

AN OVERVIEW

by Con Lehane

As this issue of *Thought & Action* goes to press, the United States Supreme Court has issued its long-awaited decisions involving the use of affirmative action in college admissions. In the University of Michigan Law School affirmative action case *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court reaffirmed a position taken by Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. in the landmark 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision that diversity is “a compelling state interest.”

While ruling 5-4 to uphold the University of Michigan's use of affirmative action in law school admissions, the Court issued a separate decision, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, that voided Michigan's undergraduate admissions affirmative action program on technical grounds. Most observers concluded that the Court, in reaffirming the *Bakke* decision effectively set aside a Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling—the 1996 *Hopwood v. the State of Texas* decision—that outlawed affirmative action in most of the Southwest. The upshot: Colleges and universities can look at race as long as they're evaluating applicants individually. Mechanical formulas, automatic points, and quotas are out.

The Supreme Court received more than 60 briefs supporting affirmative action in college admissions, including one from NEA, which has long supported efforts to promote fairness in the academy. “The Court recognized the importance of diversity in education and of expanding access to educational opportunities,” NEA President Reg Weaver noted in praising the Court's action.

Also just before press time came another piece of good news. A recent

survey by the Educational Testing Service finds that Americans give colleges and universities high marks for their academic programs and the value of a college degree. Our fellow citizens also said they are in favor of offering young people from all backgrounds a chance to go to college, providing financial help to those who need it, and making sure that high school graduates get the quality education they need to meet the academic challenges of college. "Higher education remains the jewel in America's education crown according to students, parents, educators, and business leaders," concluded Kurt Landgraf, head of ETS.

Reading this, one might logically ask: If the public is so much behind higher education, why the dismal level of financial support for public colleges and universities in states throughout the nation? Woodruff D. Smith, an Excellence in the Academy award winner for his article, "Higher Education, Democracy, and the Public Sphere," argues that the problem stems from the academy's failure to nurture public discourse. "We in public higher education should rethink our priorities," writes Smith, "and emphasize the primacy of our responsibility for the public sphere."

In a similar vein, this year's winner of the NEA Excellence in the Academy New Scholar Award, Michelle Cooper, is concerned about the timidity of the academy when faced with criticism. She tackles this issue in her article, "Academic Freedom and the Challenges of September 11." The nation's faculty has much to be proud of in responding to the horrific events of September 11, 2001, notes Cooper. "Many faculty used September 11 to exercise their academic freedom and autonomy to develop new areas of inquiry for themselves and their students." This is what the academy is for, argues Cooper, and we cannot afford to give in to political pressure.

As in the past, this issue of *Thought & Action* presents a panoply of offerings that we hope are helpful to the Association's higher education members as they go about the day-to-day business of education. Athena Andreadis takes the scientific establishment to task in her award-winning article, "The Double Helix: Why Science Needs Science Fiction." David Takacs asks how one's "positionality" biases one's "epistemology" in an eloquent plea for open mindedness, while Judith Mikesch McKenzie laments the loss of the departmental refrigerator and with it the loss of neighborhood and something intrinsic to meaningful education.

Most heartening to me is that in addition to the thoughtful commentaries on issues facing the academy by the authors of articles and reviews in this issue, our mailbox has been filling up with letters from our readers—a half-dozen printed in this issue—creating the back and forth of discussion and dialogue that *Thought & Action* was designed to promote.

—Con Lehane