

Overview

By Mark F. Smith

Mark F. Smith is an organizational specialist-higher education for the National Education Association. A coordinator of NEA's higher education program since March 2006, he works with state affiliates and locals to advance the interests of college and university faculty and staff and to carry out the goals of the association. Smith holds a BA in history and political science from the University of Wisconsin, and an MA in government from Johns Hopkins University. Prior to joining NEA, he served as director of government relations at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). He has worked as an advocate, organizer, and legislative staff member at the national and state levels.

Several essays in the *NEA 2009 Almanac of Higher Education* use the term “crisis”—a reflection of the fear found daily in the media. Colleges and universities around the country are implementing layoffs, budget cuts, and enrollment caps. Under these circumstances, it may be comforting to remember that the Chinese character for “crisis”—*weiji*—combines the characters for “danger”—*wei*—and “opportunity”—*ji*. The dangers are all too clear, but we need to take advantage of the opportunities presented by our collective “crisis.”

The new presidential administration has a clear understanding of, and a stronger commitment to, the public purposes of higher education. Together with congressional majorities committed to similar goals, the U.S. has the opportunity to replicate national programs such as the GI Bill and the original Higher Education Act. Increased access to higher education, in turn, will fuel the economy. Before the inauguration, Lawrence Summers, an economic

advisor to President Obama, advocated using “investments to build the classrooms, laboratories and libraries” to ensure that students can “meet 21st-century educational challenges.”¹

The *NEA 2009 Almanac* examines the state of higher education in a time of economic challenge. The essays, therefore, emphasize material concerns. In “State Support of Higher Education: The Roller Coaster Plunges Downward Yet Again,” William Zumeta sees “grim times” for higher education in most states in light of the collapse of the financial system. Previous downturns in public support, he notes, have left colleges and universities particularly vulnerable to this crisis.

These dire expectations had not affected faculty salaries in FY 2008, note Suzanne B. Clery and Barry L. Christopher in “Faculty Salaries: 2007–2008.” The “average salary rose 3.7 percent in public institutions and 3.6 percent in independent institutions.” The gender gap in wages increased in public institutions, but showed a

slight decrease this year in independent institutions. Gaps continue between independent and public institutions, among unionized and non-unionized faculty, and among disciplines. Clery and Christopher provide data for full-time faculty. The situation is much bleaker for contingent faculty, who remain more vulnerable when the economy deteriorates.

The economic crisis, Valerie Martin Conley postulates, in “Retirement and Benefits: Protecting Ourselves,” may yet again delay many retirements and jeopardize pensions. The growing variety of retirement plans found in contracts complicates matters. Early retirement incentive options, defined benefit and defined contribution plans, and post-retirement part-time work opportunities are all in the mix. Unions, Conley argues, must carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of these plans in meeting the needs of retirees and continuing employees. They must also ensure that all members understand the details of their individual plans.

In “Faculty Workload and Productivity: The Next Generation’s Plight—and Opportunity,” Henry Lee Allen focuses on the impact of crisis on public colleges and universities. They system, he argues, actually faces five crises—funding, affordability, access, leadership, and faculty resulting from years of “systematic neglect of U.S. public higher education.” Faculty members, Allen adds, must recognize the link between the fate of public higher education and the conditions of academic work. Our upcoming leaders, he concludes, must address both.

In “The Googlization of Universities,” Siva Vaidhyanathan outlines the dangers to the culture of scholarship by the increased presence of commercial search engines in colleges and universities. These dangers, he notes, are exaggerated in the current economic climate where administrators are looking for low-cost alternatives to traditional information management.

In “Unions and Senates: Governance and Distance Education,” Christine Maitland, Gary Rhoades, and I examine how collective bargaining protects faculty rights in distance education

and intellectual property matters, *and* how bargaining strengthens general governance processes. Process rights can be critical, since unionized institutions address many important faculty and staff rights through senate policies, not in the contract.

In “Investing in Staff for Student Retention,” Patricia L. Farrell examines the impact of professional development programs for staff on student retention. Staff members, Farrell finds, have a higher effect on student retention than previously studied. Institutions, she notes, must therefore complement faculty programs with effective orientation sessions for staff. Farrell’s insight represents a new and important strategy for addressing the retention problem in an era of economic challenges.

In “Support Professionals: The Key Issues Survey,” Vicki J. Rosser examines the key bargaining table issues for the 58 percent of university employees who are not faculty members. Most support professional unions focus primarily on salaries, benefits, and job security, Rosser notes. But, she adds, professional recognition and interpersonal relations on the job are also important to these colleagues.

The *NEA Almanac* includes a CD-ROM containing faculty salary data by institution for 2007–08, and articles from previous *NEA Almanacs* and *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*. The disk also includes the College and University Data Analysis System (CUDAS), a database developed by NEA that encapsulates key IPEDS data with an easy to use search and retrieval engine.

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¹ Lawrence Summers. “Obama’s Down Payment: A Stimulus Must Aim for Long Term Results.” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2008.