

# RESEARCH METHODS WITHIN THE MLA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARLY INQUIRY IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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### **1 ABSTRACT**

*This pilot study analyzes research methods courses offered within North American MLA programs and their potential implications on scholarly inquiry within landscape architecture. Despite more emerging landscape architecture faculty holding doctoral degrees than in previous generations and emergence of some landscape architecture doctoral programs, the MLA is still widely regarded as the discipline's terminal degree. In published landscape architecture academic position announcements—which typically list doctoral degrees as not required, but preferred credentials—the MLA is assumed to be sufficient training for meeting the research/creative scholarship outputs demanded by many university tenure and promotion processes. This study analyzes research methods courses offered within North American MLA programs and their potential implications on scholarly inquiry within landscape architecture. Direct content analysis of selected research methods course syllabi provided insights on stated course learning outcomes, methods covered, course delivery format, student-generated deliverables, and their relative apportionment toward course grades. Because research questions are necessarily aligned with corresponding research methods, the range of methods that emerging academics are formally taught may impact the range of scholarly inquiries they pursue, the resulting peer-reviewed products they produce, and ultimately their access to a complete range of scholarly dissemination venues. A broad analysis of how MLA programs educate emerging academics in the craft of research illuminates potential implications for the discipline's ability to effectively pursue its full range of possible scholarly inquiries and presents opportunities for future research.*

#### **1.1 Keywords**

Research Methods, Scholarly Productivity, Faculty, MLA.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes research methods courses offered within North American MLA programs and their potential implications on scholarly inquiry within landscape architecture.

Landscape architecture faculty face higher research demands than ever before. Literature describes the range of research and creative scholarship within the discipline (Deming & Swaffield, 2011; Francis, 2001; Zeisel, 2006), projections and discussion of future scholarship (Gobster, Nassauer, & Nadenicek, 2010; van den Brink & Bruns, 2014), multiple analyses of scholarly output levels and their relationship with teaching loads and other factors (Milburn & Brown, 2003; Milburn & Brown, 2016), and research productivity of recently tenured landscape architecture faculty among peer institutions (Christensen & Michael, 2014; Milburn et al., 2003b; ). Research productivity levels have increased among landscape architecture faculty; however they still lag behind those of other disciplines (Christensen, Michael, & Sleipness, 2017; Christensen et al., 2014). Despite more emerging landscape architecture faculty holding doctoral degrees than in previous generations and emergence of some landscape architecture doctoral programs, the MLA is still widely regarded as the discipline's terminal degree. In published landscape architecture academic position announcements—which typically list doctoral degrees as not required, but preferred credentials—the MLA is assumed to be sufficient training for meeting the research and creative scholarship outputs demanded by many university tenure and promotion processes. In addition to providing formative research training of future landscape architecture faculty, MLA curricula also provide current MLA students with analytical and technical research skills that they exercise in research assistantships under mentorship of current faculty. For MLA graduates who elect for careers in professional practice, their foundational knowledge in academic research methods can also augment traditional methods of inquiry used in professional practice—particularly case studies—enriched through focused or nuanced lines of inquiry that are directed by a focused research question. Consequently, among a suite of professional skills, an ability to formulate and conduct methodologically sound research offers value for professional offices outside of academia. However, this study is focused on research methods courses as they relate to preparing emerging academic faculty.

When evaluating faculty for promotion and tenure, universities often rely on traditional measures of research productivity, with emphasis on conventional peer-reviewed products (Christensen, Michael, & Sleipness, 2017; Christensen & Michael, 2014; Milburn et al., 2003; Milburn et al., 2001). Due to its diverse breadth of professional work and frequent transdisciplinary affiliations, landscape architecture produces a broad range of scholarly outputs, often transcending boundaries of traditional research. In addition to traditional peer-reviewed products such as journal articles, books, and conference proceedings, exhibition of creative works is also a recognized and respected scholarly output within landscape architecture (Armstrong, 1999; Armstrong, 2000; Nijhuis & Bobbink, 2012; Lavoie, 2005; Lenzholer et al., 2015). Creative scholarship recognition within the discipline is evidenced in manifold ways, from the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture's (CELA) thematically organized conference tracks, a broad range of published content in landscape architecture journals (Gobster et al., 2010) and their corresponding calls for submissions, and even the recent change in title from CELA's Vice President for Research to Vice President for Research and Creative Scholarship. While recognizing creative works as essential scholarly contributions, this paper focuses on how MLA programs train future academicians and advanced professionals in more traditional research methods, in preparation for careers in academia.

Because research questions are necessarily aligned with corresponding research methods, the range of methods that emerging academics are formally taught may impact the range of scholarly inquiries they pursue, the resulting peer-reviewed products they produce, and ultimately their access to a complete range of scholarly dissemination venues. A broad analysis of how MLA programs educate emerging academics in the craft of research reveals which methods universities believe are most essential for their graduates, which methods receive less coverage, and illuminates implications that MLA research methods courses may have on the discipline's ability to effectively pursue its full range of possible scholarly inquiries.

## 3 METHODS

This study describes and evaluates how North American MLA/MSLA programs train emerging academics in the craft of research through direct content analysis of their research methods course syllabi and associated course documents. A search of MLA degree programs located in North America was conducted using websites for CELA (2018), American Society of Landscape Architects (2018) and Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (2018), which revealed 51 MLA programs in 34 US states and 4 MLA

programs in 3 Canadian provinces. Websites for each MLA program were reviewed to determine research methods course offerings. Within programs' published MLA curricula, courses that focus on research methods were identified and corroborated by program personnel. Copies syllabi, assigned readings, and assignment descriptions were requested via email communication, which included a brief description of the study purpose.

Of the 51 MLA programs, 13 programs provided syllabi for their research methods classes, 2 programs declined to provide syllabi, and requests with the remaining 36 programs are pending. Direct content of the 13 research methods course syllabi was initially performed using systematic intuitive analyses in order to map the thematic areas; these included course activities, research methods covered, instructional delivery method, deliverables produced during the semester, required and optional readings, and evaluation criteria corresponding with course activities. A list of keywords was developed from initial review of the syllabi, reflecting their range of methods-related content, as well as the research typologies described by Deming and Swaffield (2011) and Gobster, Nassauer, & Nadenicek (2010). Following a keyword search, research methods-related themes were mapped and arrayed within a spreadsheet, which provided a format for comparison of each syllabus. While content analysis focused on syllabi, their content was interpreted in the context of their placement within the MLA program curriculum, descriptions of other associated courses, and program descriptions of faculty expertise and credentials. A total of 82 pages of syllabus content were included in the analysis.

## **4 FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Course Delivery**

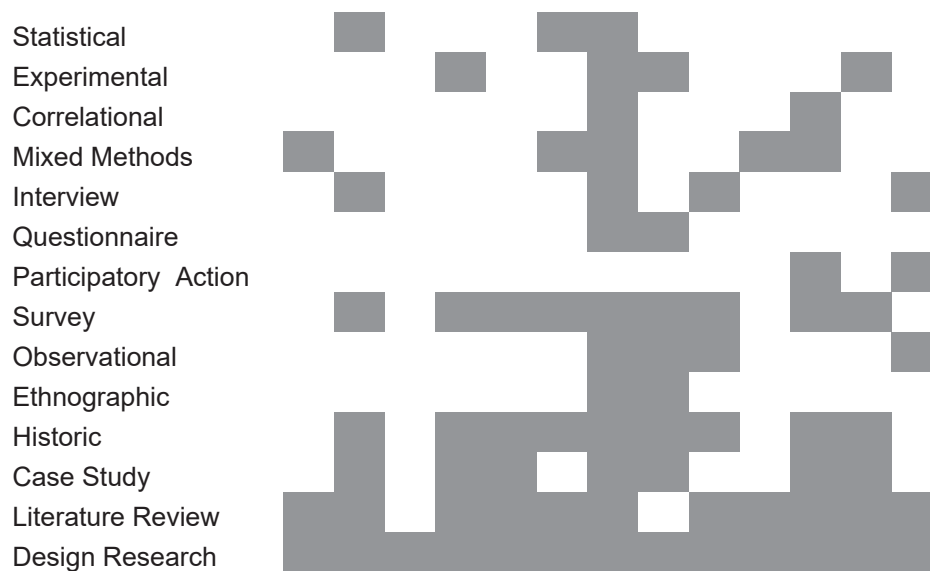
Following is a summary of course delivery characteristics. All 13 courses included in this pilot study are delivered via face-to-face; none are delivered via dispersed, distance, or online instruction, although one course did require blogging as a means of sharing critique outside of scheduled class sessions. Courses ranged from 2-4 credits, averaging 2.7 credits. Eight of the courses are 3 credits; four courses are 2 credits; one course is variable (2-4) credits. Seven courses met once per week; six met twice per week. Total contact hours spent in class ranged from 1.5 hours to 3 hours, with an average of 2.47 hours per week. Nine of the courses are taught by Ph.D. faculty and four are taught by faculty with masters degrees. None of the 13 courses included in this pilot study were co-taught; however, 5 syllabi reported guest speakers or discussants as a formal component of the course structure.

### **4.2 Course Structure, Activities, and Content**

All courses are structured around discussions of assigned readings, and nearly all courses (12 of 13) culminate in production of a research or project-based thesis proposal. Of the 12 syllabi that describe assignments' relative value toward final course grade, between 40 and 85 percent of the final course grade is assigned to production and presentation of the thesis research/project proposal; among the 13 courses examined, the final research/project proposal averaged 59 percent of the final course grade. Assigned readings focus on both explanation and application of a range research methods or other associated methods of creative inquiry within landscape architecture. Because nearly all courses are structured around the primary purpose of preparing MLA students for proposal and successful completion of a self-selected thesis topic, the methods covered within the courses reflect a broad range of methods and protocols of both research and design inquiry—reflected in the terrain of landscape architecture scholarship described by Deming and Swaffield (2011). The array of research methods covered in each course is illustrated in a matrix (Figure 1). Review of syllabi revealed a collectively greater coverage of design research, literature review, case study, and historical research. The aforementioned methods do not preclude quantitative analyses; even those geared toward the qualitative end of the spectrum can still contain quantitative analyses embedded within a mixed methodology. However, with the exception of the prevalence of survey methods within the course syllabi, the content analysis revealed substantially less coverage of experimental, correlational, or other discretely statistical research methods.

## 5 DISCUSSION and FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was initiated under the premise that the research methods described within MLA programs' research methods course syllabi are a measure of the value that graduate landscape architecture programs assign to knowledge of particular research methods. Analysis revealed the presence of program-specific specializations within research methods training, particularly as these specializations relate to areas of expertise of the course instructor. The syllabi reviewed within this pilot study generally found design research, literature review, case study, survey, and historic research methods received the greatest coverage in research methods syllabi. While quantitative methods are often incorporated within case studies, in the interpretation and reporting of survey data, and embedded and utilized within design research, the research methods found to be most heavily covered in the courses tend toward qualitative research—or methods that can be exercised without necessitating quantitative analyses. In contrast, methods that are necessarily or discretely quantitative were much less prominently featured within the syllabi content. However, their tilt toward qualitative methods does not necessarily mean that MLA programs do not value quantitative research methods or recognize their importance for undertaking evidence-based design or rigorous academic research. Instead, perhaps the syllabi content—focused on readings, discussions, literature review, and case studies, and design applications—may actually indicate that even though their course titles contain the words, “research methods,” many MLA research methods courses are instead geared instead toward providing enough foundational knowledge for students to craft a credible thesis proposal, under the understanding that they will receive more specialized methods training within the context of their thesis committee. Literature review, case studies, and design applications are applicable—even essential—for all MLA students, regardless of thesis topic. However, while sufficient for students embarking on design project-based theses—without augmentation with additional research methods training—they are an insufficient methodological foundation for students who wish to conduct experimental research.



**Figure 1. Research Methods, as reflected in the 13 MLA course syllabi**

The study results reflect several limitations. Only 13 syllabi were analyzed—a small share of the 51 MLA programs in North America. Content analysis was limited to syllabi for each course, including learning outcomes, goals, topics, titles of assigned readings, and other text within the syllabus. The content analysis did not extend to the full text of assigned readings or other documents referenced in the syllabus. Analysis was limited to only the words—including titles, descriptions, and explanations of assigned readings—contained in the syllabi. Extending the content analysis to assigned readings would further illuminate research methods covered within each course—methods that may not be apparent within the syllabi. Additionally, a review of course syllabi does not necessarily reflect the entirety of research methods

covered within an MLA program, particularly as graduate students tend to work closely under the guidance of thesis committees comprised of faculty members who possess specialized theoretical or methodological expertise. A survey, questionnaire, or interviews of faculty within MLA programs might illuminate further information that would augment the conclusions derived from the syllabus content.

In hiring prospective faculty for tenure-track positions and evaluating faculty for promotion and tenure, universities often rely on traditional measures of research productivity, with emphasis on conventional peer-reviewed products. Whether conducting research as part of an academic process—or within evidence-based professional practice (Brown & Corry, 2011)—the methods employed are inextricably connected to—and defined—by a line of inquiry. Because research questions must align with corresponding research methods, the range of research methods in which emerging academics receive formal training may impact the breadth of scholarly inquiries they feel confident pursuing, the pace of peer-reviewed products they produce, and ultimately their success within the academic system. Within this pilot study, a broad analysis of how a limited number of MLA programs cover research methods reveals a need to expand the study to a larger sample of North American MLA programs, while considering implications that MLA research methods courses may have on the discipline's ability to effectively pursue a complete range of possible scholarly inquiries. Future studies will enable a more robust discussion of the issue of research in landscape architecture and potential implications on MLA curriculum development.

This study was initiated under the premise that the MLA is still considered the terminal degree within landscape architecture—and consequently the research methods covered within MLA programs reflect those the discipline deems most critical for future academic career success. However, given the large proportion of MLA graduates who elect to instead enter professional practice, future research on this topic should also include deepened exploration of whether programs view their MLA offerings as preparatory for academia, professional practice, or both. While research methods might seem necessarily geared toward academic inquiry, in our contemporary cultural context characterized by proliferation of data, robust coverage of research methods may instead be viewed as a core competency—essential for landscape architecture practice readiness.

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