

Overview

By Mark F. Smith

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“**T**here is a tide in the affairs of men/
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to
fortune,” Brutus observes in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, “Omitted, all the voyage of their life/Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”¹ Seizing opportunity at high tide remains one of life’s most difficult tasks. But American citizens did so during previous eras by privileging the concept of an accessible system of public higher education. Unfortunately, the present era values private gain over public good. Our task is to remember our prior commitment, catch the next tide, and renew educational opportunity for all Americans.

Five years after he left the presidency, James Madison congratulated a Kentuckian for securing liberal appropriations for education. His letter explained the benefits of widely accessible public education. True, he envisioned that broad population to include only white males, but his outlook was an advance over contemporary practices. “Learned institutions ought

to be favorite objects with every free people,” Madison argued. “They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty and dangerous encroachments on the public liberty. They are the nurseries of skillful Teachers for the schools distributed throughout the Community.”

The public, Madison added, must share the costs of learned institutions, because “the more costly of which can scarcely be provided by individual means.” The broadest “diffusion of knowledge,” he believed, would ensure the greatest benefit to free government. “What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable,” he asked, “than that of liberty and learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual and surest support.”² Commitments to the public good, such as Madison’s, inspired the Morrill Acts, the GI Bill, the Higher Education Act, and the establishment of a widely diffused community college system.

The Obama Administration initiated promising discussions and some concrete actions

toward improving college access and affordability. But the commercial and instrumental approaches to education now in vogue have shifted the focus of student aid policy from extending opportunity to return on investment and privatization. The result: student loan debts threaten to increase.

Even worse, a vision of opportunity promoting private gain over public good is generating a decline of societal civility and mutual understanding. The 2016 election campaign taught us that the country needs a large infusion of tolerance. We must find a way to accept differences, whether cultural, demographic, or political. And we must work together to resolve societal problems.

James Madison foresaw our current difficulties. “A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it,” he wrote, “is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both.”³ But Madison expressed optimism and confidence. “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”⁴ Agreeing with Madison that “Education is the true foundation of civil liberty,” we hope these essays provide knowledge that helps overcome ignorance and return the polity to a more public-minded outlook.

“Trends in Faculty Salaries: 1995–96 to 2014–15,” by Abby Miller and Amelia Marcetti Topper, finds that changes in employment patterns and faculty salaries reflect the 20 percent decline in public funding experienced by higher education since the early 1990s. Faculty salaries are still below the 2008 average level, despite modest increases in the last two years. The profession has suffered declines in the percentage of faculty teaching on a full-time basis and in the percentage of faculty with tenure. Salary levels for remain lower for women than for men; they vary widely depending on discipline and state. One finding is clear: all faculty members benefit from collective bargaining.

In “Whither Higher Education in the Trump Era?” William Zumeta looks at recent trends in state funding for higher education, and their implications. Despite the recovery from the financial crash of 2008, state appropriations have not returned to anywhere near pre-recession levels. With the state and national economic forecast in doubt, higher education will face a long period of uncertainty. Remaining hopeful, Zumeta notes the economic advantages of long-term investment in higher education. Greater educational attainment, he concludes, would benefit all sectors.

In “The ‘You’re Fired’ Era: Academic Freedom, Student Complaints, and Faculty Discipline,” Kristine Anderson Dougherty, Gary Rhoades, and I examine the effects of heightened political controversy on faculty work. Faculty members face internal threats from student advocates of particular political viewpoints and from external groups with agendas unrelated to educational goals. After a look at associational and institutional policies, we examine contract provisions that address academic freedom and faculty discipline. The national political context, we conclude, increases the likelihood that these issues will affect more campuses.

In “Mind the Gap: Connecting Academic Libraries and Campus Communities,” Nancy Kranich discusses the changing role of academic libraries as digitization threatens to separate libraries from their campus communities. After explaining how academic libraries are adjusting to this new environment, Kranich explains how librarians, faculty, and campus communities can improve communication and coordination to benefit the entire campus.

In “Faculty Workload and Productivity in an Era of Social Diversity,” Henry Lee Allen analyzes the “diversity explosion” and its impact on the campus. First delineating the demographic changes that generate increased diversity, Allen then discusses the complications of political opposition to demographic changes, and the effects of these changes on

student attitudes, faculty recruitment, and the structure of postsecondary education. Finally, he outlines the mechanisms needed to navigate the inevitable transformations successfully. Allen calls on faculty unions, especially NEA, to generate social action and cooperation that can effect these transformations.

In “Retirement and Benefits: Where from Here?” Valerie Martin Conley examines the costs of healthcare benefits and retirement programs to employers and states. Benefits continue to increase as a percentage of employer costs, but Conley warns that states must exercise care before cutting their pension plan contributions, lest they lose investment income. Conley then touts a study showing the benefits of defined benefit programs, despite the turn toward defined contribution plans.

In “ESPs: Employment and Living Wage Update,” Vicki Rosser and Celeste Calkins explore the relationships between minimum wage levels, living wage standards, and ESP employment across occupational categories. Their review of regional and state data reveals

that wages lag behind minimum and living wage standards in too many cases.

Thanks to the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, for its support, and to the *Almanac*’s editorial and production staff—especially editor Harold Wechsler, Hallie Logan Shell, and Mark Kemp—for their dedication and expertise. Thanks to NEA organizer Valerie Wilk for updating the appendix of bargaining units.

NOTES

¹ Shakespeare, Act IV, Scene III, 355.

² James Madison to William T. Barry, August 4, 1822, in Rackove, 1999, 793.

³ *Ibid.*, 790-793.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 790.

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Shakespeare, W. *Julius Caesar* in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. New York: Thomas Crowell, 1998.

