

SPECIAL FOCUS

A New Progressive Era for Higher Education

It is hard to imagine higher education at the center of a flourishing economy in a progressive era when we now face state budget cuts for public universities and community colleges. But it is always true that a recovery is necessary after an economic crash before an economy and culture based on new assumptions can emerge. Because a massive infusion of federal stimulus money takes us in the right direction of saving academic jobs and supporting student enrollment—in addition to funding a growing green economy—we have reason to believe a recovery could happen and to plan on it.

To be sure, during a recovery we need the cooperation of state legislatures to invest in higher education. Can this happen? Skeptics might consider the example of Florida this year. The legislature cut other state agencies more than 10 percent while higher education had a 1 percent increase—responding to a campaign led by faculty and students to save higher education from severe program and enrollment cuts during a recession.

Can we create a green economy with full employment, inclusion of all, and dramatic savings in energy, water, and transportation use, by investing in higher education? The effort will require investment in research across many disciplines to propose, design, and test new ideas and plans, as well as a comprehensive teaching program to educate students theoretically and practically for life in a progressive era—transforming and retro-fitting most structures, routes of access, and use of natural resources, among other things. The question is not whether the nation can afford it. The question is: What alternative do we have when the present situation is neither sustainable nor ultimately affordable? The articles in this Special Focus suggest new directions that are not only desirable, but necessary, for a world that is inhabitable in the future.

Tom Auxter is a philosophy professor at the University of Florida and president of United Faculty of Florida, an NEA-AFT affiliate, which represents 23,000 faculty and graduate assistants at public universities and colleges and also at one independent university.