropic leaders maintained a passionate faith in the value of standardized tests and the data that they produced as measures of quality and as ultimate, definitive judgments on people and on schools. The agenda of both Republicans and Democrats converged around the traditional Republican agenda of standards, choice, and accountability. In my view, this convergence has nothing to do with improving education or creating equality of opportunity but everything to do with cutting costs,

standardizing education, shifting the delivery of education from high-cost teachers to low-cost technology, reducing the number of teachers, and eliminating unions and pensions.

The Common Core standards were written in 2009 under the aegis of several D.C.-based organizations: the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve. The development process was led behind closed doors by a small organization called Student Achievement Partners, headed by David Coleman. The writing group of 27 contained few educators, but a significant number of representatives of the testing industry. From the outset, the Common Core standards were marked by the absence of public participation, transparency, or educator participation. In a democracy, transparency is crucial, because transparency and openness builds trust. Those crucial ingredients were lacking.

The U.S. Department of Education is legally prohibited from exercising any influence or control over curriculum or instruction in the schools, so it could not contribute any funding to the expensive task of creating national standards. The Gates Foundation stepped in and assumed that responsibility. It gave millions to the National Governors Association, to the Council of Chief School Officers, to Achieve and to Student Achievement Partners. Once the standards were written, Gates gave millions more to almost every think tank and education advocacy group in Washington to evaluate the standards—even to some that had no experience evaluating standards—and to promote and help to implement the standards. Even the two major teachers' unions accepted millions of dollars to help advance the Common Core standards. Altogether, the Gates Foundation has expended nearly

$200 million to pay for the development, evaluation, implementation, and promotion of the Common Core standards. And the money tap is still open, with millions more awarded this past fall to promote the Common Core standards.

Some states—like Kentucky--adopted the Common Core standards sight unseen. Some—like Texas—refused to adopt them sight unseen. Some—like Massachusetts—adopted them even though their own standards were demonstrably better and had been proven over time.

The advocates of the standards saw them as a way to raise test scores by making sure that students everywhere in every grade were taught using the same standards. They believed that common standards would automatically guarantee equity. Some spoke of the Common Core as a civil rights issue. They emphasized that the Common Core standards would be far more rigorous than most state standards and they predicted that students would improve their academic performance in response to raising the bar.

Integral to the Common Core was the expectation that they would be tested on computers using online standardized exams. As Secretary Duncan's chief of staff wrote at the time, the Common Core was intended to create a national market for book publishers, technology companies, testing corporations, and other vendors.

What the advocates ignored is that test scores are heavily influenced by socioeconomic status. Standardized tests are normed on a bell curve. The upper half of the curve has an abundance of those who grew up in favorable circumstances, with educated parents, books in the home, regular medical care, and well-resourced schools. Those who dominate the bottom half of the bell curve are the kids who lack

those advantages, whose parents lack basic economic security, whose schools are overcrowded and under-resourced. To expect tougher standards and a renewed emphasis on standardized testing to reduce poverty and inequality is to expect what never was and never will be.

Who supported the standards? Secretary Duncan has been their loudest cheerleader. Governor Jeb Bush of Florida and former DC Chancellor Michelle Rhee urged their rapid adoption. Joel Klein and Condoleeza Rice chaired a commission for the Council on Foreign Relations, which concluded that the Common Core standards were needed to protect national security. Major corporations purchased full-page ads in the New York Times and other newspapers to promote the Common Core. ExxonMobil is especially vociferous in advocating for Common Core, taking out advertisements on television and other news media saying that the standards are needed to prepare our workforce for global competition. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce endorsed the standards, saying they were necessary to prepare workers for the global marketplace. The Business Roundtable stated that its #1 priority is the full adoption and implementation of the Common Core standards. All of this excitement was generated despite the fact that no one knows whether the Common Core will fulfill any of these promises. It will take 12 years whether we know what its effects are.

The Common Core standards have both allies and opponents on the right. Tea-party groups at the grassroots level oppose the standards, claiming that they will lead to a federal takeover of education. The standards also have allies and opponents on the left.

I was aware of Common Core from the outset. In 2009, I urged its leaders to plan on field testing them to find out how the standards worked in real classrooms with real teachers and real students. Only then would we know whether they improve college-readiness and equity. In 2010, I was invited to meet at the White House with senior administration officials, and I advised them to field test the standards to make sure that they didn't widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots.

After all, raising the bar might make more students fail, and failure would be greatest amongst those who cannot clear the existing bar.

Last spring, when it became clear that there would be no field testing, I decided I could not support the standards. I objected to the lack of any democratic participation in their development; I objected to the absence of any process for revising them, and I was fearful that they were setting unreachable targets for most students. I also was concerned that they would deepen the sense of crisis about American education that has been used to attack the very principle of public education. In my latest book, I demonstrated, using data on the U.S. Department of Education website that the current sense of crisis about our nation's public schools was exaggerated; that test scores were the highest they had ever been in our history for whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians; that graduation rates for all groups were the highest in our history; and that the dropout rate was the lowest ever in our history.

My fears were confirmed by the Common Core tests. Wherever they have been implemented, they have caused a dramatic collapse of test scores. In state after

state, the passing rates dropped by about 30%. This was not happenstance. This was failure by design. Let me explain.

The Obama administration awarded $350 million to two groups to create tests for the Common Core standards. The testing consortia jointly decided to use a very high passing mark, which is known as a "cut score." The Common Core testing consortia decided that the passing mark on their tests would be aligned with the proficient level on the federal tests called NAEP. This is a level typically reached by about 35-40% of students. Massachusetts is the only state in which as many as 50% ever reached the NAEP proficient level. The testing consortia set the bar so high that most students were sure to fail, and they did.

In New York state, which gave the Common Core tests last spring, only 30% of students across the state passed the tests. Only 3% of English language learners passed. Only 5% of students with disabilities passed. Fewer than 20% of African American and Hispanic students passed. By the time the results were reported in August, the students did not have the same teachers; the teachers saw the scores, but did not get any item analysis. They could not use the test results for diagnostic purposes, to help students. Their only value was to rank students.

When New York state education officials held public hearings, parents showed up en masse to complain about the Common Core testing. Secretary Duncan dismissed them as "white suburban moms" who were disappointed to learn that their child was not as brilliant as they thought and their public school was not as good as they thought. But he was wrong: the parents were outraged not because they thought their children were brilliant but because they did not believe that their

children were failures. What, exactly, is the point of crushing the hearts and minds of young children by setting a standard so high that 70% are certain to fail?

The financial cost of implementing Common Core has barely been mentioned in the national debates. All Common Core testing will be done online. This is a bonanza for the tech industry and other vendors. Every school district must buy new computers, new teaching materials, and new bandwidth for the testing. At a time when school budgets have been cut in most states and many thousands of teachers have been laid off, school districts across the nation will spend billions to pay for Common Core testing. Los Angeles alone committed to spend $1 billion on iPads for the tests; the money is being taken from a bond issue approved by voters for construction and repair of school facilities. Meanwhile, the district has cut teachers of the arts, class size has increased, and necessary repairs are deferred because the money will be spent on iPads. The iPads will be obsolete in a year or two, and the Pearson content loaded onto the iPads has only a three-year license. The cost of implementing the Common Core and the new tests is likely to run into the billions at a time of deep budget cuts.

Other controversies involve the standards themselves. Early childhood educators are nearly unanimous in saying that no one who wrote the standards had any expertise in the education of very young children. More than 500 early childhood educators signed a joint statement complaining that the standards were developmentally inappropriate for children in the early grades. The standards, they said, emphasize academic skills and leave inadequate time for imaginative play. They also objected to the likelihood that young children would be subjected to

standardized testing. And yet proponents of the Common Core insist that children as young as 5 or 6 or 7 should be on track to be college-and-career ready, even though children this age are not likely to think about college, and most think of careers as cowboys, astronauts, or firefighters.

There has also been heated argument about the standards' insistence that reading must be divided equally in the elementary grades between fiction and informational text, and divided 70-30 in favor of informational text in high school. Where did the writers of the standards get these percentages? They relied on the federal NAEP—the National Assessment of Educational Progress-which uses these percentages as instructions to test developers. NAEP never intended that these numbers would be converted into instructional mandates for teachers. This idea that informational text should take up half the students' reading time in the early grades and 70% in high school led to outlandish claims that teachers would no longer be allowed to teach whole novels. Somewhat hysterical articles asserted that the classics would be banned while students were required to read government documents. The standards contain no such demands.

Defenders of the Common Core standards said that the percentages were misunderstood. They said they referred to the entire curriculum—math, science, and history, not just English. But since teachers in math, science, and history are not known for assigning fiction, why was this even mentioned in the standards? Which administrator will be responsible for policing whether precisely 70% of the reading in senior year is devoted to informational text? Who will keep track?

The fact is that the Common Core standards should never have set forth any percentages at all. If they really did not mean to impose numerical mandates on English teachers, they set off a firestorm of criticism for no good reason. Other nations have national standards, and I don't know of any that tell teachers how much time to devote to fiction and how much time to devote to informational text. Frankly, I think that teachers are quite capable of making that decision for themselves. If they choose to teach a course devoted only to fiction or devoted only to non-fiction, that should be their choice, not a mandate imposed by a committee in 2009.

Another problem presented by the Common Core standards is that there is no one in charge of fixing them. If teachers find legitimate problems and seek remedies, there is no one to turn to. If the demands for students in kindergarten and first grade are developmentally inappropriate, no one can make changes. The original writing committee no longer exists. No organization or agency has the authority to revise the standards. The Common Core standards might as well be written in stone. This makes no sense. They were not handed down on Mount Sinai, they are not an infallible Papal encyclical, why is there no process for improving and revising them?

Furthermore, what happens to the children who fail? Will they be held back a grade? Will they be held back again and again? If most children fail, as they did in New York, what will happen to them? How will they catch up? The advocates of the standards insist that low-scoring students will become high-scoring students if the tests are rigorous, but what if they are wrong? What if the failure rate remains

staggeringly high as it is now? What if it improves marginally as students become accustomed to the material, and the failure rate drops from 70% to 50%? What will we do with the 50% who can't jump over the bar? Teachers across the country will be fired if the scores of their pupils do not go up. This is nuts. We have a national policy that is a theory based on an assumption grounded in hope. And it might be wrong, with disastrous consequences for real children and real teachers.

In some states, teachers say that the lessons are scripted and deprive them of their professional autonomy, the autonomy they need to tailor their lessons to the needs of the students in front of them. Behind the Common Core standards lies a blind faith in standardization of tests and curriculum, and perhaps, of children as well. Yet we know that even in states with strong standards, like Massachusetts and California, there are wide variations in test scores. Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution predicted that the Common Core standards were likely to make little, if any, difference. No matter how high and uniform their standards, there are variations in academic achievement within states, there are variations within districts, there are variations within every school.

It is good to have standards. I believe in standards, but they must not be rigid, inflexible, and prescriptive. Teachers must have the flexibility to tailor standards to meet the students in their classrooms, the students who can't read English, the students who are two grade levels behind, the students who are homeless, the students who just don't get it and just don't care, the students who frequently miss class. Standards alone cannot produce a miraculous transformation.

I do not mean to dismiss the Common Core standards altogether. They could be far better, if there were a process whereby experienced teachers were able to fix them. They could be made developmentally appropriate for the early grades, so that children have time for play and games, as well as learning to read and do math and explore nature.

The numerical demands for 50-50 or 70-30 literature vs. informational text should be eliminated. They serve no useful purpose and they have no justification.

In every state, teachers should work together to figure out how the standards can be improved. Professional associations like the National Council for the Teaching of English and the National Council for the Teaching of Mathematics should participate in a process by which the standards are regularly reviewed, revised, and updated by classroom teachers and scholars to respond to genuine problems in the field.

The Common Core standards should be decoupled from standardized testing, especially online standardized testing. Most objections to the standards are caused by the testing. The tests are too long, and many students give up; the passing marks on the tests were set so high as to create failure.

Yet the test scores will be used to rate students, teachers, and schools.

The standardized testing should become optional. It should include authentic writing assignments that are judged by humans, not by computers. It too needs oversight by professional communities of scholars and teachers.

There is something about the Common Core standards and testing, about their demand for uniformity and standardization, that reeks of early twentieth

century factory-line thinking. There is something about them that feels obsolete. Today, most sectors of our economy have standards that are open-sourced and flexible, that rely upon the wisdom of practitioners, that are constantly updated and improved.

In the present climate, the Common Core standards and testing will become the driving force behind the creation of a test-based meritocracy. With David Coleman in charge of the College Board, the SAT will be aligned with the Common Core; so will the ACT. Both testing organizations were well represented in the writing of the standards; representatives of these two organizations comprised 12 of the 27 members of the original writing committee. The Common Core tests are a linchpin of the federal effort to commit K-12 education to the new world of Big Data. The tests are the necessary ingredient to standardize teaching, curriculum, instruction, and schooling. Only those who pass these rigorous tests will get a high school diploma. Only those with high scores on these rigorous tests will be able to go to college.

No one has come up with a plan for the 50% or more who never get a high school diploma. These days, a man or woman without a high school diploma has meager chances to make their way in this society. They will end up in society's dead-end jobs.

Some might say this is just. I say it is not just. I say that we have allowed the testing corporations to assume too much power in allotting power, prestige, and opportunity. Those who are wealthy can afford to pay fabulous sums for tutors so their children can get high scores on standardized tests and college entrance exams.

Those who are affluent live in districts with ample resources for their schools. Those who are poor lack those advantages. Our nation suffers an opportunity gap, and the opportunity gap creates a test score gap.

You may know Michael Young's book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. It was published in 1958 and has gone through many editions. A decade ago, Young added a new introduction in which he warned that a meritocracy could be sad and fragile. He wrote:

If the rich and powerful were encouraged by the general culture to believe that they fully deserved all they had, how arrogant they could become, and if they were convinced it was all for the common good, how ruthless in pursuing their own advantage. Power corrupts, and therefore one of the secrets of a good society is that power should always be open to criticism. A good society should provide sinew for revolt as well as for power.

But authority cannot be humbled unless ordinary people, however much they have been rejected by the educational system, have the confidence to assert themselves against the mighty. If they think themselves inferior, if they think they deserve on merit to have less worldly goods and less worldly power than a select minority, they can be damaged in their own self-esteem, and generally demoralized.

Even if it could be demonstrated that ordinary people had less native ability than those selected for high position, that would not mean that they deserved to get less. Being a member of the "lucky sperm club" confers no moral right or advantage. What one is born with, or without, is not of one's own doing.

We must then curb the misuse of the Common Core standards: Those who like them should use them, but they should be revised continually to adjust to reality. Stop the testing. Stop the rating and ranking. Do not use them to give privilege to those who pass them or to deny the diploma necessary for a decent life. Remove the high-stakes that policymakers intend to attach to them. Use them to enrich instruction, but not to standardize it.

I fear that the Common Core plan of standards and testing will establish a test-based meritocracy that will harm our democracy by parceling out opportunity, by ranking and rating every student in relation to their test scores.

We cannot have a decent democracy unless we begin with the supposition that every human life is of equal value. Our society already has far too much inequality of wealth and income. We should do nothing to stigmatize those who already get the least of society's advantages. We should bend our efforts to change our society so that each and every one of us has the opportunity to learn, the resources needed to learn, and the chance to have a good and decent life, regardless of one's test scores.