

Overview

by Con Lehane

W elcome to the 2009 issue of *Thought & Action, the NEA Higher Education Journal*. When we issued the Call for Papers for the 2009 Special Focus, A New Progressive Era for Higher Education, just before last fall's general election, we hoped for a change in the nation's political climate. What we thought we saw coming was a new progressive president and a more optimistic and forward-looking citizenry finally ready to take on the challenges of the 21st Century. We hoped for a recognition that higher education would play a pivotal role in creating a brighter future. As the Call noted, there seemed no end to the contribution the academy could make "to a new era of progress if given sufficient opportunity and resources."

Instead, we've been suffering through a devastating national financial calamity. Higher education, rather than receiving the windfall of support and resources we'd hoped for, is reeling from draconian funding cuts and increasing enrollments while unemployment rises and state revenues sink. Nonetheless, the authors and scholars writing in this issue, while acknowledging the difficulties facing the nation and the academy, are more inclined to propose solutions than to bewail our fate.

In "Who Are These Economists, Anyway?" economist James K. Galbraith looks at the failure of the nation's leading academic economists to understand the current financial crisis or the shaky underpinnings of the nation's financial system.

Con Lehane has edited NEA's higher education publications, including Thought & Action, since 1996. Before coming to NEA, he was an associate professor of English at Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York. He's also been adjunct instructor of English in the City University of New York system and an adjunct associate professor at University of Maryland University College, where he taught advanced expository writing. He is the author of three mystery novels.

Rather than dwell on the debates between the self-proclaimed “new-classicists” and “new Keynesians,” which Galbraith characterizes as “a chummy conversation between Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” he introduces us to a gallery of less-renowned economists—many of them toiling in the trenches of the nation’s public universities—who challenged the idea that the nation’s financial system was working well and all but inviolable, but weren’t heard by the mainstream. These economists, he argues, are creating a body of economic theory “entirely suited to the study of the real economy and its enormous problems.”

Other articles in the Special Focus address the need for the academy to get its own house in order as we move forward to help shape a brighter future. Sociologist Troy Duster, in his article “The Long Path to Higher Education for African Americans,” sees a history of exclusion in American higher education, noting that it wasn’t “until the late 1960s that the nation finally broke through the barriers that had effectively separated races, religions, and genders into separate colleges.” Because of our nation’s success in diversifying higher education in the 1960s and ’70s, he tells us, other nations, namely India and South Africa, have looked to the United States as a model for their diversity efforts. He also notes the inroads made by elites since the 1980s in reversing the egalitarian accomplishments of those earlier decades.

Also in the Special Focus, Kim Emery calls for a more expansive definition of academic freedom—and a union contract to protect it; Steve Street asks if a new progressive era for higher education is possible without dealing with the question of equity between tenure line and non-tenure track faculty; Max Page and Dan Clawson, former presidents of the Massachusetts Society of Professors, recount the rebirth of their activist union; Sarita E. Brown, president of Excelencia in Education, calls on us to pay greater attention to Latino and Latina Americans’ participation in higher education; Michele V. Gee and Sue Margaret Norton offer some analysis and advice for women in the academy; Delores M. Byrnes asks: Will the values of the university someday “permeate the very ways in which human life and society are conceptualized?”

In addition to the Special Focus, we provide our usual fare of articles on topics of importance to the academy. This issue includes essays on improving teaching practice, understanding the “calculus of friendship,” revisiting the culture debate, dealing with race issues in homogeneous settings and understanding the lives of faculty of color on predominantly white campuses, as well as suggestions for improving college opportunity for poor and minority students. We also include a tribute to the great American historian John Hope Franklin who died this year.

As always, the *Thought & Action* Review Panel welcomes your comments and encourages you to consider becoming a contributor. 