

Bob Chase: Higher Education and the New Unionism

Since his 1996 election as NEA president, Bob Chase has electrified the education world—and NEA members—with his calls for the Association to reinvent itself.

Chase is advocating a “new unionism” that welcomes responsibility for the quality of the education profession. He is also emphasizing the importance of NEA members at all levels of education working more closely with one another.

Thought & Action editor Con Lehane recently interviewed Chase about what the new direction for the NEA means for higher education members.

Thought & Action: NEA represents more higher education faculty and staff than any other union. Yet higher ed members make up less than 100,000 of the Association’s 2.3 million members. Do these numbers mean higher education is peripheral to NEA’s overall mission?

Bob Chase: Not at all. It’s vitally important for NEA to look at education as a pre-K through G experience. Connecting all of our members through that total spectrum of education is a particularly important part of our mission.

There is great emphasis today on young people gaining access to higher education. The President’s emphasis on the importance of postsecondary education in his State of the Union address is one good example. He spoke of the need to make 14 years of education universal. That is in line with our organization’s commitment to the total spectrum of education—the concept of a seamless web of education from pre-K through graduate school and beyond.

When we talk about life-long learning, higher education has a major role to play. We, as an organization, have to ensure that we help shape the concept of life-long learning to meet the needs of the general population—and our members.

Thought & Action: Do you think that NEA members in higher education see a connection to K-12 teachers? Or, vice versa, do K-12 teachers see clearly enough their connection to their colleagues in higher education?

Bob Chase : I don’t think that it would be honest to say that either segment sees this connection clearly enough. It’s unfortunate, because each segment needs the other.

The NEA Membership Advisory Committee, which includes seven

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higher ed members, seven K-12 teachers, and seven support staff members, has been particularly important in trying to bridge this gap and make clear the interdependence of all levels of education.

If we could replicate this kind of committee structure in our state affiliates, I think we could help ensure interconnectedness between the various levels of the education enterprise.

Thought & Action: Since your election as NEA president, you have spoken and written about a New Unionism. What is the New Unionism, and what does it mean for higher education?

Bob Chase: New Unionism means being as strong an advocate for the professional side of the education equation as we have been for the economic and social well-being of our membership, the other side of the equation.

I'm not saying that we should, in any way, back away from the moral responsibilities as a union to provide for the economic well-being of our members. But I am saying that there is another whole area of our members' well-being—the professional side—that we must be involved in.

If we take the best from traditional industrial unionism and the best from traditional craft unionism, as well as the best from organizational management gurus, and

meld all these into a philosophical underpinning for what our union should be, I think that we would be stepping forward and moving in a direction that is absolutely essential if we are to remain relevant.

This means that those of us who have held beliefs that are more in line with traditional unionism must rethink some of that and broaden our scope and vision about the work of the NEA.

This is tough work, and there's no blueprint for how we go about doing this. But unless we can make inroads here—whether it's K-12 or higher education—our importance to the future of education will be minimal, and the needs of our members, or potential members, will go unmet.

Thought & Action: Can New Unionism help our members in higher education take advantage of the technological changes now taking place?

Bob Chase: Faculty in higher education historically have had more of a collegial relationship with management than in K-12, but I think that's breaking down in all too many places right now. The role of unions, then, in enhancing this collegial working relationship becomes increasingly important.

Technology should be seen as a tool to improve the collegial atmosphere. The university world, the college world, has a responsibility

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to faculty and staff to help them become more conversant in the use of technology, not only to enhance student learning, but also to enable faculty and staff to expand their opportunities for collegial decision-making.

Thought & Action: You have talked about the importance of creating a seamless web within education. And you, in particular, are seen by higher education leaders within NEA as someone who understands that concept very well, probably better than most people.

What does the “seamless web” mean to you, and what ought to be the NEA’s role in bringing it about?

Bob Chase: To think, at this point in history, that the needs of individuals are met once they graduate from secondary school is myopic in perspective.

In today’s society, people who do not have an opportunity for post-secondary education will not find much opportunity in the world they will enter into.

When I talk about a seamless web, I’m saying that, to achieve in our society and to play a positive and productive role in our society, individuals must be able to continue their education beyond high school.

Now this education may not necessarily be in a traditional school of higher education. It may well involve other kinds of post-

secondary opportunities.

But the time when we could look at formal, universal education ending at grade 12 is over. Thinking that postsecondary education must, of necessity, be through graduate school, in a traditional college or university setting, is also archaic.

It is particularly important, then, for all of us in the education enterprise to work together to overcome these archaic views.

A seamless web of education, to me, makes perfect sense. The connectedness should be very clear for all to see.

Thought & Action: There have been situations in the past, at least in some states, where K-12 and higher education have competed over funding resources. How can we avoid this sort of conflict?

Bob Chase : Both segments need additional resources. But, as educators, we should not allow ourselves to be put in a position where one level of education has to compete with the other for scarce resources. We should be putting together programs at the legislative level that enhance the opportunities for K-12 and for higher education.

If we allow others to drive a wedge between us, neither level will reach its goals. We need to work with one another to ensure adequate funding and adequate resources for education at all levels.

As a nation, we need to ensure that there is access to high quality preschool programs.

Thought & Action: Let's turn to the question of access to postsecondary education.

In 1994, eight out of ten students from families with incomes above \$65,000 earned a college degree by age 24. The rate among students from families with incomes under \$22,000 in 1984 was less than one in ten.

What can NEA do to narrow this huge access gap?

Bob Chase: I think there are two questions around the concept of access. One, obviously, is finances, which may be the easy one to solve, actually.

There are proposals involving access before Congress right now. I look upon these proposals favorably. One is a \$10,000 tax deduction. The other is a tuition tax credit for postsecondary education.

I know these proposals are a bit controversial. Some say how can you support tax credits for higher education tuition but not for private K-12 tuition. Let me explain the difference.

K-12 education is compulsory, and, secondly and more importantly, in K-12, free public education is provided to all. On the other hand, higher education is not compulsory, and it is certainly not free, even in public universities and colleges.

So we've got a whole different set of facts when we consider the wisdom of tuition tax credits at the

college or university level.

Congress is also considering proposals to increase Pell grants and loan programs, and these, I think, are also positive ideas.

Thought & Action: You mentioned a second question concerning access.

Bob Chase: The other question of access—whether or not a person is prepared for college and university studies—isn't as easy to resolve.

Poverty, of course, has long influenced student performance. There is no question that poverty negatively impacts a person's opportunity to learn—not ability to learn, but opportunity to learn.

Recent studies on brain development make clear that we need to be involved in the education and development of young children well before the kindergarten level. The first three or four years of life are critically important in cognitive development.

We, as a nation, need to ensure access to high quality preschool programs, which will eventually improve learning at all levels of education—including the postsecondary level.

For NEA members in higher education, the learning that takes place in pre-K is as important as what happens in K-12. Pre-K learning, sadly, is something this country has seldom valued.

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So when we talk about the “seamless web of education,” we have to see the connection from pre-K through graduate school. This is the context within which we must address the question of access.

Thought & Action: You anticipated the next question to some extent. Overall, is there enough of an effort to make sure that minority students gain access to, and then succeed, at the postsecondary level?

Bob Chase: Poverty is an impediment to success in schools, and minority students, disproportionately, find themselves in poverty. We need to recognize this and understand the importance of early educational opportunities for kids, especially those who are in poverty.

That, in my opinion, is the overriding issue as it relates to minority success in schools. When programmatic opportunities in K-12 are lacking—when we see minority children shuffled off into special education programs because there aren’t programs within the regular setting to help them overcome difficulties that stem from poverty and life circumstances—then that’s going to mean a lack of access to higher education.

Not long ago, standardized test scores for minorities were increasing, and we saw a decrease in the gap between the achievement

scores of minorities and majority students. More recently, we’ve seen that gap widening again.

That is not anything more than a function of poverty. We have seen, over the last few years, a substantial worsening in the economic conditions of a disproportionate number of minorities in this country. The decline in scores is a result.

Thought & Action: Besides the issue of access, there is the question of standards. How can higher education faculty and staff work with K-12 faculty and staff to raise standards for students and improve teaching and learning at all levels?

Bob Chase: First of all, there has to be a much greater interest, at both levels, in dialogue than there is at the present time. I have to be very honest and say that, at times, higher ed faculty and staff look upon K-12 faculty and staff as less than equals. And that hampers the opportunity for dialogue.

At the same time, people who are professionals at the K-12 level don’t always understand what the impact of a positive relationship with higher ed could be—what might be accomplished if the kind of partnership that should be developed was developed.

The standards question is very important. This organization must speak out strongly for higher standards and must work diligently for

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the resources needed to reach those standards. Among the most important of these resources are those that would assist in the area of professional development.

The growing body of knowledge about how people learn and the increasing importance of technology in schools and on campuses mean that educators at the K-12 and higher ed levels have an increasingly urgent need for professional opportunities to keep pace with new developments.

Thought & Action: NEA members at both the elementary and secondary levels understand the importance of keeping kids in school and have been working to increase graduation rates. Higher education is also concerned about the retention of students, in particular, first-generation students.

What can our higher education members learn about keeping students in school from the experience of our K-12 members?

Bob Chase: I think colleges and universities have to make themselves more welcoming, especially to first-generation college students. College can be an overwhelming experience for these students. It can be frightening. Students can start to doubt their worthiness.

Often, first-generation students have to make adjustments. They may need to learn study skills.

We need to remember that, just as K-12 schools exist for students, it must be understood that colleges and universities exist for students as well.

I understand the research component and the other very important roles that colleges and universities play in our society. But, basically, colleges and universities exist to provide educational opportunities for students. And sometimes I think we forget that and think that they exist either for us, or for something other than the students. But students are the people who are paying the bills, and we need to keep that in mind.

Thought & Action: You personally have worked hard in the past to help develop new strategies for educating students with disabilities.

According to a recent report from the American Council on Education, nearly 10 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen in college report having a disability, and the numbers have been growing.

Is there anything in the K-12 experience with inclusion that can help NEA members in higher education?

Bob Chase : The issue of inclusion on the K-12 level has been fraught with danger and controversy because special needs students are being included in the regular ed classrooms without the ancillary

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assistance essential to meet their needs and the needs of the regular ed students.

Higher education institutions could learn from this. These institutions have a responsibility to make ancillary programs available on our college and university campuses.

It's easy for some to dismiss the responsibilities of colleges and universities to provide this kind of assistance. But the fact that a student has special needs does not mean that this student cannot handle college and university work. It just may mean that work must be approached in a different way.

Adult learning theories, coupled with the increased knowledge we have of how to overcome some special needs as they relate to learning, can help colleges and universities provide educational opportunities for students with disabilities in ways they might not have thought possible in the past.

Reaching special needs students takes a will to do it, and a commitment to discover how it can be done. But if we're unwilling to do that, then an awful lot of very capable people who have an enormous amount to offer our society will not have the opportunity.

Thought & Action: This past fall, faculty at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale voted for NEA representation. This was the first time in a number of years that

a research university faculty voted for union representation. Does this reflect a change in faculty perception of unionization?

Bob Chase: Well, I hope it does. I understand only too clearly that faculty at the college and university level are much more involved with their field of study—their discipline—than most people are at the K-12 level. And I think, traditionally, that this discipline-specific worldview has hampered the understanding of the importance of unions to college faculty and staff.

I'm hoping that there is a clearer understanding now that unionism and intellectualism are not incompatible. As a matter of fact, not only do they complement one another, but each can help the other move in a positive direction.

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Certainly, college and university faculty need to band together now more than ever—especially with incursions into what used to be the domain of the university by states, business, communities, all of whom, to one degree or another, work together. If the faculty is unwilling to work together as one, then they're going to find themselves left out of the picture.

Thought & Action: Does the success at Southern Illinois raise

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new interest within NEA for a national effort at higher education organizing?

Bob Chase: Well, I think this success gives us pause to reflect. We should seize the opportunity to investigate and see exactly what this victory means. We should study why faculty at SIUC voted the way they did. What were the reasons behind the vote? Are there factors that are replicated on other campuses?

Thought & Action: Part-time, adjunct, and temporary faculty and staff are an increasingly significant part of the higher education work force. Often, these faculty and staff don't have job security, are paid less, get fewer benefits than those tenured and tenure track faculty.

What does NEA have to say about faculty and staff in this situation?

Bob Chase: I don't think there's any question that having more people on tenure-track or in tenured positions would be much preferred. But that's not the real world, so we need to look at the real world and see what the real situation is in terms of job security, academic freedom, and all of the issues that are important to faculty.

Then we have to begin tailoring programs that will address these issues, rather than just bemoan the fact that part-time faculty are becoming more prevalent.

Thought & Action: How does higher education fit into NEA's strategic focus of restoring confidence in public education?

Bob Chase: If you look historically at how the American people view higher education, you will find that view has, justifiably, been very positive. But, just as there has been a much closer scrutiny on and much more criticism of public K-12 education, we see more scrutiny and criticism aimed at the college and university level.

So the importance of restoring public confidence in public education is no less great at the college and university level than it is at the K-12 level.

There may be a difference in degree now in the level of criticism, but wait a few years and I don't think the degree of difference will be as wide.

Actually, we may have an opportunity at the higher ed level to start doing things now that can help prevent the sort of problems we have seen at the K-12 level.

Thought & Action: A corollary to that question. Restoring public confidence in public education means, in part, building better community partnerships. What role can higher education play in developing those sorts of partnerships?

Bob Chase: I think the role of higher education can be vital.

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Higher education hasn't developed partnerships at the community level to the degree that it should have.

We may see partnerships with the quote/unquote "intellectual elite," but partnerships beyond that have been somewhat minimal. Perhaps that's too broad a statement to make, but I think you understand what I'm trying to say.

Higher education can provide a unique opportunity to build collaboration with the community. We need to seize that opportunity and do it.

Thought & Action: On a different question of working together, what is the status of the merger talks between NEA and the American Federation of Teachers, which also represents many higher education faculty and staff?

Bob Chase: Talks are progressing. We have reached no agreement yet. But the atmosphere among those at the table is very positive. It's very congenial.

We are currently operating under a national no-raid agreement, which went into place in January of this year for a period of 18

months. It's my hope that, over this 18 months, we will be able to develop something that will, in fact, lead to a merger.

We are about to enter into a more formalized, cooperative arrangement, where NEA and AFT will jointly select two or three issues we can work cooperatively on. This is an important step. It will show us more clearly whether or not we have the ability to work together in a more formalized manner.

We don't anticipate that we will be bringing anything to this year's annual NEA Representative Assembly. But, hopefully, a year from now, we will have something.

Thought & Action: Finally, you have, many times, expressed an interest in hearing from members. How can NEA higher education members reach you with their opinions and concerns? Are you E-mailable?

Bob Chase: I am E-mailable. My address is BobChase@nea.org. I just hope our members understand that it can take a while to respond to all the messages I receive! ■