

Overview

by Con Lehane

Welcome to the 2006 *Thought & Action!* For this issue's Special Focus on the Academy at Work, we have assembled an interesting array of authors with special interests in the nature of academic labor whose work we think you'll find provoking. From all of the accounts here, it becomes readily apparent that those of us who depend for our living on the nation's higher education enterprise should take a hard look at the conditions under which we labor.

In an article based on their seminal study of faculty work, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (2006), Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein report that change is taking place in the academic professions more rapidly now than at any time "in the near millennium history." The authors find "a tidal change in academic staffing patterns that is moving, seemingly inexorably, toward creating a predominantly contingent workforce." This sea change, the authors note, is not only creating an army of part-time instructors but also affects full-time appointments as well—the majority of which are now off the tenure track. The implications of this change are profound, as you will see.

On another front, Henry Giroux, a leading voice in the area of educational theory and cultural studies, writes of his concern about growing cynicism and anti-democratic tendencies across the nation. More worrisome, he writes, is that too

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. He is currently an adjunct associate professor at University of Maryland University College, where he teaches advanced expository and research writing. His third mystery novel, Death at the Old Hotel, will be published in June 2007.

many “academics (have) become models of moral indifference,” “refusing to take positions on controversial issues or to examine the role they might play in lessening human suffering.” For Giroux, academics aren’t taking seriously enough their larger responsibilities as public intellectuals, guardians of the academy, and, crucially, promoters of democracy. For Giroux, as well as Schuster and Finkelstein, there’s much reason to be interested in the changes taking place in the academic workplace.

Elsewhere in this issue’s Special Focus, a team of legal experts from the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law, provides a new model for supporting faculty women—and men—with family responsibilities by eradicating gender bias in the academy. The authors highlight “potentially illegal patterns of gender bias” that put institutions at risk for lawsuits, and they offer solutions for eliminating these practices that force too many in higher education to choose between their careers and their families.

In addition, authors in the Special Focus section question the kind of stereotyping of adjunct faculty that bars these colleagues from participation in faculty governance in most institutions, examine and evaluate different models of online teaching in the community college, and propose taking an approach to tenure that pays more than lip service to providing service to the larger communities in which our institutions are located. We also present the findings of a survey by our colleagues, members of the Associated COLT (Clerical, Office, Laboratory, and Technical) Staff of the Universities of Maine, that document the shameful financial consequences of low pay and inadequate benefits in the lives of the higher education staff whose work is vital to the functioning of our institutions. Finally, Jeff Lustig, a political scientist and member of the California Faculty Association, looks at the “degradation of faculty work” and challenges the professoriate to refuse to relinquish their rightful place as stewards of the academy.

As always, along with the Special Focus, we provide our regular fare of reviews of relevant books and articles on myriad topics we hope our readers find helpful and important. Paul Price, a psychology professor, asks you to consider if you’re as good a teacher as you think you are in a profession where all the practitioners, like the children of Lake Wobegon, are above average. Richard Francis, a professor emeritus at California State University, Fresno, provides the antidote for errors commonly made in grading, Diana Cundell envisions science as a discipline without borders, William Vaughn wonders why he can’t write his own syllabus, and Taylor Stoehr describes a modest teaching effort that changes lives.

We hope you enjoy our offerings. Let us know what you think, as our colleagues have done in the Letters section of this issue. 