

# Overview

by Mary Ellen Flannery

**I**n this 2012 issue of *Thought & Action*, we ask you to reflect upon the value of an open door, considering questions of both personal and institutional practice: Is your office door open to all students? Are the gates of your campus closed to the non-privileged? Equally important are questions of state and federal policy. For example, just what was U.S. Representative Paul Ryan thinking when he proposed to shove 500,000 Pell Grant recipients out the door?

This November, you have a choice—and the context and consequences of that choice are framed in this issue of NEA's journal of higher education. Will you vote to prop open the doors of public colleges and universities? To sustain the federal student aid programs, like Pell, which enable millions of poor and middle-class Americans to attend your classes? Or will you opt to slam shut the door?

Even as a recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center tells us that Hispanic student enrollment in higher education reached a new high last year (a record 16.5 percent share), Texas A&M professor Jon Travis warns in this issue of *Thought & Action* of the efforts afoot to close those doors to people of color: the lawsuits against institutions that practice affirmative action, the budget proposals that eviscerate public education, the endless parade of books that insult the work of tenured faculty. “These oligarchs understand that by restricting educational access to the rich and white,” Travis writes, “by targeting public investment in higher education, and by attacking such democratic concepts as need-based aid, academic freedom, and shared governance, they can effectively restrict participation in the American governmental system.”

Is there really a vast right-wing conspiracy, as Hillary Clinton famously put it in 1998, working to shut down the rights and powers of working people? Well, yes. There is—and it is not a matter for satire or *Saturday Night Live*. It is a matter of public record. Over the past two years, more than 30 states have introduced

legislation or enacted laws aimed at keeping voters from the polls. In Florida and Ohio—both battleground states for the upcoming presidential election—early voting opportunities have been dramatically curtailed. These measures are aimed directly at poor people, at people of color, and at the candidates who would carry their voices into rotundas across the nation. Meanwhile, attacks on your rights to collectively bargain also continue unabated in Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, and elsewhere. If elected, Romney has promised to eliminate the National Labor Relations Board, the judicial body that protects workers from unlawful firings and other abuses, and to work for a national “Right to Work” (RTW) law. In his article, which describes thoroughly the harmful impact of RTW on key standards of living, such as productivity and poverty, *Thought & Action* author Darrell Minor quotes Martin Luther King, Jr.: “In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, as ‘right to work.’ It provides no ‘rights’ and no ‘works’. Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining.”

Within this context, the escalating trend toward contingent, or adjunct, faculty makes perfect sense (perfectly terrifying, that is), as American University lecturer Claire Goldstene ably points out in these pages. It’s not about money. It’s about political power. Take away faculty’s job security and academic freedom, and so goes their collective ability to speak truth to power. So goes the incubation of progressive thought in this nation. “The push toward contingent academic labor erodes the university as a basis for the free exchange of ideas, undermines the scientific method as a foundation for intellectual pursuits, and diminishes a potent voice of opposition,” Goldstene writes. “The political left ignores this development at its own peril.”

This November, the intellectual health of institutions, of faculty and of students is walking dangerously near the edge of collapse. Understand the consequences when you cast your vote. Opt for the candidate who would keep the doors open. [nea](#)

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