Economists predict that knowledge workers—those who earn their living sharing information and solving problems—will constitute the majority of the American workforce by the year 2010.

Educators are the single largest group of knowledge workers in organized labor. Interestingly, another industry that has a large percentage of knowledge workers who are unionized is the entertainment industry.

Seemingly strange bedfellows, educators and entertainers face a good many common concerns at the bargaining table. Issues of intellectual property, for instance, increasingly important in higher education, are familiar to entertainers.

Then inventors like Thomas Edison produced motion pictures and the phonograph record, and it suddenly became possible to record a work and play it again in locations far away.

Performers, in response to this development, unionized to protect their rights when their work was reused, and a long struggle across the decades ensued over the payment of residuals.

In much the same way, developments in technology are impacting education. Technology makes it possible to videotape faculty or put their work on a Web site for use in other locations at other times. College and university administrators are increasingly laying claim to the faculty’s intellectual work.

The stock and trade of knowledge workers, educators included, are products of the mind. This reality presents unique challenges to unions that represent knowledge workers.

To address this challenge,
Thought & Action has invited three scholars who have studied unions of knowledge workers to present their thoughts on the future of NEA's higher education unionism.

The question we asked them to address: How can we change our unions to represent faculty and staff in an environment that is being changed by technology?

This question was the focus of discussion at NEA's 1999 Critical Issues Seminar. At this annual seminar, 35 leaders from NEA locals around the country meet to dialogue on a topic of vital interest to higher education. This year's topic: Knowledge Workers and the New Unionism. The discussion begun there is continued here.

While this symposium provides a thought-provoking analysis of the issues, the questions raised here are far from settled. They must be discussed and debated on our campuses and in national forums such as Thought & Action and the Critical Issues seminars. The future of our Association -- and the future of higher education itself -- depend on the answers we arrive at.