

Overview

In recent issues of *Thought & Action*, we've emphasized the enormity of the changes taking place in higher education: the introduction of distance learning, the erosion of tenure and academe's growing reliance on a contingent workforce, the increasing tendency of our institutions' to usurp rights to the intellectual property of faculty and staff, and the inroads made by for-profit corporations into what was once the idyllic world of the ivory tower.

In addition, *Thought & Action* has made it a point to solicit and publish articles on quality teaching and learning—as witnessed by the NEA Excellence in the Academy awards. We've made a commitment to quality teaching and learning because our readers tell us this is the most important area in their work lives. No matter how well these teachers are already doing their jobs, they want to do better—and they want their union and *Thought & Action* to help.

The important issues of quality teaching and learning and the future direction of higher education haven't gone away. These issues, in fact, are more important than ever, and you'll find articles addressing them in this issue.

But, while we continue our dialogue on excellent teaching practices with articles like "Adapting to a New Generation of College Stu-

dents" and "Learning to Read and Write: Still A Miracle," and while we continue our analysis of major issues in the profession, such as the effects of distance learning on the academy and the impact of traditional notions of merit on faculty of color, we also take a serious look, in this issue, at what technological change and improving teaching and learning mean to our own institution—the NEA, our union.

That the conditions of life in education have changed dramatically is undeniable. Whether education unions, as they currently operate and under their existing structure and governance, will meet the challenges presented by the changing educational environment is a question our organizations must confront—and soon.

With the immensity of this challenge in mind, this issue of *Thought & Action* offers a symposium, featuring three of the nation's leading thinkers on unions and change.

We feature articles by Charles Kerchner, coauthor of *United Mind Workers*, whose work centers on the need for education unions to reinvent themselves, Dorothy Sue Cobble, author of *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the 20th Century*, who has studied issues of women in workforce for many years, and Lois Gray, author of *Under the Stars*, a study of how the

entertainment unions have adapted to technological and other changes in their industry.

These three scholars turn their sights on higher education, and, in a thought-provoking dialogue, expand on themes they developed during this year's NEA Critical Issues in Higher Education Seminar. Taken together, the three pieces present some eye-opening challenges to the status quo.

Dorothy Sue Cobble points out that unions have not always been employer-based. Prior to the rise of industrial unionism, unions were career-based. How much relevance does this approach have for a workforce that is now hovering around 50 percent part-time? Well, read what Professor Cobble has to say and decide for yourself.

From Lois Gray, we find out that, quite simply, the entertainment unions that increased membership in the last decade are the ones that changed the way the do business. The unions that haven't adapted to changing conditions? They're losing membership and their relevance in the industry.

Charles Kerchner's prescription for New Unionism: Professors define themselves. It is, notes Kerchner, the job of the professoriate to guarantee the quality of the education its charges receive.

What does this mean in terms of the structure of the union, the union's relationship to the employer, the union's relationship to its own members?

These are the questions Kerchner wants education unions and the unions of other knowledge workers to come to grips with before it's too late.

We may not have the answers to any of these questions—at least, not yet. But *Thought & Action* sees its role as bringing the questions to our readers and looks forward to our readers taking up the challenge, engaging in vigorous debate on their campuses—and getting back to our journal with lively and thoughtful commentaries on these important questions. This is what we're here for.

—*Con Lehane*
Editor, *Thought & Action*