

Overview

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Four years ago, in this space, I wrote, “This November, you have a choice... Will you vote to prop open the doors of public colleges and universities? Or will you opt to slam shut the door?”

Today, the gap between the two major-party candidates for U.S. president is even more unpleasantly clear. On the one hand, we have the 93 percent owner of Trump University—“Yes, It Was a Massive Scam,” announced the *National Review* earlier this year—who says, for his own part (it’s all for his own part): “I’m a very smart guy. I went to the best college.”

On the other, we have a candidate addressing the need for millions of other smart guys (and gals, too!), the ones whose lives are edging toward hopelessness, to access their own high-quality higher education. Her college affordability plan promises debt-free college for all, and free tuition for poor and middle-class families at public institutions. She listens to educators. She listens to parents. She listens to students. “I’m with you,” promised Hillary Clinton, as she stood before thousands of NEA members this summer.

This is a fact: Even today, in 2016, with college costs rising faster than the U.S. space program, higher education is still the most reliable pathway to jobs, home ownership, and our own best selves.

But the golden ticket is fraying. As the rights of faculty and staff to speak with a collective voice are sabotaged (see, for example: Wisconsin), the kindred interests of students also are diminished, and the foundation of institutions built by the public, for the public good, are eroded. In this issue of *Thought & Action*, authors James Freeman and Peter Kolozi write of the “anti-labor winds” that have blown through Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and elsewhere. “Public employees are right to fear it might get worse,” they portend.

Meanwhile, what's taught inside our classrooms? Author Steven Ward warns of the popular movement to competency-based higher education, funded by private mega-foundations like Gates and Lumina, and propagated by organizations like AAC&U and others. "Are the organization and its allies saving and updating the liberal arts for the economic demands of the 21st century? Or are they key players in its destruction?" he asks.

Let's assess. Or let's not. Of the current craze for assessment in public higher education, author Laurie Occhipinti observes, "We measure, not in a way that is useful for ourselves, or even our students, but in a way that makes the process visible and transparent to an external observer (...) Assessment, then, is a management technique that purports to be a pedagogical technique."

So what is the answer? Authors Christine Mooney and Edward Volchok have one, or thousands actually: Their students. The interdependent hand-knit American mesh of faculty and students, of union labor and all other workers, especially those laboring in contingent conditions, must be made stronger, they point out—and that work begins in classrooms. "Students should be aware that unions might hold the key to their own upward mobility, to their access to an affordable education and the American Dream," they write.

And that's why #ImWithHer.

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