

# *Debunking The Myth Of Academe*

*By George C. Shaw*

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For the most part, faculty participation in shared governance is at best marginal. Changing this state of affairs, noted George Shaw in this spring 1985 *Thought & Action* article, requires that faculty appreciate the lesson learned by primary and secondary educators in the 1960s: Collective bargaining is entirely consistent with professionalism.

Realistically, collective bargaining is the single most effective instrument for amassing professional power. Almost anything else smacks of individual deal making, which has virtually nothing to do with solving the problems and challenges confronting the profession as a whole.

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**W**orking conditions in higher education have changed considerably over recent decades. The past 30 years have seen an enormous expansion in higher education, particularly in public and two-year institutions. With this expansion have come significant changes that range from the routinization of academic work to the loss of faculty autonomy.

These trends have paralleled, in many respects, the socioeconomic and institutional changes that earlier transformed American primary and secondary education. As K-12 education for all children became a

legally guaranteed right, large administrative bureaucracies emerged to threaten teacher autonomy with increasing routinization and centralized control. Public school teachers responded by unionizing, and, through collective bargaining, they have advanced and protected their rights and professional concerns.

Collective bargaining has also emerged as an important factor in higher education. Many faculty today are successfully bargaining to protect their professional autonomy and ensure equitable compensation. Yet there are those who still

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*At the publication of this article, **George C. Shaw** was a member of the NEA Board of Directors, vice-president of the California Teachers Association, and chair of NEA's Standing Committee on Higher Education. Shaw, who received his master's degree from Chico State University, was also an instructor in history, political science, and foreign affairs at Yuba Community College in Marysville, California.*

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argue that academic unionism threatens the status and dignity of professors. Their position rests on an unabiding faith in what this paper calls the *myth of academe*, the belief that faculty in America lead lives devoted to the selfless pursuit of knowledge in institutions carefully organized to support that pursuit.

**A**ccording to this myth of academe, faculty work for the intrinsic pleasure of the work itself and willingly forego the greater material rewards that men and women with their credentials could earn elsewhere. Faculty, by and large, govern themselves—or so the myth maintains—and make all necessary policy decisions about admissions, staffing, performance evaluation, and curricular content.

The myth of academe fails to describe the places in which most faculty now work. It nonetheless persists. Administrators, legislators, and the courts routinely exploit the myth to divert faculty efforts to improve the terms and conditions of their employment. The continuing strength of this myth of academe demands that we closely examine each and every aspect of it in significantly greater depth.

As most of us are aware, we are all motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards are nonmonetary forms of

satisfaction derived from the essential qualities or content of the work itself. Extrinsic rewards are monetary or contextual rewards external to the work process. Real income—the total benefit received from working—is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Men and women maximize their real income by choosing occupations and employers that, given their qualifications, best match their preferred mix of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

Those who subscribe to the myth of academe maintain that faculty, more than most other individuals, are people who have freely foregone greater economic security—extrinsic rewards—in exchange for the intrinsic rewards basic to higher education.

One faculty member has vividly described this mythic trade-off in *Change* magazine. The academic's job, he wrote, "is so much fun, and there is so much freedom to do only what's of interest to him [sic] that the line between 'work' and 'leisure' for an academic worker is hard to draw."<sup>1</sup> Viewed from this perspective, as faculty advance from professorial to administrative positions, monetary income may increase, but real income often decreases since academic administrators no longer enjoy such intrinsic benefits as discretionary time and flexibility.

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enjoying life in a community.***

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Colleges and universities, the myth continues, are meritocratic institutions where the level of extrinsic rewards available to faculty members is directly related to their performance. Faculty alone determine the level of their rewards.

**F**aculty alone, the myth also maintains, determine the decisions that affect their professional working lives. The myth depicts the college or university as a true community of scholars where the goals of faculty and administration harmoniously coexist. All segments of the community—trustees, administrators, and faculty—are seen as participating either individually or through committees in decision making, and faculty have input into areas traditionally reserved to management in the private sector: hiring, promotion, administrative policies, and budget decisions. Within the context of the myth, faculty are, in essence, academic entrepreneurs working in a communal environment, not employees working in a bureaucratic organization.

Many faculty placed great faith in the myth of academe during the educational boom that began in the late 1950s. But, for most, the myth faded as the boom—and the slowdown that followed it—inexorably changed the face of American higher education. Broad demographic

changes in the student population, a large increase in the number of publicly controlled institutions, and then drastic retrenchment all combined to redefine the traditional myth of academic life.

Between 1950 and 1980, the number of postsecondary institutions increased by 76 percent, from 1,851 to 3,253.<sup>2</sup> This growth was not evenly distributed across all types of institutions. Growth came mainly in public institutions and, to be more exact, in public two-year colleges. The number of community colleges in the nation nearly doubled between 1960 and 1980, climbing from 663 to 1,219. Two-year enrollment during this period rose more than six times, from just under 750,000 in 1960 to 4.8 million.<sup>3</sup> By 1980, two-year institutions comprised one-third of all U.S. postsecondary institutions and enrolled one-third of all students.

The significant increase in public and, in particular, public two-year institutions dramatically changed the administration and character of higher education. The traditional and somewhat amorphous long-term goals of the “elite” four-year colleges and universities no longer set the tone. The newer institutions were much more influenced by local market forces than by the imperative of expanding the boundaries of knowledge. These growing institutions served a more

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vocationally oriented clientele. The academic myth did not describe these institutions very well.

**B**etween 1950 and 1980, the proportion of all 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in colleges increased from 14.2 percent to 41.7 percent. In absolute numbers, there were 2.3 million students in this age group enrolled in 1950 and 12.3 million in 1981.<sup>4</sup> By the latter year, many of the students enrolled were no longer full-timers. The open admissions, low tuition, and flexible scheduling policies of two-year institutions attracted increasing numbers of part-time students. The proportion of full-time students enrolled in postsecondary institutions declined to 58 percent by 1981.<sup>5</sup>

Current estimates project that the number of 18-year-olds enrolled in postsecondary institutions will decline by 25 percent between 1979 and 1994, causing what will most likely be a divisive scramble for new student populations.<sup>6</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that by the year 2000 total enrollments will have declined by 10 percent; 50 percent of those enrolled will be part-time students; 48 percent will be male; over 40 percent will attend two-year institutions; 50 percent will be over age 22; and 85 percent will be commuters.<sup>7</sup>

These changes in the composition of student bodies have already begun to generate shifting demands for new curricula, teaching methods, schedules, and class sites. Faculty will soon be less able to protect themselves professionally under these new conditions of employment without the safeguards a collectively bargained agreement affords.

Federal, state, and local funding for higher education increased dramatically between 1950 and 1980, and this expansion undermined another crucial tenet of the myth of academe. With institutions more and more dependent on government funding, control over basic academic decisions on curriculum, professional competence, standards, and compensation increasingly shifted from faculty and administrators to external public bodies.

By 1983, 53 percent of all colleges and universities were public, and they employed 73 percent of all faculty.<sup>8</sup> This tremendous growth of public two-year and four-year institutions made a large proportion of the higher education establishment more accountable to the economic and political demands of local and state legislatures. These bodies have centralized decision making and planning for higher education by controlling the structure and content of new academic programs

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and new degree offerings. Over 70 percent of all public institutions now must obtain approval from a state coordinating body, which sometimes requires a three- to four-year wait, before beginning any new academic programs.<sup>9</sup> State- or system-level agencies often control the number of faculty positions in specific institutions, allocate these positions among departments, and define and establish teaching loads. In some cases, these agencies have even restricted tenure.<sup>10</sup>

**T**he increasing average size of institutions has also encouraged decision-making centralization. More than half of all professors teach in only 10 percent of all institutions. One quarter of all professors belong to faculties of 800 or more members. The number of institutions enrolling fewer than 1,000 students represents 39 percent of all colleges and universities, but these institutions combined employ less than 6 percent of all faculty.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in the 1970s, still another dynamic emerged to undermine the myth of academe: hard economic times. Inflation more than offset absolute increases in funding for education, and then, in the late 1970s, state and federal governments began to cut budget expenditures across the board in order to reduce deficits and

respond to public demands for lower taxes.

These cutbacks fell particularly hard on public postsecondary institutions. These institutions serve higher proportions of lower-income students than do private schools. Students at public institutions lose the most from cutbacks and more restrictive eligibility requirements for financial aid, and the faculty and staff of these institutions are more subject to wage freezes and job layoffs.

Retrenchment—in whatever form—undermines, of course, the myth that each individual faculty member can expect a bigger slice of the institutional pie based on his or her own merit. The size of the pie in the public sector of higher education—where 73 percent of all faculty now teach—is clearly determined by state and federal legislatures, not by the stellar performances of individual faculty members. That pie is shrinking.<sup>12</sup>

Monetary rewards to faculty, as a result, have fallen well behind the levels of comparable occupations outside academe. Between 1952 and 1970, real faculty salaries increased about 65 percent, faster than the cost of living.<sup>13</sup> Between 1971 and 1982, however, faculty salaries—factored for inflation—fell 20.5 percent, compared with only a 4.3 percent drop for comparable occupations in private industry.<sup>14</sup> Faculty salaries did not again

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creep ahead of inflation until 1982-83, and that advance was due not to increases in salaries, but rather to a sharp decline in the inflation rate.

Faculty salaries, overall, vary significantly by institutional type and enrollment. In general, the lower the enrollment, the lower the median salaries of faculty. Faculty at public institutions and private universities are the most highly paid. Faculty at two-year private institutions are least well paid. Women faculty at every rank and at every type of institution are paid less than and receive smaller salary increases than male faculty.<sup>15</sup>

Extrinsic rewards in higher education, it is clear, are determined primarily by structural factors that are beyond the capacity of individual faculty to influence. In these times of retrenchment, faculty can affect their compensation significantly only by organizing and competing with other organized groups in the political arena.

Retrenchment has also undermined the mythic status of America's campuses as supportive environments for creative scholarship. Between 1950 and 1980, postsecondary research expenditures increased rapidly, from \$785 million to over \$5 billion.<sup>16</sup>

This development naturally encouraged faculty to believe they could always count on institutional support for their pursuit of

knowledge. But the massive expenditures for research and development, most from the federal government, were never distributed evenly across educational institutions. According to the Brookings Institution, in 1975 about 85 percent of all federal research and development dollars was concentrated in the top 100 universities. About 25 percent went to the top 10 institutions, six of which were in the private sector.<sup>17</sup> By the late 1970s, in any case, federal research funds no longer kept pace with inflation, and campuses seldom provided the mythic supportive environment for creative research even at the biggest universities.

**B**y the late 1970s, American campuses also no longer provided the academic job opportunities they had in earlier years. During the 1950s and 1960s the number of available faculty positions actually outpaced the number of trained professionals. The demand for faculty members—above simple replacement needs—stood at 27,500 per year by the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

This seller's market could not last. A dramatic increase in graduate enrollments soon ended the seller's market—at just about the same time that the Arab oil embargo also brought recession and the dramatic institutional retrenchment of the 1970s. Supply and demand were

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again out of sync, and this time faculty—particularly those in the humanities and social sciences—were in oversupply.

These changes in faculty demography left America's colleges and universities with a large proportion of faculty members, tenured and in their middle forties and fifties, who will not retire for another 15 or 20 years. The statistics are dramatic: in 1972, 50 percent of all full-time faculty were tenured;<sup>19</sup> in 1980, 75 percent;<sup>20</sup> and in 1990, if present trends continue, 90 percent will be tenured.<sup>21</sup> These demographic conditions, coupled with retrenchment, have meant a sharp decrease in the number of available jobs for the new Ph.D. and few, if any, promotional opportunities for young faculty. The crunch is felt disproportionately by women and minority faculty, who did not begin to enter the system in significant numbers until the late 1970s.

The absence of opportunities for young faculty limits, of course, the infusion of creative young minds into higher education. Administrators have another concern about this problem—because it commits institutions to the higher fixed costs of guaranteed permanent employment for a very large part of their workforce. These administrators have advanced a variety of “solutions”: standards that would make it harder for faculty to obtain

tenure; fixed tenure quotas; and, perhaps most severely, abolition of the tenure system itself.

In such a setting, the myth of academe bears scarce resemblance to cold academic reality. The meritorious performance of individuals cannot be rewarded by promotion if there is nowhere to go. Structural changes demand structured solutions. Faculty must organize if they are to have a voice in developing solutions that will best serve the profession and the quality of higher education.

The economic recession of the 1970s, coupled with declining enrollments, forced many institutions to close and left many others in dire financial straits. A 1976 study found that 14 percent of public institutions and 87 percent of private institutions were in financial trouble.<sup>22</sup> Slightly more than half of the 141 institutions that closed between 1970 and 1980 were private four-year colleges; most of these were residential colleges with fewer than 1,000 students.<sup>23</sup>

The financial problems confronting colleges and universities have, in turn, compounded the institutional drift from faculty to centralized control. Administrators have adopted management strategies designed to reduce costs by increasing administrative control. “Laissez-faire campus administration,” the

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administrative model most compatible with the academic myth, has been replaced by “academic strategy.”<sup>24</sup> Administrators have begun adopting a managerial style that relies on “control, planning, evaluation, and reallocation to promote institutional strength within financial constraints.”<sup>25</sup>

This centralized control undercuts the autonomy, collegiality, and shared governance that is central to the myth of academe. These intrinsic rewards, according to a recent study by the Institute of Higher Education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, are no longer enjoyed by a majority of faculty members. The percentage of faculty who believe that “a concept of shared authority, by which faculty and administrators arrive at decisions jointly, described fairly well the college’s system of governance” declined from 64 percent in 1970 to 44 percent in 1980.<sup>26</sup>

Faculty senates, which increased in number and in prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s, have proved unable to either reassert a faculty role in administrative decision making or recreate a shared collegial decision making structure. Several major studies of faculty senates have shown that, in most cases, the faculty senate role in governance is superficial,

and advisory only. Even where faculty senates do exercise authority, that authority does not extend to hiring, promotion, and tenure.<sup>27</sup>

The inaccurate perception that shared governance between faculty and administration does exist has, however, had profound consequences on faculty organizing. In the private sector, for example, the National Labor Relations Board ruled in *C.W. Post Center*<sup>28</sup> that faculty were professional employees with only quasi-supervisory authority and, therefore, were entitled to the benefits of collective bargaining. In *Yeshiva*,<sup>29</sup> however, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Post*, holding that full-time faculty at Yeshiva University were managerial employees. According to the court: “The central consideration in this case is that the faculty of Yeshiva University exercise authority which in any other context would be managerial.”<sup>30</sup>

Justice Brennan, in a dissent, argued that the changing conditions of higher education had made the traditional shared governance ideal obsolete. Wrote Brennan:

Education has become “big business” and the task of operating the university enterprise has been transferred from the faculty to an autonomous

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administration, which faces the same pressures to cut costs and increase efficiencies that confront any large industrial organization . . . The past decade of budgetary cutbacks, declining enrollments, reductions in further appointments, curtailment of academic programs, and increasing calls for accountability to alumni and other special interest groups has only added to the erosion of the faculties' role in the institutions' decision-making process.<sup>31</sup>

Given this reality, faculty really have no choice. The only way faculty can fend off the encroachment on their professional autonomy is to work to have their interests protected and advanced collectively. The professoriate can develop and implement solutions for coping with exigencies that protect academic freedom and job security—but only if it is organized.

**T**he myth of academic life is certainly a seductive one: a productive, creative life supported by plentiful institutional resources, with rewards based solely on individual merit and performance and governance determined by collegial bodies. One can readily see how faculty might trade—and, indeed, very willingly have traded—increased monetary rewards for these valued intrinsic rewards.

In the changing context of higher education, however, the reality of 1985 does not conform to the myth. The intrinsic rewards described by the myth simply do not exist in most of the two-year and public institutions that dominate the higher education landscape, and they exist in increasingly fewer traditional private institutions. The supportive institutional environment assumed by the myth has largely disappeared. The modern postsecondary institution is centralized, bureaucratized, and financially weak. Decision-making authority over the terms and conditions of faculty employment has shifted from faculties (if it ever truly rested there) to college administrators and to governmental bodies. Meanwhile, the extrinsic rewards of academia—however little they are valued by the mythic academic—have failed to keep up with inflation, with the result that they now purchase 20 percent less than they did in 1971.

If academic excellence, academic freedom, and professional self-governance defined the working lives of academics today, there would be little need for faculty to organize. They do not. The major decisions affecting the working lives of faculty are made in highly politicized settings. In these settings, the views of individual faculty are marginalized. If faculty,

as employees and professionals, intend to protect themselves from the imposition of political and administrative decisions that neither enhance the quality of education nor further their economic and professional interests, they first must acknowledge that they are participants in political organizations, then acquire the skills appropriate to working effectively in such settings.

**C**ollective bargaining provides faculty with the means to restructure their relationship with college administrators and with state legislatures. Bargaining does not institutionalize conflict. It provides instead a

forum and an opportunity for faculty and administrators to resolve problems and address conflict in a constructive manner.

Faculty in higher education must begin to appreciate the lessons learned by teachers in primary and secondary education during the 1960s—that is that collective bargaining is consistent with professionalism. Collective bargaining is a critical mechanism for addressing professional concerns, expanding governance authority, and improving the terms and conditions of employment. Only when faculty organize and bargain collectively can they then begin to make the myth of academe a more valid description of academic life. ■

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#### **AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT**

I sold out and became an administrator in 1987. It was a good way to improve my retirement.

I'm happy to say that I left administration—retired—four years later, and all but a board member were sorry to see me go. I retired as the personnel director and had been the district's chief negotiator for the last three years of my tenure. In that capacity, I had instituted "problem solving" bargaining, a process similar to what is now called "non-adversarial" bargaining.

In "problem solving" bargaining, instead of each side starting out with formal proposals, we would come together informally and list the areas of the contract we wanted to change. Each side would approach these items with the question, "What problem are you trying to solve?" We would discuss the issue in depth, and the opposite side would say, "Would this solve your problem?" We could take this approach without giving up anything, because when formal bargaining started, we each brought our proposals to the table. The process didn't work on money issues, but we found that it worked on almost everything else.

Everything that I saw on both sides of the table and in the years since then—I have done a bit of "Rent-A-Dean" work since I retired—leads me to believe even more strongly in what I wrote in 1985. Women and minorities have made some strides, mainly because of legislation and governmental policy. Political action has been extremely important in the improvements that have been achieved. This doesn't mean the problems have been solved. Some have been ameliorated, but the faculty at all institutions still have much to do.

In California, the faculty does now have some direct hand in hiring, in curriculum, course offerings, academic standards, sabbaticals. Faculty also have the right to bargain on issues of wages, working conditions, and benefits. The public community college faculty have the right to establish academic senates, and these senates have guaranteed rights to influence the academic life of the

institution. All of this is more the result of unionization and political action than of anything else.

During the last few years, negotiations have matured to some degree in California, and I suspect this is true in many other states. Collective bargaining has become institutionalized, and, where it has, administrators and most faculty leadership have, more or less, grown up with the process. Some formal, non-adversarial negotiation methods have developed, and this is a trend that should continue. Most of the people on each side of the table in education recognize that a bad contract breeds trouble, that, if one side is "beaten up" by an article, it will only generate strife and a nasty attitude at the next round of bargaining.

Bargaining is not the bugaboo that it was just a few years ago. This has not, from my perspective, weakened the faculty or the administration, but has allowed both to learn to deal with each other more as equals. I have hopes that collective bargaining will someday bring both sides to the realization that if we are going to improve education, we have to work together to "increase the size of the pie" rather than fight among themselves over the little pie that exists.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Winston, Gordon. "Updating Economic Theory: The Employment Relationship," *Change* 15 (April 1983), p.41.
- <sup>2</sup> *Digest of Education Statistics 1982*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (1982), p. 114.
- <sup>3</sup> Scott, Barbara Ann. *Crisis Management in American Higher Education*. New York: Praeger (1983), p. 13.
- <sup>4</sup> *Digest of Education Statistics*, p.92.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Condition of Education-1983 Edition: A Statistical Report*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Educational Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (1983), p.72.
- <sup>6</sup> Keller, George. *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, (1983), p. 12.
- <sup>7</sup> Hollander, T. Edward and Lawrence R. Marcus. "The Economic Environment in the 'Eighties." in *Campus Bargaining in the 'Eighties: A Retrospective and Prospective Look. Proceedings, Eighth Annual Conference, April 1980*. Ed. by Aaron Levenstein. National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, Baruch College, City University of New York, p. 13.
- <sup>8</sup> "The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession." *Academe* 69 July-Aug. 1983), p.4.
- <sup>9</sup> Keller, p. 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Kemerer and Baldrige.
- <sup>11</sup> Keller, *op. cit.*
- <sup>12</sup> "The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession." *Academe* 69 July-Aug. 1983), p.4.
- <sup>13</sup> Bowen, Howard R. *The Costs Of Higher Education: How Much Do Colleges and Universities Spend Per Student and How Much Should They Spend*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980.
- <sup>14</sup> "The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession" p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> "The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession" p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup> In fact, these numbers understate the increase because the 1950 data are for expenditures for "instruction and departmental research," while the 1980 data are for expenditures for "research" only.
- <sup>17</sup> Scott, p. 158.
- <sup>18</sup> Scott, p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Hollander and Marcus, p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Scott, p. 177.
- <sup>22</sup> Hollander and Marcus, p. 13.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Condition of Education: 1983 Edition: A Statistical Report*, p. 75.
- <sup>24</sup> Keller, p. 26.
- <sup>25</sup> Keller, p. 66.

- <sup>26</sup> Magarrell, Jack. "Decline in Faculty Morale Laid to Governance Role, Not Salary: Involvement in College Planning Deemed a Major Factor." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (November 10, 1982) p. 28.
- <sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Kemerer, Frank R. and J. Victor Baldrige. *Unions on Campus* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975; Lee, Barbara A. *Collective Bargaining in Four-Year Colleges: Impact on Institutional Practice*. AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Report No. 5. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education, 1978; Elam, Stanley and Michael H. Moskow, eds. *Employment Relations in Higher Education*. Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1969; Keller, George. *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
- <sup>28</sup> *C.W. Post Center*, 189 N.L.R.B. 904 (1971)
- <sup>29</sup> *N.L.R.B. v. Yeshiva University*, 444 U.S. 672 (1980).
- <sup>30</sup> *N.L.R.B. v. Yeshiva University*, 444 U.S. 672 (1980), p. 686.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 702-703.