

# Overview

**By Mark F. Smith**

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In 1974, another time of economic strife and political discord, Michael Oakeshott, the British political philosopher, lectured on “A Place of Learning.” “Human learning is not acquiring habits or being trained to perform tricks or functions,” Oakeshott argued, “it is acquiring something that you can use because you understand it.”<sup>1</sup> He stressed that learning—understanding and developing the ability to use that understanding—requires responsibility that cannot be evaded by shifting it to others. The essays in *The NEA 2012 Almanac of Higher Education* address major problems facing public higher education. They show how some individuals are attempting to meet their responsibilities.

In “An Anti-Union Tide: The 2011 Attacks on Public Employee Bargaining Rights,” Gregory M. Saltzman describes one approach to accepting responsibility—the political push-back against attempts by the governors of Ohio and Wisconsin to dismantle public employee

bargaining in their states. Refuting arguments that collective bargaining caused the fiscal crisis, Saltzman argues that bargaining promotes cooperation among members of the academic community. “Public sector bargaining is a solution,” he concludes, “not a problem.”

Suzanne Clery, in “Faculty Salaries: 2010–11,” reports a national average salary of \$75,461, “a relatively small 1.1 percent increase in salaries for full-time faculty members on 9/10-month contracts.” Purchasing power continued its recent decline, and faculty at public institutions, especially community colleges saw smaller increases—a circumstance exacerbated in many states by “unpaid furlough days and shifting benefit costs to the employees.” Gender gaps continued, and non-ranked faculty members fared less well than their colleagues.

A sluggish economy, William Zumeta demonstrates in “States and Higher Education: On Their Own in a Stagnant Economy,” cuts support for higher education, harms students, and

affects the public mission of academic institutions. The economic payoff associated with higher education, he speculates, may undermine arguments for taxpayer funding and turn higher education into a “private good.”

In “Bargaining Retrenchment,” Kristine Anderson Dougherty, Gary Rhoades, and I show how program elimination threatens both tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty. The essay suggests contract provisions that protect against financial exigency, program elimination, and layoff in a hostile political environment. New conditions of academic employment, the authors argue, require a focus on these protections.

Martin Finkelstein, in “American Faculty and Their Institutions: A Multinational Comparison,” reports on the 2007–08 *Changing Academic Profession* (CAP) international survey. Comparing the status of the U.S. academic profession to the conditions of academic work and careers in 13 developed countries, he finds “their level of satisfaction with their current job places them in the middle of the global distribution.”

In “Faculty Workload and Productivity in Israel: Lessons for Uncertain Times,” Henry Lee Allen examines the conditions of academic work in Israel. Highlighting Israel’s reliance on human capital and innovation promotion, Allen contrasts its “constructive academic policies” with a “floundering American academic system [that] lacks astute leadership, a coherent national vision, financial fecundity, and collective tenacity.” “The U.S. may be headed for trouble,” he warns, “if the social forces currently affecting its academic system persist.”

In “Eroding Retirement and Benefits: The Wrong Response to Fiscal Crises,” Valerie Martin Conley notes that recent assaults on pension rights “could signal a turning point, in part, related to two decades of eroding retirement and benefits and deferring retirement contributions.” These assaults, she argues, may be counter-productive, because of unintended consequences for satisfaction, loyalty, recruitment, retention, and productivity of higher education employees.

Vicki J. Rosser examines institutional communications procedures in “How Did You Hear That You Might Lose Your Job?” Through interviews with education support professionals (ESPs) in public research institutions in a western state, she examines the human toll exacted by eliminating or merging ESP units, or by staff reductions and reassignments. She shows how universities exacerbated the harm by their means of notification.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Oakeshott, 2001, 8.

## REFERENCES

Michael Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning.” In *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2001 [1989].