Overview

By Mark F. Smith

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The overview to the NEA 2009 Almanac of Higher Education looked forward to a “new presidential administration [that] has a clear understanding of, and a stronger commitment to, the public purposes of higher education.” “Together with congressional majorities committed to similar goals,” NEA anticipated, “the U.S. has the opportunity to replicate national programs such as the G.I. Bill and the original Higher Education Act. Increased access to higher education, in turn, will fuel the economy.”

Looking back during the last year of the Obama administration, we see a mixed record. Despite years of obstructionism, the administration successfully transitioned all federal student loans to the William D. Ford Direct Loan program, saving students and taxpayers untold millions of dollars. Improved repayment plans, loan forgiveness programs, and regulation of egregious for-profit abusers of the public trust all contributed to making college more affordable and accessible for millions of students.

That said, a recalcitrant, unproductive Congress blocked substantive accomplishment after the 2010 elections. Much of the administration’s agenda for higher education remains the victim of partisan political deadlock. A 2014 proposal to eliminate tuition for two years of community college capped President Obama’s sustained effort to strengthen two-year institutions. The president also proposed increased transition funding from secondary to post-secondary education. Unfortunately, these initiatives have little support in Congress and are likely to remain unfulfilled in the near term.

Nevertheless, the president built long-term public support for more affordable higher education by launching several non-profit structures. The College Promise Campaign promotes grass roots and social media efforts to enact the proposal for free community college tuition. The campaign involves higher education unions, student groups, college administrators, and foundation representatives. The NEA and
American Federation of Teachers presidents sit on the campaign’s national advisory board, where they argue for resources that enable community colleges to absorb and properly educate the increased enrollment envisioned by the free-tuition proposal. Protecting academic quality, the presidents argue, must accompany college affordability.

*Degrees Not Debt*, NEA’s own college affordability campaign, advances a four-point agenda: more grants, cheaper loans, more accessible loan forgiveness programs, and reinvesting in the institutional capacity of colleges and universities. Protecting academic quality requires colleges to hire more full-time tenure track faculty. They must provide enough support to contingent faculty to assure their involvement in the life of their departments and their colleges. *Degrees Not Debt* also calls for more librarians to assist student research, and more counselors to help students effectively navigate their college careers. Improving faculty and staff working conditions—identical to student learning conditions—maximizes academic outcomes. All higher education institutions, from technical workforce development centers to large research universities, must join these grassroots campaigns to promote accessible and affordable education.

The proposals of the Obama administration follow a long tradition of promoting large-scale transformation of higher education. In 1946, two years after enactment of the G.I. Bill, President Truman appointed a Commission on Higher Education. Its report, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (1947), called for colleges and universities to assume “a much larger role for higher education in the national life.” Rather than remain an “instrument for producing an intellectual elite,” they must “become the means by which every citizen, youth, and adult is enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal and informal, as far as his native capacities permit.”

“Universal education is indispensable to the full and living realization of the democratic ideal,” the report added. “Education that liberates and ennobles must made equally available to all.” “Justice to the individual demands this;” the report concluded, “the safety and progress of the Nation depend on it. America cannot afford to let any of its potential human resources go undiscovered and undeveloped.”

Lyndon Johnson’s Higher Education Act (1965) began to fulfill the promise of the Truman Commission report, and the Obama administration’s commitment to universal postsecondary education builds on the significant advances made over seventy years. But fully realizing the commission’s vision is long overdue. The essays in this year’s *Almanac* address our current reality, while suggesting paths to fulfilling the promises made by previous generations.

FY 2014–2015 is the first year to show signs of recovery in faculty salaries since the beginning of the Great Recession, notes Suzanne Clery in “Faculty Salaries: 2014–2015.” But the purchasing power of those salaries remains a percentage point below its 2007 pre-recession level. Gender imbalances continue, adds Clery. Women faculty members earn just over 80 percent of men’s salaries at public and independent institutions. The gap between salaries at public research institutions and at public two-year institutions also continued to grow. Faculty at institutions with bargaining agreements averaged almost $5,000 more than colleagues at non-bargaining institutions. Salaries also varied by discipline and state.

William Zumeta reports modest improvements in state support for higher education in “The States: Are They Coming Back to the Aid of Higher Education?” Energy producing states, he notes, having weathered the recessionary downturn better than most others, now endure greater suffering. But inflation and decreased federal student aid translate into net increases in the cost of higher education. Reinvesting in higher education and making it affordable, Zumeta concludes, would pay off in economic growth and social equity, though he questions whether such reinvestment is on the horizon.
Gregory Saltzman, in “Contested Terrain: Developments in Labor Law Affecting Higher Education Since 2012,” identifies significant differences between an anti-union majority on the Supreme Court and a pro-union majority on the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Some recent Court rulings adversely affect fair share provisions. An expected ruling in Friedricks v. California Teachers Association could devastate public sector unions if it finds fair share provisions unconstitutional under the First Amendment. By contrast, recent NLRB decisions make it easier to organize faculty unions at private institutions. The board may soon allow graduate assistants to organize unions; perhaps finally resolving the legal status of graduate unions. Their status switched back and forth over the last two decades, depending on the party of the president.

Kristine Anderson Dougherty, Gary Rhoades, and I highlight the many challenges facing the growing number of contingent faculty in “Negotiating Improved Working Conditions for Contingent Faculty.” The essay focuses on the political advocacy measures NEA and others are taking to address those challenges, the relevant provisions in existing contracts, and the provisions that must be incorporated into contracts. We found many favorable provisions in NEA’s Higher Education Contract Analysis System, but most contracts offer inadequate protections to contingent faculty. Negotiating stronger provisions is achievable for contingents and for the profession. Combined units must pay attention to the needs of all faculty members as they negotiate. Contracts for combined units, for example, seldom address course cancellation fees—a critical issue for contingent and adjunct faculty.

In “Faculty Workload and Productivity in Scandinavia: A Corrective to American Policies,” Henry Lee Allen examines the academic systems of the four Scandinavian countries—Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland—to determine the actions American colleges and universities can adopt to address the reform initiatives pushed by government and foundations. Scandinavian faculty unions, Allen concludes, have a greater impact on policy than their American counterparts. American unions must expand their activities beyond collective bargaining by leading efforts to manage academic climate change.

Valerie Martin Conley examines the complexities of benefits in the higher education sector in “Retirement and Benefits: One Size does Not Fit All.” She uses the National Compensation Survey, published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to detail employer compensation costs for state and local government workers by industry group. Compensation costs were higher for education and health services employees than for workers in public administration, but benefit costs were significantly lower. Most tenured faculty expressed confidence in their retirement planning; 31 percent reported “very confident,” and about half reported “somewhat confident.” But contingent faculty showed dramatically different proportions: only 19 percent reported “very confident” while almost a third lack confidence in their retirement prospects.

Median household income has remained unchanged in the last three years and is still below the 2007 pre-recession level, Vicki Rosser notes in “Income and Poverty: A Regional and State Examination of ESP Salaries.” Rosser examines regional and institutional disparities of ESP salaries using the new occupational categories established by the U.S. Department of Education in 2012. She then compares these salaries to the poverty line. Despite differences among federal job classifications, 8.7 percent of working ESPs live in poverty. The average in Northeast and Midwest regions is slightly higher than the national average. By contrast, the percentage of ESPs with incomes below the poverty line is higher than the national average in the South and West regions. More research is needed, Rosser concludes, to determine the proportion of ESPs in the categories of chronic or transient poverty. Regardless of which
category applies, almost ten percent of working ESPs live in poverty at least some of the time.

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NOTES

1 Smith, 2009, 5.

2 For a description of Obama administration initiatives on college affordability and access, see Kanter, 2015.


REFERENCES

