

An Overview

by Con Lehane

Welcome to the 2005 *Thought & Action*. We've made a few changes in this issue and hope you'll agree with us that they're for the better. Beginning with the cover, there's a larger and more readable format for NEA's higher education journal, now in its 21st year. Also on the cover, you'll discover a Special Focus for this issue, the first one we've done in a while, but destined to be a permanent feature. The contents of the Special Focus are pretty special, too, beginning with an interview with Noam Chomsky, one of the academy's most provocative thinkers over the past few decades, who's more optimistic about the nation's current political and intellectual climate than one might expect.

Our Special Focus authors take seriously threats to the autonomy of the professoriate and the freedom of inquiry and discussion at the heart of the academic enterprise. However it's dressed up, these authors argue, political interference in the sphere of higher learning is a disservice to our professions, our students, and society. As United Faculty of Florida president Tom Auxter notes in his introduction to the Focus, "The articles in this section underscore the need for a strong and organized faculty advocate to resist the changes on the political drawing board and to create the conditions for our members to continue to provide higher education at its best."

Con Lehane has edited NEA's higher education publications, including *Thought & Action*, since 1996. Before coming to NEA, he was an adjunct instructor of English in the City University of New York system and an associate professor of English at Rockland Community College in Suffern, New York. More recently, he is the author of two mystery novels, *Beware the Solitary Drinker* (2002) and *What Goes Around Comes Around* (2005).

In her contribution to the discussion, McCarthy-era historian Ellen Schrecker points out some ominous parallels between the anticommunist furor of the early Cold War years and the challenges today's scholars face. "There is a very real danger," she writes, "that external groups and individuals will, as they did in the 1950s, impose political tests for employment on the nation's faculties." Articles by Sara Roy, a scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, and others bring such dangers realistically to life.

In addition to the Special Focus, *Thought & Action* serves up its usual fare of articles on issues we think are important to our members. Terry Jones writes about the unspoken but continuing racial divide on our campuses that he argues must be addressed by all faculty if the academy is to fulfill its promise. William G. Tierney and Vicente M. Lechuga offer a defense and broader definition of academic freedom for the 21st Century in their Excellence in the Academy award-winning article. And Nancy Hanna Nicastro writes about how she developed her philosophy of teaching in "Teaching from Both Sides of the Desk," which won the 2004 Excellence in the Academy Art of Teaching award. Other articles touch on reflections on teaching practice, critical thinking, connecting with postmodern students, and making our higher education systems more productive.

Some of the articles in this issue have the potential to provoke strong reactions from readers whose views differ from those of the authors. While *Thought & Action's* editorial board and review panel have an abiding respect for the diversity of thought and scholarship within the academy, and while the opinions expressed in articles published in *Thought & Action* are not necessarily shared by the editorial board, the review panel, or NEA, *Thought & Action* has never been ideologically neutral. Reflected in this issue is the belief that the autonomy of the academy and the freedom of scholarship of the professoriate must be defended.

And, of course, *Thought & Action* welcomes reasoned responses to the arguments put forth in this issue. We especially hope that these articles generate both thought *and* action, and welcome responses from our readers with proposals for where we must go and what we must do to move the academy forward.