

# Overview

by Con Lehane

**W**e study the past, scholars tell us, in the hope that the knowledge we gain might help us understand the present. The Special Focus of this issue of *Thought & Action*, coming as it does during the National Education Association's Sesquicentennial Anniversary year, is about history. We hope the articles in the issue tell us something about ourselves, where we came from, where we are now, and perhaps help point us in the direction we should be heading. It's a tall order, but we've assembled an impressive group of authors and we think what we've gathered here will be enlightening.

In "Expectations and Reality in American Higher Education," an overview of five centuries of American higher education, John R. Thelin describes the enterprise's past as a "clash of democratic dreams and demographic realities." The American belief in higher education, he tells us, has been one of "Great Expectations." But those expectations too often have not come to fruition. The nation has dreamed of serving students well, he notes. In fact, on first glance, one sees an expansion of opportunities for higher education over five centuries that suggests a national commitment to "universal higher education"—but invariably there has been "a public reluctance to invest in a robust academic profession to carry out this charge."

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**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 has also been an adjunct associate professor at University of Maryland University College, where he taught expository writing. His third mystery novel, *Death at the Old Hotel*, was published in June 2007.

Philo Hutcheson reconsiders the contribution of the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education. The commission, appointed by Harry S. Truman to examine "the functions of higher education in our democracy," recommended that students be educated in a broad program of general education that would enrich their lives and contribute to better citizenship. The group also criticized college teaching, pointing to weaknesses in the training of graduate students (something Rita Sommers Flanagan and Donald Christian address in another section of this issue), notably "the failure to provide potential faculty members with the basic skills and the art necessary to impart knowledge to others."

Closer to home, Christine Maitland considers NEA's role in the unfolding of the nation's higher education history. During NEA's 150 years, she notes, the Association's higher education leadership "worked with Association K-12 leaders in shaping higher education, the nation's public elementary and secondary schools, and the education of their teachers." Maitland traces the growth of higher education within NEA, as rank and file teachers in higher education and K-12 wrested the leadership of the Association from the administrators who ran NEA for its first 100 years and entered the world of collective bargaining.

Wayne Urban takes us back to 1957, the year of NEA's Centennial Anniversary, for an examination of a little known but important attempt by the Association, through an entity called the Educational Policies Commission, to craft a report that would address significant higher ed policy issues of the day and raise the profile of NEA's higher education department as a significant contributor to national policy debates.

In other contributions, M. Christopher Brown II and Ronyelle Bertrand Ricard discuss the legacy of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Michael Pak examines the faculty role in establishing the academy's tradition of academic freedom, Stephanie Y. Evans considers the marginalization of faculty women of color and argues for more diverse and democratic campuses.

Along with the Special Focus, we present an array of articles on myriad topics, including one that questions the assumptions of political pundits who think they know more about assessment than the professoriate and another that dispels a set of wrong-headed assumptions about measuring faculty productivity. One author wonders if there is something to the student-professor relationship that is uniquely human, another proposes that academics come down from the Ivory Tower. We also provide reviews of important recent books on higher education.

Finally, in our Letters pages, Richard Francis responds to inquiries about his article on calculating grades that appeared in last year's *Thought & Action*. We hope you find the issue worthwhile and welcome your comments. 