SLO Assessment: Fun! (Really.)

+ In memory of Umpqua’s Larry Levine

The Higher Education Act turns 50: What’s next?

NEA recommends Hillary Clinton in primary election

Union power! In Chicago, California, Massachusetts, and more
NEA President: Hillary Clinton will do what’s best for U.S. students

“The National Education Association proudly supports Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to be the Democratic nominee for president of the United States,” announced NEA President Lily Eskelsen García on Oct. 3. “For more than four decades, Clinton has fought to make sure all children have a fair opportunity to succeed regardless of their ZIP code. Clinton will continue to advocate on behalf of students, educators and working families because she understands the road to a stronger U.S. economy starts in America’s public schools,” said Eskelsen García. With more than 50 percent of all children attending public schools living in poverty, and the number of homeless children doubling since before the recession, Clinton knows America has swung out of balance. Everyone who works should make ends meet, have a say about their futures, and be able to negotiate better wages and benefits to support a family. Clinton will fight for America’s working families, and she believes a collective voice gives educators the ability to not just maintain a fair workplace but also help them stand up and advocate for their students. “Educators know that Clinton is a true partner and always will give us a voice in working to not only create stronger public schools but to create a stronger America,” said Eskelsen García.

Don’t miss it! The 2016 NEA Higher Education Organizing Conference

The 2016 NEA Higher Education Organizing Conference will be held April 1-3 at the Sheraton Hotel and Marina in San Diego. Speakers will include NEA President Lily Eskelsen García and author Steve Pemberton. Online conference registration begins November 2. For more information, visit www.nea.org/grants/19458.htm

Thought & Action call for papers

The NEA Thought & Action Journal invites your submissions for a special focus section: “In Search of a More Perfect Union...” The deadline is January 1. For more information, see nea.org/thoughtandaction.

Also, have you seen the online-only summer issue of Thought & Action? Articles focus on the “purpose of higher ed,” and also can be found at nea.org/thoughtandaction.
In Memory of
Larry Levine

“Today, I stood where the wide ledge below my house meets the deep part of the river. Where the river ran over it, the ledge was the color of wet sand with a patina of moss green highlights. It was ninety degrees; I was summoning the courage to jump in. As I gazed into the depths, I saw my shadow and rays of light emanating around my silhouette. The light danced to the rhythm of the breeze on the water; it was all in one and magical, and that was what I dove into.”

— LARRY LEVINE, STEAMBOATERS WHISTLE, SUMMER 2013

At 10:38 a.m., October 1, the first 911 call was made. An armed 26-year-old student had entered a creative-writing classroom at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, and shot and killed professor Larry Levine and eight of his students, ages 18 to 59. Levine, a part-time professor and a full-time friend, writer, and outdoorsman, was a member of the Oregon Education Association, which has worked with the UCC Foundation to create a scholarship in Levine’s memory. To donate, see www.oregoned.org/uccscholarship.
The Higher Education Act, the landmark legislation that has opened the doors to college for countless Americans, turns 50 on Nov. 8. First signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his Great Society program, the decades that followed its passage saw the lowest poverty rates in the U.S. since records began. Higher education was then — and still is, despite rising tuition and debt — the most reliable ticket to the American Dream. “To thousands of young men and women, this act means the path of knowledge is open to all that have the determination to walk it,” said Johnson, as he signed the act into law.
Over the past 50 years, HEA has helped send millions of smart, low- and middle-income Americans to college through its creation of need-based grants, work-study opportunities, and federal student loans, as well as outreach programs, such as TRIO.

Even today, these programs are the cornerstones of the federal government’s college affordability and access efforts. In 2015, guaranteed federal student loans enabled a whopping 29 million Americans to pay for higher education, U.S. Department of Education figures show, while the same grant program created in 1965 helped more than 1.3 million of the poorest Americans chase their dreams.

Meanwhile, work-study provided part-time employment to more than 711,000 students in 2011. “The success of the HEA in enabling literally millions of students to attend college and university has transformed this country for the better, and helped create a fundamentally more equitable and creative society,” said Mark F. Smith, NEA senior policy analyst for higher education.

Since 1965, HEA has been reauthorized by Congress numerous times, notably in 1972 when Pell Grants were established. Its next update is underway — with committee hearings held recently on Capitol Hill to address topics including affordability and teacher prep. Although reauthorization could happen as soon as 2016, the House Speaker’s recent resignation, as well as next year’s presidential election — both obstacles to swift lawmakers — mean the road to passage likely will be slow.

What do we want in the next HEA?

Nonetheless, NEA Higher Ed members are ready for reauthorization! We know what we want for our students and our institutions — and it’s to preserve and expand the public good that is public higher education.

This fall, NEA and its union partners, the American Federation of Teachers and the American Association of University Professors, together representing more than 350,000 higher education staff and faculty, issued joint recommendations for the reauthorization of HEA.

These recommendations are framed by the realization that higher education is a public good and must provide a 21st-century education, and the fact that public investment in higher education is severely lacking — “Unfortunately it seems that cuts to state support for higher education are far outpacing the contributions made by HEA, in terms of Pell Grants and other programs,” said DeWayne Sheaffer, president of NEA’s National Council for Higher Education.

To read the recommendations in full, visit nea.org/he. They include:

- power of Pell Grants must be restored, and support for historically black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions must be increased.

On the topic of quality, accountability, and student services: HEA should provide incentives to institutions that invest in instruction that leads to student learning — and this includes reversing the trend to contingent or adjunct academic labor, and transitioning to a majority full-time, tenure-track faculty. Also additional controls to guard against fraud and predatory practices at for-profit colleges are necessary, especially those providing distance education. College campuses also must be made safe.

On the topic of teacher preparation: Every student deserves the “right to be taught by a well-prepared, profession-ready teacher.” To that end, the HEA

Celebrate by Signing!

Sign NEA’s petition to remind Congress of HEA’s original and ongoing intent: It’s about the public good.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Higher Education Act (HEA), we must reclaim its original promise — creating a real opportunity for students to graduate from high-quality institutions of higher education without burdensome debt.

I believe that higher education is a public good, and one that must provide a 21st Century education for all students, whatever their goals may be. It is critical that any changes to the Higher Education Act protect the interests of students, faculty and staff.

Your signature here!

Go to https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/protect-the-interests-of-students-with-new-hea

On the topic of affordability, access, and diversity: With student debt at $1.2 trillion and two out of three students needing to borrow to pay for college, reauthorization must address affordability. This includes making sure that “students with the greatest financial need receive sufficient federal aid to attend college.” Also, community college should be made free, the purchasing

should expand opportunities for future teachers to access residency programs that include supervised clinical practice. The law also should discourage “testing-only” approaches to licensure.

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Editor, NEA Advocate, mflannery@nea.org
Making SLO Assessment Productive and Fun

Faculty, Assessment, Productive, and Fun. These four words are not usually said in the same breath. However they can be. We can prove it.

Like most colleges and universities our campus is mandated to conduct program assessments of our Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Often this mandate is implemented by a top-down approach in which faculty are directed to “use this tool to assess your classes and or programs!” If you heard the voice of Charlton Heston or Morgan Freeman, you get the point. This directive is often met with rolled eyes, questions about academic freedom, or just plain refusal. Some faculty feel students’ grades on assignments and overall course grades reflect how well their students have met the SLOs. Other faculty are not even aware there are SLOs they need to meet.

In this article we will describe the process we went through to assess the specific learning objectives for one of our General Education (GE) sections—Comparative Cultural Studies (CCS). Not only did we learn a lot about working together as a committee, including part-time and full-time faculty, we all had such a good time that we kept meeting even after we finished our task! We feel that sharing our process will allow other campuses to benefit from our experiences. Mandated directives about assessing SLOs do not have to be a burden. We found that bringing together faculty from various disciplines is not only an asset but can produce tools that can be used across campus.

BY BETH LASKY, ANU THAKUR, NINA GOLDEN, MINTESNOT WOLDEAMANUEL, ASHLEY SAMSON, AND GIGI HESSAMIAN
California State University, Northridge
Participation Can be Painless

We have all been at the place, say a department meeting perhaps, where we are told not only what to assess but what tools to use for the assessment process. How many times have we said, “That won’t work in my course, or in my discipline?”

As the director of General Education and the coordinator of Academic Assessment at our university, we were part of a group that helped establish GE assessment on our campus. During the strategic planning process, we agreed that simply telling faculty what tools to use for assessment would not work. We needed to create a plan that placed decision-making in the hands of the faculty. Our campus GE program has seven sections, including natural sciences, arts and humanities, and more. Each section has its own goals and SLOs. We decided to begin with the GE section of Comparative Cultural Studies/ Gender, Race, Class, Ethnicity Studies and Foreign Languages (CCS) to follow with our GE course recertification process. Our first task was to put together a committee to design a process to assess the SLOs for CCS.

Establishing the Committee

To begin, a questionnaire to gain information about who was teaching CCS courses was distributed, via department chairs, to faculty. After respondents emailed back, the GE program director went through the

Meet the Authors

Beth Lasky is a professor of special education, and former director of general education. beth.lasky@csun.edu

Anu Thakur is an associate professor of interior design, and coordinator of academic assessment. anubuhti.thakur@csun.edu

Nina Golden is a professor of business law. nina.golden@csun.edu

Mintesnot Woldeamanuel is an associate professor of urban studies and planning. mintesnot.woldeamanuel@csun.edu

Ashley Samson is an associate professor whose specialty is sport and exercise psychology. ashley.samson@csun.edu

GiGi Hessamian is a lecturer who teaches General Education and rhetoric. gigi.k.hessamian@csun.edu

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > HOW RUBRICS CAN WORK

At our first CCS committee meeting, I remember thinking that we were a diverse group with little in common. Once we began discussing our courses and pedagogy, we found that in fact we had one thing in common: we all required students to reflect on topics such as cultural diversity in written assignments. Over the course of many meetings we developed a tool to assess how successful students were in reaching the set learning outcomes. Along the way we fine-tuned the tool through discussions and norming sessions. So long as home-baked pumpkin bread and multi-colored post-its were provided, we were content.

Most of us with years of teaching experience develop a sense of what makes a good paper. But having a rubric allows me to quantify that sense, makes grading faster, and most importantly, tells students what I expect of them. For every paper that I assign in every class, I post a rubric before the paper is due, and return a completed rubric with their grade. Creating and implementing the CCS rubric has made me a more effective instructor and I know that my colleagues from the committee feel the same way.

BY NINA GOLDEN
responses and formed a committee, ensuring a diverse group. (See Best Practices.) Selected faculty were invited and informed they would receive $100 for every meeting.

Getting Together
At first bringing together instructors from five departments seemed like a crazy idea. How would five instructors who teach five different courses ever come to a consensus on how to assess the five CCS SLOs? The purpose of our first meeting was simply to get to know each other and to discuss the goals and expectations of the committee. Everyone briefly shared the structure of the CCS class they taught, while committee coordinators discussed potential assessment strategies to initiate the thought process. The meeting concluded with a discussion of our goals and expectations—to design a way to assess the CCS SLOs across their five courses. As we left, members promised to look at their own course to determine if and how it met the SLOs, and to return with samples of assignments and thoughts about the assessment strategy and process.

Deciding on a Tool
Our second committee meeting lasted a bit longer. Each member provided information about his or her course, assignments used and how they addressed the CCS SLOs. Although the courses included ranged from Cities of the Third World to Women in Sports, as Mintesnot remembers, “The pivotal moment in the process was when we discovered that the varying sample assignments had one thing in common: all were reflection essay assignments. The assignments asked students to reflect on certain cultural issues, and how the course content changed their perspective. This made the

“I AM MORE EFFICIENT, STRUCTURED, AND THOROUGH IN ALL MY COURSE REQUIREMENTS…”

entire process focus on developing an assessment tool on reflection assignments. To do that, we shared our individual experiences on how we assess assignments.”

Finally, the committee discussed tools to assess reflection papers. One member used a scale based on timeliness, quality of writing, and whether the student followed directions. Rubric samples were shared, and types and merits were discussed. The meeting ended with everyone agreeing to try writing benchmarks for the reflection assignment that met the SLOs.

Getting into Rubrics
Most of the benchmarks brought to the third meeting focused on the content and form of the papers. All brought checklists or holistic rubrics. After sharing some examples of analytical rubrics, a fruitful discussion around grading scales occurred. We began to draft a rubric and then revised it via email. Before the calibration meeting to determine its effectiveness, each member submitted a reflection paper from a previous semester. At the calibration meeting, we practiced using the rubric until everyone was able to score the same paper with a similar rating. By the end of this long meeting everyone felt they had a good understanding of how to use the CCS rubric.

A full day with lots of highlighters and food was set aside to use the finalized rubric. Before the meeting the members were asked to provide 15 student papers from previous semesters, representing a good mix of high to low quality. Eight papers were randomly selected from the 15 papers brought by each faculty, for a total of 40 samples. They were duplicated and numbered. Then, each paper was rated by two committee members, with each member scoring 16 papers. The coordinator for Assessment shared the results at a final meeting.

Sharing the Rubric
At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year the committee reconvened (without the $100 meeting stipend) and decided they wanted to share the rubric as a grading/assessment tool with CCS faculty across the campus. If the rubric could be widely ad-

BEST PRACTICES > GETTING AND KEEPING FACULTY INVOLVED

W e found that our success hinged on a few easy strategies. First, we remained focused. We started with one area, and treated it like a pilot program that would provide insights on ways to scale up. Second, we prioritized variety among our members, including length of time teaching a GE course, the college/department the instructor was from, the course they taught, their rank, etc. Including part-time faculty was not only beneficial to our committee, but also to the instructors. This best practice ensured more buy-in across campus when we shared our rubric. Third, make the meetings short and fun! Except for the calibration and scoring meetings, none went longer than 90 minutes. In addition, at least one home baked yummy was served, and we gave out other treats like colored pens. Although participants received $100 per meeting during the first year, they continued to attend after the stipends ended. Paying for members to present and attend conferences was a wonderful perk. Because we tied the rubric to the SLOs, two different courses went through our campus recertification process with ease. Finally, letters of appreciation from the director of GE were placed in participants’ professional files to use for promotion and tenure. Ashley said it best, “I looked forward to coming to these meetings. My colleagues couldn’t believe it!”
opted, we could likely collect large samples of data from various departments. The director of GE emailed all chairs and asked for 5-10 minutes at upcoming meetings. Twenty-one of the 28 departments welcomed a discussion, provided by one or two committee members, about the new rubric and how to use it. Additional presentations were also made at meetings of associate deans, college/department assessment liaisons and various curriculum committees. In addition, the committee presented their process, rubric, and results at two assessment retreats.

**Surveying the Students**

With the CCS rubric being used in many courses, the committee decided in fall 2013 to add an indirect assessment component. They designed a student survey to be distributed at the beginning and end of courses. The purpose was to determine why students take their course and then to find out their opinion of the course after completion.

**Final Opportunities and Lessons Learned**

Four of the five committee members attended the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference (AAC&U) on General Education and Assessment in Portland, Ore. In addition, they presented at the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Academic Resource Conference, in Los Angeles, on this process and what was learned.

At the last meeting, everyone shared what they learned from the process. You have already heard from Nina. GiGi said this: “From discussions with my committee and participation in two assessment conferences attended largely by full-time faculty, I learned about assessment issues at national and state levels. But why was this information mostly new to me? Because part-time faculty are by-and-large absent from policy-related, decision-making processes, their involvement relegated to times of enforcement which can create a disconnect or worse, breed resistance.” Finally, Ashley: “I am more efficient, structured, and thorough in all my course requirements and am able to make sure that they line up more congruently with the SLO’s. The students have also benefited from having a structured rubric in place from the start, so that they know what they will be evaluated on.” None of these members had used rubrics before, now they all use them!

**REFERENCES & RESOURCES**


CSUN Documents. Please contact Beth Lasky at beth.lasky@csun.edu


WHY I AM A MEMBER!

UNION POWER!

Faculty Tenure in Texas

When two Texas state universities merged this year — the University of Texas at Brownsville and the University of Texas Pan-American — to form the new University of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), a few things were left behind. A sense of shared governance was one of them, and a respect for faculty tenure was another. “They basically used the merger to chip away at tenure,” says one professor, who was among some two dozen Brownsville and Pan-Am tenure-track and tenured faculty who were not offered jobs at the merged university for a variety of so-called reasons. One professor recounts a years-old investigation, which had been unequivocally ruled unfounded and expunged from his record — but still used as a reason to disregard his tenure and let him go. Others were faulted for turning paperwork in late. “It really reflected how tyrannical a university administration can be, if there doesn’t exist a counterbalance.” But, in the end, when the doors of the new state university opened this year, many of those faculty members were back in the classroom. Why? “I think it says a lot that the people who belonged to the union were the few people who were rehired,” says the UTRGV professor. Members of the Texas Faculty Association (TFA), an NEA Higher Ed affiliate, who had been caught up in the attacks on tenure, benefited from their membership, the professor said. They had TFA attorneys working with them, even flying across the state to attend hearings. “I believe that the pressure applied by the union is the reason I still have a position.”

Cleveland Jones

CHICAGO

Cleveland Jones remembers the bad old days before he and his contingent faculty colleagues at Olive Harvey College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago, had a union. “I remember how it was when you’d come in, and you thought you had a class, and then they’d come in behind you and give it somebody else, and you didn’t have any recourse,” he said. Jones, who also works as a Chicago police officer, remembers when the word grievance meant nothing in his academic workplace. He remembers when there was no health insurance for adjunct faculty—and yes, it’s unaffordable now, but it wasn’t even offered before. He remembers when pay varied wildly from campus to campus, person to person, and there was no such thing as a paid day off. But over the past decade, since Olive Harvey College part-time faculty joined the City Colleges Contingent Labor Organizing Committee (CCCLOC), an Illinois Education Association (IEA) affiliate, of which Jones is vice president, things have begun to change. These days, thanks to their collectively bargained contract, every union member has a guaranteed class assignment, and canceled classes come with compensation. Nobody walks into a disciplinary hearing alone. But the fight isn’t over — CCCLOC members have been at the bargaining table for more than 1,200 days, battling administration for a living wage. Their current average pay is just $2,000 per class, far less than the national average, and less than a third of the average full-time professor’s pay, even as student tuition goes up and their chancellor took home a $35,000 bonus last year. They want fair pay, and compensation for the things that help them be better teachers, like office hours and planning time. In October, Jones helped lead his union brothers and sisters — 95 percent of them — to reject the administration’s “last best” offer, which would have left them still living in poverty.
Who Needs Faculty Anymore? (Just our students…)

FACULTY MATTER TO STUDENT LEARNING. Indeed 50 years of research shows conclusively that the more interaction with faculty, the better — and that includes better completion rates, better grades and test scores, and increased development of leadership and critical thinking skills. And yet, as a new report from the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education (futureofhighered.org) points out, “Unfortunately for students, many national trends in these areas actually decrease the possibilities for faculty to interact with students in the amounts and ways that matter most.”

“If faculty are the backbone of American higher education — which they most certainly are — then our system is near collapse.”

— NEA PRESIDENT LILY ESKELEN GARCIA, LILY’S BLACKBOARD, SEPT. 29, 2014. (http://lilysblackboard.org/2015/09/contingency-on-campus/)

The Fall of Faculty
In 1990, public colleges had about twice as many full-time faculty as administrators, says the CFHE report. Now those numbers are roughly equal. Not only have full-time faculty members been replaced by low-paid, part-time or non-tenured colleagues, but high-paid administrators have multiplied.

A Case Study: Cal State between 2004 and 2013
- Increase in California State University students between 2004 and 2013
- Decrease in full-time faculty members
- Increase in number of managers
- Faculty hired on part-time basis

What do we value? Despite the role faculty play in student learning, institutions don’t seem to value them. At the CSU, about 50 percent of all faculty earn less than $40,000 a year:
- Low salaries have had a negative affect on their lives
- Taken additional jobs to make ends meet
- Can’t afford to live in their campus community
- Part-time faculty who say they’ve received income-based government assistance while working in the CSU

Source: CFHE, California Faculty Association survey.

Instructional Faculty by Rank and Reporting Category, 2013
- Graduate Teaching Assistant
- Part-Time Instructional Staff
- Full-Time Non-Tenure-Track
- Full-Time Tenure-Track
- Full-Time Tenured

14% 51% 14% 6% 15%

14% 20% -3% 19% 46%

80% 72% 60% 20%
When you introduced America’s Promise College Act—to make community and technical colleges free for eligible students—who did you have in mind? And how do you intend to get this passed by Congress?

Wisconsin has a strong history of supporting higher education and has a great system of four-year universities and two-year schools, an amazing set of technical colleges, as well as two tribal colleges. When I introduced America’s College Promise, I was thinking of the students these institutions serve, and the many more they could serve, if we could address the affordability barrier that keeps too many students from starting, or, all too often, completing postsecondary education.

I strongly believe America needs to out-educate the rest of the world to better compete in a 21st century, skills-based economy. America’s College Promise is a bold investment in higher education, workforce readiness, our economy, and our future.

If people believe, like I do, that no middle class family should be priced out of the education they need and deserve, then they need to let their voices be heard. We’re in the process of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, and as a member of the Senate’s Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, I’m excited to bring America’s College Promise to the table during reauthorization. I know we can make change from the outside in when people get engaged.

You recently visited Chippewa Valley Technical College and heard the student body president say: “You’ve got students graduating with fixed loan payments they cannot control, and they’re having to choose ‘do I pursue this public career that I’ve had as a dream but doesn’t pay very much?’” What do you think is sacrificed when students face these choices?

For far too many students, the desire to serve others is pushed aside by the crushing burden of student loan debt. I have no doubt there are students who don’t pursue a career in teaching simply because they aren’t paid enough to manage student loan payments as well as the other expenses of life. That’s just one reason we need to address the student debt crisis, because we can’t afford to have it stop anyone from pursuing their dreams. We also need to make sure we put in place policies that reward hard work—like teaching. The top 25 hedge fund managers are making more than all of America’s kindergarten teachers combined. Sadly, our tax system rewards the wealth of these hedge fund managers with a tax loophole that allows Wall Street millionaires to pay a lower effective tax rate than some teachers. This is simply wrong and that is why I have introduced the Carried Interest Fairness Act of 2015. If we closed this tax loophole and made the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes, we would raise $15.6 billion that we could invest in education, whether it’s K-12 or higher education.

This fall you also re-introduced the Working Student Act—what is it? And can you get this passed by Congress?

Making college affordable is one of the most important steps toward building a strong path to the middle class for all Americans. I’m proud to introduce legislation, endorsed by the NEA, that will help more students, in particular those who work while in school, to afford higher education, attain in-demand skills, and succeed in the workforce. What it would do is raise the amount a student can earn while in school — known as the “income protection allowance” — without seeing reductions to his or her federal financial aid. For example, under this bill, a single mom with two children can earn about $10,000 more without cuts to financial aid. As a member of the HELP committee, I’ll be pushing to see this change included in any reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

How can NEA members help you to help all students have a fair shot at higher education?

NEA members are working every day to make sure that our nation’s students are prepared for postsecondary education, and I can’t overstate how important that is. It’s critical that my colleagues in Congress keep hearing from you about the challenges you face in doing that important job, and the unmet needs you see as you guide students to the next step in their lives. I am so proud to have an opportunity to work with the NEA as a partner, fighting together to ensure that all students, regardless of circumstance, have a chance to pursue the dream of higher education.
CA Faculty schedule strike vote, ask for fair pay
A strike authorization vote by the California Faculty Association (CFA) was scheduled for Oct. 19-28, as the Advocate went to press. The serious sticking point in CFA contract negotiations, which have been ongoing since May, is salary. CFA leaders believe strongly that nothing less than 5 percent raises will make up the years of financial neglect of faculty by the Cal State system, but administrators will not budge beyond 2 percent. “I am voting yes [to a strike] because we are more than an impediment to a balanced budget. I am voting yes because getting and retaining good faculty is key to getting students to finish quality degrees,” said Douglas Domingo-Forasté, Long Beach CFA president. In surveys, 80 percent of CFA faculty say that their low wages have adversely affected their lives; 72 percent have taken extra jobs to make ends meet; and 60 percent can’t afford to live in their campus communities. The CFA represents about 25,000 members across 23 campuses.

UMass staff and faculty win retroactive pay
After months of action to hold the University of Massachusetts accountable for employee contracts it settled but did not fully fund, union workers can claim victory. “Our members and members of the other unions on UMass campuses are finally receiving the money owed to them,” said Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) President Barbara Madeloni to MTA Today. “Throughout this process, they demonstrated solidarity with each other and to union principles... This type of solidarity and strength works for our students, our schools and colleges, and all working people.” Former UMass President Robert Caret had refused to pay the negotiated salaries for the staff and faculty members of seven MTA/NEA-affiliated unions on three UMass campuses, claiming the state Legislature hadn’t fully funded them. But, after MTA filed an unfair labor practices charge with the state, current President Martin Meehan agreed to pay. The additional raises will cost about $10.9 million, and will help about 6,500 staff and faculty members in Boston, Lowell, and Amherst.

Welcome UNH law faculty!
Congratulations to the University of New Hampshire law school faculty who voted overwhelmingly earlier this year to form a new NEA-New Hampshire affiliated union.

Manhattan adjuncts can tally their union votes
Ballots from a 2011 union election at Manhattan College have been impounded for years because administrators said their Catholic religious affiliation made them exempt from the National Labor Relations Board. But this fall, a regional NLRB office ruled in favor of counting the ballot, saying the college failed to show how the adjuncts help maintain the religious environment. There is no religious loyalty test for hiring, for example. The proposed union would be an affiliate of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), a joint NEA-AFT affiliate.

TWO-MINUTE INTERVIEW > DR. FRANCES JENSEN

DR. FRANCES JENSEN is professor and chair of the Department of Neurology at the Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, and the co-author of The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults (Harper), with Amy Ellis Nutt. Recently, Jensen spoke with the NEA Advocate.

In the book you describe the many things that are happening — or not yet happening — in the teenage brain. Can you explain what you mean when you say it’s like a Ferrari that’s all revved up...

But doesn’t have any brakes!
There are a few basic points about brain development that I always try to make:
First of all, the brain is the last organ in the body to mature, and it isn’t done until the mid- to late-20s. So when you’re in college, it’s not done, and it’s certainly not done in high school. Learning is about building circuits in your brain, or making connections between brain synapses—this is called “synaptic plasticity.” The heightened synaptic plasticity [of young people] is the “revved up” part. But the “brakes,” or the way they regulate themselves is more limited.

What can educators do with this new information about brains?
Teenagers are learning machines. Our society puts them in a special place where their primary purpose is to learn—and this is excellent because they’re extremely well-equipped to do that. The hope is that teachers can remind their students, good and bad students, how to help their brains function optimally. Sleep is a big part of it. Their circadian clock is 2-3 hours off from adults, and their melatonin does not get released until 2-3 hours after adults’ release. Topics requiring rigorous brain activity—and that includes our exams—probably should be placed no later than late morning.

In the book, you explain how stress affects teenage brains more acutely than adult brains, but much of what happens in college is stressful...
Mindfulness should be a big part of their education: being mindful of the effects of stress or social networking on their brains. We need to teach kids to be sensitive to their brain health.
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Trigger warnings

Let’s consider some different kinds

BY JASON WALTA

THE MEDIA LOVES A GOOD STORY about political correctness run amok on campus. And, so, the current debate over “trigger warnings” has yielded a bumper crop of coverage that ranges from chin-stroking thought pieces to hectoring tirades against coddled students. Without a doubt, the debate makes for fun reading, and even raises some important pedagogical concerns for educators. But it shouldn’t distract us from far more significant issues that confront us as institutions of higher education and the political climate around us change rapidly.

For the uninitiated, trigger warnings are alerts that may be provided by instructors to students to notify them that certain course material could prompt — or “trigger” — a traumatic reaction in those who have post-traumatic stress disorder. While the actual incidence of trigger warnings on college syllabi is probably miniscule in comparison to the number of pundits who’ve opined on them, that hasn’t stopped the issue from being held up as a symbol of everything that’s wrong in higher education today.

To be sure, there is a serious discussion to be had — particularly among educators — about the merits and demerits of using trigger warnings. Some, like the University of Chicago’s Jerry Coyne, believe the warnings infantilize students and insulate them from “one of college’s most important functions,” which is “to learn how to hear and deal with challenging ideas” (goo.gl/9Rurfi). Others, like Cornell University’s Kate Manne, think they make good pedagogical sense because they allow students with sensitivities “to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions” (nyti.ms/1W2wOma).

Drowned out in this debate, however, are issues about different kinds of “triggers” that are far more consequential for academic freedom. One is the hair-trigger by which an increasing part of the teaching force in higher education — adjuncts and other contingent faculty — can be dismissed because they lack even the most basic job protections. Such protections have long been understood as necessary to securing the freedom to explore controversial material in research and in the classroom. Yet, a growing share of non-tenured faculty feel the need to “play it safe” for fear that they could be forced from the classroom with little or no explanation — at least where they lack the protections of a union.

Another “trigger” that should worry those who care about academic freedom and robust debate is the literal trigger on a gun that you may see on campuses, thanks to a new wave of “campus carry” laws. State legislatures in places like Texas, Wisconsin, and Florida are pushing for guns on campuses, and they are opposed overwhelmingly by educators, administrators, campus police, and students alike — with good reason. College can be a disorienting and stressful time, and young adults who are often away from home for the first time don’t always make smart choices when it comes to alcohol, drugs, and partying. Adding guns to the mix holds the potential for disaster.

These laws also have significant potential to chill academic freedom and debate on campus. Virtually every seasoned educator knows how to deal with an agitated student who comes to their office to complain about his grades. But, if that agitated student also has a gun holstered to his hip, you might start to feel a lot less resolute about maintaining the original grade. Likewise a student engaged in a heated class debate with an armed student might decide that the wiser choice is to walk away rather than have the discussion spill out into the hallway later.

By all means, don’t hold back in the debate about trigger warnings, particularly as it concerns how you teach in your own classrooms. But don’t let it dominate the field. There are far more pressing issues begging for more activism and discussion. And, unlike the passing brouhaha over trigger warnings, they will undoubtedly affect higher education for decades to come.

Jason Walta is an attorney in the NEA Office of General Counsel and an adjunct faculty member at American University’s Washington College of Law.
An Open Letter to Lawmakers, 
after yet another mass shooting

ON THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1, the day that ten people were shot and killed at Umpqua Community College, I was at my second day of work at Clackamas Community College, outside of Portland, Oregon.

Following the shooting I realized that as a new hire, I hadn’t been fully informed on my college’s emergency protocols. What should I do in the event of an active shooter situation? My school’s Emergency Response Guide advises me to evacuate if it is safe, or lock my door if possible. I am on the third floor, without the key required to lock my door, and so I look to the final recommendations, which suggest that I “arm [myself] with classroom items (e.g. stapler, chair, fire extinguisher) to fight back in the event that the shooter attempts to enter [my] room.” In the next paragraph, I am told: “If you must fight, fight to win and survive.” 

Fight to survive. I am a teacher with a Master’s degree in creative writing, and this is part of my job.

These security measures are, in their inadequate way, essential. It is not the school’s fault that heavily armed people, whether through incurable rage or mental instability, all too frequently choose academic institutions as the settings for the horror they unleash. I am positive that handing me—or any teacher—a gun, will solve nothing. Regardless of the level of preparedness, though, it is clear that schools and teachers are being asked to do a job that they are not meant to do.

When I speak to my students about what happened at Umpqua, what do you, our lawmakers, advise I say after I explain that the stapler and white board markers—the only classroom supplies I have in my room—are critical to our survival? I could tell them that your thoughts and prayers are with us. But I am teaching a class on argument, instructing my students on the importance of facts. So instead I will tell them the truth: They have to be prepared to hide out of the line of fire, and I to fight for our survival, because you haven’t done your jobs.

The next time you have an opportunity to vote on common sense gun legislation, instead of fearing the attack ads the gun lobby will undoubtedly launch against you, the lost campaign revenue, or the threat to your job, I hope that you think of the educators and students across this country who have been asked to stand up to gunmen because you are too scared to stand up to the gun lobby.

Melissa Duclos, an OEA member, is founder of The Clovers Project, which provides mentoring to writers at various stages of their careers. Her work has appeared in Salon, The Offing, and elsewhere. This article was published first at longer length at Salon.com.