

# Overview

by Mark F. Smith

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At the beginning of 2018, colleges and universities in this country are facing financial, political, and institutional challenges of significant proportions. Of course, observers of higher education over the last 10 or 20 years might wearily retort, “What else is new?” Or, as the great American philosopher Yogi Berra once said, “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

Changes in the federal tax law threaten state revenue and, therefore, support for higher education institutions that are just now recovering from a decade-long shortfall. Political assaults at the campus and classroom levels threaten academic freedom and free speech. Congressional efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act threaten access, affordability, and quality. And, the continued attack on education at *all* levels threatens an entire generation.

The current administration seeks to favor career/technical education and apprenticeship programs over a traditional liberal education, not realizing that this is a false distinction. Properly conducted, liberal and vocational education are complementary and have never been more essential. The Morrill Acts, the GI Bill, the Higher Education Act, and the establishment of a widely diffused community college system, have always combined the practical aspects of post-secondary education with a wide-ranging liberal education. Even the earliest American colleges, with their focus on religious enlightenment, served as career-building endeavors by training students for positions in the ministry.

In fact, Cardinal Newman, in his classic *The Idea of the University*, while strongly advocating liberal education “to be the business of

the university,” also argues that “a cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number.”<sup>1</sup> Thorstein Veblen in his equally classic, although much more irreverent, *The Higher Learning in America*, while advocating for the acquisition of knowledge through “idle curiosity” recognizes that “this, of course, does not imply that the knowledge so gained will not be turned to practical account.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there is a widespread belief within academe that we are surrounded by a disapproving, anti-intellectual, antagonistic populace who will prevent any further public support for our mission. There is, of course, much circumstantial evidence to back up this view, and the essays in this year’s *Almanac* address several of these concerns. Nevertheless, I would argue, along with the authors of these essays, that there are some rays of hope.

In Virginia, the Virginia Business Higher Education Council has launched a campaign—*Growth4VA*—to promote reform and reinvestment in Virginia’s top-ranked higher education system. Rather than focus on the cost and impracticality of higher education, these businesses recognize colleges and universities as engines of economic growth, and key to the state’s future. A study commissioned by the Council found that “state higher education operations each year generate \$2.118 billion in long-term state revenue. Every dollar spent on public higher education by the state is associated with an additional \$1.29 in state revenue and an increment of \$17.40 to Virginia’s gross domestic product.”<sup>3</sup> This acknowledgment that higher education is a net benefit to states, an important public investment, and good public policy represents the beginning of a movement to reinvest in all post-secondary education. It is in this spirit that we offer the following essays.

In “Faculty Salaries: 2016–17,” Suzanne Clery outlines the most recent changes in faculty

salaries. She finds that faculty purchasing power showed only a slight increase in 2016–17, but has finally recovered to the level of 2007–08, the high before the financial collapse. Male faculty continued to earn more than female faculty, and men continued to outnumber women in higher faculty ranks, with women outnumbering men in instructor and lecturer ranks. In public institutions, faculty with collective bargaining agreements earn more than faculty at institutions without such agreements. The gap is more pronounced at community colleges. The percentage of faculty with tenure continues to drop, and salary data for the increasing share of faculty off the tenure track remains difficult to assess on a national basis.

In “Beyond Academic Freedom: The Economic Case for Tenure,” Gregory Saltzman discusses the status of tenure in American higher education and examines the arguments for its existence. The basic justification has always been academic freedom, certainly a concern still, but Saltzman goes on to examine the economic case for institutions to grant tenure. He argues that tenure enables institutions to pay lower salaries than they otherwise would for quality faculty, and provides both theoretical and empirical evidence to support that contention. Finally, he notes that threats to tenure have led to faculty unionization efforts and that this trend is likely to continue.

Kris Dougherty, Gary Rhoades, and I examine the impact of outside political pressures on classroom activity and faculty evaluations in “Big Brother or Big Breitbart: Negotiating Evaluation in the Surveillance Age.” We review NEA policy and traditional academic practice, as well as contract provisions regarding evaluation policies, with special focus on technological monitoring of classroom activity. While a review of both surveillance and evaluation contract provisions reveals some good language protecting academic freedom and educational quality, overall the contracts do not provide adequate protection. As locals deal with these issues in the future, the goal must be not only

to provide protection for faculty, but to look beyond immediate self-interest and make clear the impact on educational quality—to remember that the working conditions of faculty are the learning condition of students.

Henry Lee Allen, in “Faculty Workload and Productivity: The Trauma of Trump,” explores the Trump phenomenon and details a number of threats to higher education and its values. Allen identifies five “traumas” with Trump’s style of leadership and discusses their implications for higher education. While recognizing that the culmination of these issues threatens the fundamental values of higher education, Allen argues that our values can also provide the means of overcoming the threats.

In “State Finances and Higher Education in Trump Year Two,” William Zumeta looks at the economic forecast and the implication for higher education funding. He notes that despite the economic recovery of the last several years, states are still finding it difficult to fund projects and balance their budgets. In most states, real general fund spending is still below the level before the downturn. And while the immediate effect of last year’s tax cut may provide some stimulus, Zumeta likens it more to a sugar high, with unknown challenges facing states in the relatively near future. While colleges and universities resort to tuition increases when faced with reductions in state support, Zumeta notes that public tolerance for the increased cost of higher education may be reaching its limit.

In “Retirement and Benefits: Moving Forward, Rebuilding Trust,” Valerie Martin Conley and Andrea Nelson Trice discuss efforts by states and institutions to deal with retirement issues as they recover from the effects of the great recession. Notwithstanding some real financial challenges that retirement benefits face, pension plans in particular, the authors contend that the real issue is the rebuilding of trust between all those who have a stake in the process. They examine two states’ efforts to reform their underfunded pensions to illustrate

the range of approaches being taken. Conley and Trice conclude that keeping plans solvent is a shared responsibility between employers and employees, and that collective bargaining can play a very beneficial role in ensuring that partnership.

Finally, Vicki Rosser and Celeste Calkins examine ESP workforce composition across 10 job classifications using U.S. Department of Education data. In “ESPs: Examining Their Employment Status and Workforce Composition,” they find that while more ESPs work in public than private institutions, the same basic distribution of job classifications occur, with office and administrative support representing the largest percentage of employees. Most job classifications showed increases in employment. Gender and ethnic representation varied depending on job classification, although Hispanic employees showed increases across nine of the 10 job classifications. Full-time workers continued to outnumber part-time workers, although the authors warn that we must remain on guard against replacing full-time positions with part-time ones.

As I stated at the outset, there are reasons to be optimistic. It is, however, imperative that all of us who value education remain aware of continuing threats and vow to remain diligent in addressing whatever challenges come our way, be they repeats of the past or entirely new concerns. To quote Yogi Berra again, “It ain’t over ’til it’s over.”

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Newman, *The Idea of a University*, pp. 110, 119.

<sup>2</sup> Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Rephann, *Study of the Economic Impact of Virginia Public Higher Education: 2013 Update*, p. 7.

## REFERENCES

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