

# NEA and the Educational Policies Commission

by Wayne Urban

In 1957, the year NEA celebrated its 100th anniversary, the Educational Policies Commission (EPC)<sup>1</sup>—a prestigious group co-sponsored by NEA and the American Association of School Administrators—published a document titled *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*. NEA intended the report to address significant policy issues within the academy and at the same time raise the national profile of NEA's higher education department.

While college and university administrators and faculty had often held office in the larger NEA since its inception, a Department of Higher Education had existed only intermittently since the rise of departments in the NEA early in the 20th century. After brief initial success, that department ceased to exist for roughly two decades until its rebirth in 1942. This rebirth of the Higher Education Department was marked by a campaign in the following years to make higher education more visible within the NEA and the larger educational enterprise. *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* was part of this effort.<sup>2</sup>

The Department of Higher Education changed its name to the Association for Higher Education (AHE) in 1952, an effort that reflected the desire of the higher education group within NEA to distinguish itself from the larger Association without abandoning its relationship, or its fiscal dependence, on NEA. The publication of a report on higher education by the EPC in 1957 was a visible sign of the AHE's ascendancy to a position of some significance. Not coincidentally, NEA President Herman Wells, also president of Indiana University, would, later that year, become chair of the EPC. The higher education body thought that the right kind of publi-

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cation could lead to enhanced prominence within NEA, as well as to more influence within the ranks of the leading higher education organizations such as the American Council on Education. Not only is *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* interesting from an historical standpoint, but I am convinced that it has meaning for NEA higher education in the current era.

The first mention of a publication about higher education by the EPC came in 1950, when the group considered a proposal for a report that would be broad in scope and have as significant an impact on higher education as the 1937 EPC publication, *The Unique Function of Public Education in American Democracy*, had on public

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schools.<sup>3</sup> But the higher education publication did not come quickly or easily. It was not until March 1953 that an EPC subcommittee on higher education reported that it would seek a formal proposal for a publication. Six months later, the subcommittee proposed a study to show how integral higher education was to the entire educational enterprise.<sup>4</sup> The study would build on the work of President Truman's Commission on Higher Education and would be careful not to step on the toes of other higher education groups such as the American Council on Education. Community colleges, which subsumed what the EPC had called the 13th and 14th grades in its publication about secondary education in 1945,<sup>5</sup> were to be included in this report.

Little progress was made on the higher education document between fall 1953 and spring 1954. The higher education contingent on the EPC was a distinct numerical minority and it had to make sure that its agenda did not get lost in the mass of K-12 issues under consideration. Thus, a statement at the spring 1954 EPC meeting that a good higher education report would muffle the academic critics of K-12 schools—who had become increasingly prominent in the 1950s—was welcomed by the higher education EPC contingent, whatever their own views on that topic were.<sup>6</sup> A split was possible between K-12 and the higher education sector, especially with many college faculty members disparaging school people as empty-headed progressives, so a major purpose of the higher education document was to productively span the distance between the two enterprises and head off any split.

The EPC often developed its publications by hiring outside scholars to prepare potential chapters for inclusion in the final work. This strategy was employed in the higher education effort in 1955, but without success. Willis Rudy, then a young scholar at the Massachusetts State Teachers College in Worcester, prepared a draft for EPC consideration that was not well received by the group. Rudy was quite crit-

ical of American higher education for its lack of faculty control, a custom that he observed in European universities. Specifically, Rudy suggested that American college presidents were in large part autocratic leaders who consulted little with their faculties. He engaged in some lively discussion of his views with EPC members, particularly with William Carr, NEA executive secretary, who accused the young scholar of producing a “very bearish picture of American higher education.”<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the EPC, a group laden with school and college administrators, was not ready to hear a strong faculty voice in its deliberations. Of course, this was the mid-1950s and the union forces in the educational professions were just beginning to

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exert themselves in the urban Northeast and Midwest. The NEA claimed to represent both faculty and administrators in the public schools, a claim that was echoed by the AHE, its higher education department, which accepted both faculty and administrators as members. In reality, educational executives, rather than faculty, were typically the officers and leaders of both groups. The EPC, like its parent NEA, was not interested in listening to faculty views that were beginning to be raised both in American higher education and in American colleges and universities.

One area on which the two constituencies of faculty and administrators did agree was that of academic freedom for both schoolteachers and college faculty members. In fact, EPC members thought that protecting a college professor’s right to speak out would be exceptionally beneficial for a public school teaching profession that was increasingly afraid to speak freely in the McCarthy-era political climate and its virulent anti-communism. Yet even here, discussion revealed a concern on the part of EPC members that the notion of faculty responsibility for what was said needed to be included in a the declaration of the right of academic freedom.

By fall 1955, Rudy and another outside writer had been rejected as contributors to the higher education report and replaced by Ruth Eckert, a faculty member from the University of Minnesota. Six months later, Eckert produced a document that was favorably discussed by the EPC. In this discussion, difficult issues emerged such as the need for higher faculty salaries, a concern over student costs, the percentage of the normal—18 to 21—age group that should be expected to enroll in higher education, and how much of that enrollment would come in the two-year college sector. The consideration of these ideas was devoid of the rancor that had greeted Rudy’s efforts.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Eckert would shortly be named a member of the EPC, a sure sign of the satisfaction of the group with her work.<sup>9</sup>

The report that was eventually published was a substantial 152 pages of text, divided into eight chapters of about 20 pages each. Chapter topics included the higher education enterprise as a whole, attendance and admissions, curriculum, research and public service, the faculty, policy making, finance, and conclusions and recommendations. The most significant backdrop for the volume was the entry of large numbers of baby boomers into the nation's elementary schools, a development that would shortly impact American secondary education and then American higher education. The report projected that the enrollment in 1966–67 would be 3.76 million, almost a million more than had been enrolled in 1954–55.<sup>10</sup>

The report also suggested that in a democratic society like the U.S., which was experiencing an economic upturn and making tremendous technological advances, an increasing proportion of young people could be expected to enroll in higher education. The conjunction of an upsurge in the eligible age group and an expected increase in the percentage of that group that would enroll in higher education meant an even greater challenge to the nation's colleges and universities. The bulk of the report indicated the ways that existing higher education institutions were not ready to meet the enrollment increases and the steps that needed to be taken to meet the challenges.

Most significantly, the report argued, there was an acute need for new faculty to cope with the enrollment increase. This need was compounded by the profile of existing higher education faculty, an aging group, many of whom were near retirement age.<sup>11</sup> The report sensitively analyzed aspects of the faculty role, including ominously low salaries and tensions between teaching and new needs for research and public service, and between necessary intellectual specialization and general educational aspects of the curriculum. It also stressed the need for academ-



ic freedom for faculty in conjunction with research and teaching, as well as the necessary power of the faculty in areas such as curriculum development. The report mentioned women and minorities as populations to be tapped in the search for faculty, noting that many women with advanced academic training were “not now employed at the highest level of their competence,” and adding that “relatively short periods of re-education would qualify them for many academic tasks.” In mentioning minorities, the report referred specifically to Blacks, Asian Americans and refugees from various countries as relatively untapped sources of college faculty.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that NEA higher education in the 1950s was aware both

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Additionally, the report mentioned older people and current college students as two additional sources of needed college teachers. Finally, it advocated making accommodation for those outside of academe who might teach productively in a part-time role. The report recommended that “haphazard procedures for recruitment should be replaced with clearly outlined and farsighted programs.”<sup>13</sup> Other topics included the education of prospective faculty members, innovations in college teaching methods, and student learning as the ultimate objective of those methods. The discussion of faculty concluded with a section on “The Integrity of Academic Life.” Here the authors reiterated the need for academic freedom, especially in a climate of anti-intellectualism, accompanied by unnecessary loyalty oaths and demeaning epithets of egghead professors.<sup>14</sup> The support for faculty in the report was considerable, but it was given within a context in which administrative voices spoke for the faculty, rather than the college and university teachers and researchers speaking for themselves.

In the chapter on finance, the authors noted the relatively small percentage of the gross national product allocated to higher education and the necessarily larger percentage that would be needed in the future. The chapter also addressed student financial needs, advocating scholarship programs as a way to facilitate the necessarily increasing proportion of students attending colleges and universities.

But the authors minced no words in declaring that an increase “in faculty salaries is the most urgent priority in financing higher education.”<sup>15</sup> The contours of that urgency were illustrated by noting that faculty salaries had received a declining percentage of university budgets in the past four decades and that the

real income of faculty had declined by 5 percent from 1940 to 1954, a period in which the real income of “lawyers, physicians, and industrial workers rose from 10 to 80 percent.”<sup>16</sup> While there had been some increases in university income in the war and post-war years, these funds had gone increasingly for research and not for faculty salaries. The situation, the report noted, could best be described as an emergency: “It is imperative, at the very least, that the total amount spent on salaries . . . should be advanced from 75 to 125 percent within the next 15 years—preferably within the next decade.”<sup>17</sup> The roles of state and federal government in financing higher education received attention, as did financial support from alum-

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ni, foundations, corporations, and church groups in the case of private colleges. The chapter’s concluding paragraph reiterated the concern about faculty salaries, noting that in the necessary expansion that was to take place, “the highest priority should be given to increasing faculty salaries. This should be a cardinal principle for all who share in the support and administration of higher education.”<sup>18</sup>

The discussion of the federal role in higher education, broached in the chapter on finance, was taken up again in the next chapter on policymaking. One senses the desire of the EPC to vigorously embrace federal aid for higher education—a stance supported enthusiastically by the NEA, which had been trying to obtain federal aid for the nation’s elementary and secondary schools at least since the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> The federal government had begun to fund research by the nation’s colleges and universities to a significant extent during World War II and continuing after the war. Yet this research had been largely limited to the sciences and technological fields directly related to the conduct of the war and, after the war, to the maintenance of a strong military presence in a Cold War world that had recently been wracked by war in Korea. Opening up the federal financial effort to other areas than science and technology was an important objective for NEA.

In marked contrast to the larger NEA’s devotion to the pursuit of federal aid, the report seemed rather timid in its discussion of the federal role, financial and otherwise. Perhaps the college and university administrators on the EPC were more cognizant of the political difficulties that an increased federal role might present than their elementary and secondary peers, or they had more experience with difficulties over institutional control that had accompanied the increasing federal role in funding research on campuses. Whatever the explanation, the report was mild in its advocacy of federal activity and intervention in higher education,

preferring instead to push strongly for an increase in formal state planning and policymaking, as well as regional cooperation among the states. The final recommendation of the report began with a discussion of “uncertainty” over the role of the federal government in the future of higher education. It ended with a statement that “increased federal aid seems essential,” but immediately added that it needed to be given more generally than it had in the past, and in a way that “safeguards the integrity of higher education.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the statement on federal aid, 19 other conclusions and recommendations comprised the final chapter of the EPC report. Faculty and their

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salaries were featured in two of the 19. Other recommendations were that establishing and maintaining “outstanding faculties is the most urgent, and . . . most difficult problem of higher education,” and that faculty “salaries, now lamentably low, should be given highest priority in expenditures for higher education.”<sup>21</sup> Readers of the report would have to have been obtuse not to notice the prime significance of the critical need for new faculty members and the allied need for increased salaries as a spur to help obtain them. Yet the report’s lengthy discussion of other issues such as curriculum, control, and policy obscured the primacy that the writers intended to give to the faculty, the need for reinforcements within faculty ranks, and their intense need for salary increases.

While the creation of *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* had engendered high hopes among those involved, the aftermath was for the most part underwhelming. Of course, judging the impact of any document is a speculative exercise, but the disappointing references to the higher education report at subsequent EPC meetings constitute one relatively sure sign that the document did not get the positive reception that the AHE thought it would merit, and the initial circulation fell well below the hopes of both the EPC and the AHE.<sup>22</sup>

Briefly, I offer the following reasons for the report receiving this less-than-stellar reception. First, the EPC itself was undergoing a diminution in its own influence that would culminate in its demise in 1968. In its heyday, the EPC was a powerful body that could command the attention of American educators, politicians, and lay leaders. By 1958, however, it was beset by many negative factors, including a lack of effective leadership. William G. Carr, long-time EPC secretary (chief staff officer), had assumed the top staff position in the larger NEA in 1952. His successor, Howard Wilson, who served in the EPC job from 1953 until 1958,

left the position just as the higher education document was published.

Second, EPC's failure to secure outside funding for the report was indicative of the changing climate in American philanthropy. The EPC approached foundations such as Carnegie and Ford, the major players in educational philanthropy in the 1950s, but were denied support. Educational policy was beginning to be influenced by groups not affiliated with the education profession and different from NEA-oriented groups like the EPC in biography, geography, and political affiliation.<sup>23</sup> Foundations were less interested in funding groups representing established educators and more interested in funding new voices, dealing with new issues.

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Third, the report itself paled in significance to previous documents that had marked the EPC as a player in national educational affairs. To establish this point, one need only compare *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* to the initial EPC report, *The Unique Function of Education in American Democracy* (1937). The latter document, published 20 years before the higher education report, was full of hortatory and ideological language such as that embodied in the title of the second chapter, "The Founders of the Republic Exalted Education as a National Interest." It was a call to the educators of the nation to reassert the significance of the American public school in a depression decade in which schools were under attack from a variety of corners. *Higher Education*, on other hand, was not about an institution in crisis from an attack, but about how to respond to a crisis that would come in the future. The lack of immediacy, the rather turgid, expository prose, and the real but largely indirect connection between higher education and the much larger elementary and secondary education audience that might guarantee success all militated against the document having a major impact on the field.

Fourth, the irony of a group like the EPC—composed mainly of educational administrators, with a higher education sub-group also largely made up of college and university administrators—stressing the critical significance of a faculty shortage and the dreadful salaries of faculty members should not go unnoticed. The AHE claimed to represent higher education administrators, faculty members, and any others who had an interest in the topic and were willing to pay dues. The problem was that the crucial interest identified in the report—the faculty—was the least represented within the association. This lack of faculty representation in AHE became a key concern during the 1960s when NEA remade itself into a teachers' union. The AHE left NEA in 1968 when the parent group demanded significant



faculty influence in all its affiliates. AHE had little if any meaningful faculty membership and, at the time, little real interest in obtaining any.

Finally, *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* suffered from bad timing. Almost immediately after publication of the document, the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite, a milestone that would reverberate around the American educational world for the next several years. The rush to criticize the educational institutions, K-12 schools more than colleges and universities, meant that the professional educational world would be preoccupied with defending public schools against criticism for underachievement, especially in mathematics and

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the sciences, the criticism often coming from college and university professors and administrators, as well as from politicians. In this climate, a report calling for revamping higher education took a back seat both to criticism and defense of public schools, and subsequently to the changes in all educational institutions generated by the National Defense Education Act.

What lessons might contemporary higher education advocates in the NEA learn from the activities of their predecessors in the 1950s? First, the most obvious difference should be noted. Collective bargaining, which characterizes the context in which most contemporary NEA higher education faculty members operate, was unknown in higher education, as well as in elementary and secondary education, during the 1950s. And collective bargaining, when it came in the next decade, institutionalized a faculty representation that was noticeably lacking in the AHE, as well as in the rest of the NEA. One might say that faculty members on campuses with NEA collective bargaining agreements enjoy a sense of representation that their predecessors would surely have envied. In fact, faculty on campuses without collective bargaining also have some sense of empowerment, whether through senates or other organizations, or through their own sense of individual and group efficacy. There are distinct limits, however, to that empowerment, both on non-collective bargaining campuses and on those with collective bargaining. The dominance of college and university administrators over faculty members is one of those limits. Though the dominance is clearly less prominent in the current era than it was 50 years ago, particularly in institutions with collective bargaining, administrators still play an overly prominent role on campuses. The increases in the non-tenure track ranks and in part-time faculty is one clear example of an increasing power imbalance between administration and faculty.

One can conclude that the present, like the past, lacks a productive interaction of faculty and administration, both on campuses and in larger contexts such as state systems. Relations between the two groups may be negotiable in collective bargaining settings, but there are clearly some relations that will not be covered in contract agreements, and a plethora of issues and relationships that are not covered on campuses without collective bargaining. Statewide governance in public institutions, or systems of institutions, plays havoc with collective bargaining that is locally based. Faculty unions need to develop ways to weigh in on statewide issues that may be not covered by local bargaining agreements. Regional and fed-

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eral policy present two more arenas in which collective bargaining needs to be augmented by other strategies to protect faculty interests.

Another relationship worthy of consideration is that between NEA and its higher education faculty on the one hand, and traditional organizations in higher education such as the American Council on Education that speak for, if they do not represent, administrators. The recent demise of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), the successor group to the AHE, likely indicates that administrators consider themselves represented sufficiently in other groups so as not to need their own occupational organization. But this may be a misreading, of the situation. Even if it is, the demise of AAHE presents to NEA the possibility of trying to organize college and university administrators or of trying to engage formally with existing organizations like the American Council on Education that administrators look to for leadership. There clearly are issues on which faculty and administration can, and should, work together. Finance, student aid, curriculum (particularly the trend toward assessment), and governance are areas in which cooperation can, and should, occur. Not coincidentally, these issues were all raised in *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*.

An area worthy of contemporary attention that was operative in the era of the EPC report is the stance that NEA higher education members take on private colleges and universities. NEA is mostly active on public campuses, including community college campuses. This means, at least to me, that NEA higher education, like NEA at large, should fundamentally be committed to public institutions. Does such a commitment imply foregoing organizing activities on private campuses? Given the *Yeshiva* decision, one might say that practically, as well as ideo-

logically, the answer is yes. But there are policy areas such as federal and state student aid measures, government support of research, and national movements such as the assessment of teaching and student learning that do not distinguish between public and private institutions. How the NEA chooses to address these matters is immensely important. Should it try to speak for all institutions, or should it concentrate its efforts on behalf of public institutions and deal incidentally, at best, with private colleges?

Public education, particularly public elementary and secondary education, is under significant attack from the religious right. While few institutions of higher education embrace the religious right, the number of overtly religious colleges is larger now than a decade ago, and their influence is increasing. What can or should NEA higher education do about the religious right and the colleges and universities that align themselves with this movement and its priorities?

The failure of NEA higher education to acknowledge tensions between private and public institutions in *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* was significant. And the failure to attend to the concerns of the larger NEA about separation of church and state in education in the 1960s played a small but significant role in the divorce between NEA and the AHE in the latter part of that decade. While divorce now is extremely unlikely, higher education within the NEA must always be aware of its dependence on the larger association for its support and take steps to productively address issues, like religion, that impact the two sectors differently.

*H*igher Education in a Decade of Decision raised real and significant educational policy issues when it was published. In the current climate, a number of educational policy issues—in addition to issues of faculty rights and NEA-representation—like those raised in the document of the 1950s need to be addressed by NEA and its higher education forces. While the issues are not necessarily the same, the arena of educational policy is one in which NEA higher education needs to be active, to respond to both internal and external pressures and priorities. One can only hope that such activity will take place, and that it will have more productive outcomes than experienced in the 1950s. [nea](#)

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article comes from a larger research project on the Educational Policies Commission which was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.
- <sup>2</sup> In an article for the *NEA Almanac of Higher Education* (Urban, 2007) about the history of higher education in the National Education Association, I noted the long, honorable, and largely successful history of the efforts of college and university faculty and administration on behalf of the National Education Association. In the same article, I tracked the intermittent and only sometimes successful efforts of higher education members to have their own interests represented by the NEA. In this article, I concentrate on *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*, an important document that I discussed briefly in that larger article.
- <sup>3</sup> On the initial proposal for the higher education document, see Educational Policies Commission, *Proceedings*, (October 5-7, 1950): 685-86.
- <sup>4</sup> Educational Policies Commission, *Proceedings*, [hereafter EPC Proceedings] (March 26-28, 1953)503 and (October 1-3, 1953): 491-516.

- <sup>5</sup> See EPC, *Education for All American Youth* (1944).
- <sup>6</sup> Such a statement was made at the March 24-27, 1954 meeting of the EPC, 295-96. While the critics were not identified, they quite likely included people like Arthur Bestor (1953), history professor at the University of Illinois who had produced a scathing critique of progressive education.
- <sup>7</sup> EPC *Proceedings* (April 14-16, 1955): 258.
- <sup>8</sup> EPC *Proceedings* (April 26-28, 1956): 264-443.
- <sup>9</sup> Eckert was listed as a member of the EPC on a preliminary page of the document by the time *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision* was published.
- <sup>10</sup> *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*, 31.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 5.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>19</sup> On this topic, see Urban (2000).
- <sup>20</sup> *Higher Education in a Decade of Decision*, 151.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.
- <sup>22</sup> EPC *Proceedings* (December 14-15, 1957).
- <sup>23</sup> Urban, (2005).

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