Overview

By Mary Ellen Flannery

When I think about the election of Donald Trump and the recent confirmation of Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary, I think about the 7.6 million students who relied on federal Pell Grants to go to college this year. Or the roughly 50 million who have borrowed from the federal government to attend.

Does President Trump know their stories? Does he understand the sacrifices our students make to go to college, to invest in their own futures, and in our collective future, too? These students are our teachers-to-be, our future pharmacists and firefighters, the ones who will expand our technologies, write our histories, cure our cancers, and invent and innovate a path through the 21st century.

The answer is obvious. Inside his cosseted, winter White House on Palm Beach, where Trump has angrily defended his Muslim ban that stranded grad students and researchers outside our borders, as well as his stupefying appointment of the billionaire, anti-public education DeVos, Trump doesn’t see, hear, or recognize our students.

Does he know your stories? Does he understand what you do in your classrooms, offices, and research labs to prepare students to be citizens, to improve our communities, to underwrite the common good?

Telling these stories is a start. Protesting is a means. But, as the next four years unfold, further action will be necessary. In this issue of Thought & Action, pay particular attention to the article by United Faculty of Florida (UFF) president Jennifer Proffitt and UFF-University of North Florida chapter president John White about the swift progression of guns-on-campus legislation in the Florida Capitol.

It’s a cautionary tale about what happens when wealthy special interests, like the NRA, put their money and lobbying power into local and state
politics. What can you, regular citizen, do about it? Not much, unless you magnify your voice with others, show up to hearings to participate in policy and law making, and stand with the candidates who share your values. (This, by the way, is what unions do...)

Use real data, like the numbers shared by Thought & Action authors Anthony Bernier and Mike Males, which give the lie to popular impressions of our campuses as dangerous to students. (Bernier and Males also encourage their colleagues to consider libraries as places for information sharing and community building.)

Or, use the power of art, as Salem State University curator Ken Reker has and explains in this issue.

And take inspiration from another UFF member: the recent National Book Award winner Ibram X. Kendi, who says in these pages about anti-racist efforts in the U.S. “If you’re involved in the struggle, there always remains the capacity to win. The only way in which an anti-racist America could never come to be is if anti-racists themselves decide it’s impossible and they stop fighting for it.”

Stay involved. Don’t stop fighting.

What’s at stake here isn’t just the federal government’s ability to send poor and middle-class students to college. That’s part of it, but the bigger issue is the public good served by public higher education. We laughed at Hillary Clinton’s talk of vast right-wing conspiracy decades ago, but it has become clear that corporate interests are collaborating to privatize the greatest public institutions of America, including our universities and community colleges.

For their playbook, see Wisconsin, where public unions have been dismantled, and now attacks on tenure and academic freedom are de rigueur.

As union members, you will lead the resistance.

“What could be done, and always has been done in history, is by people who are organized.”—NOAM CHOMSKY

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