Using Your Teacher Brain

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OPINION

Hello, new unions!

Hillary Clinton gets NEA support, shares college affordability plan

BY A VOTE OF 84 PERCENT, delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly (RA) in July voted to support Hillary Clinton for president. In a rousing address to RA delegates on July 5, Clinton told NEA members: “I’m with you.” She also said, “Supporting educators means supporting unions. Unions helped create the strongest middle-class in the history of the world. You’re not just fighting for your members. You’re fighting for your students, and for families across the country.” At the same time, Clinton derided Donald Trump’s plan to slash critical funding for federal programs ranging from pre-k to Pell Grants. “He would leave our most vulnerable students to fend for themselves,” Clinton said. The day after her address to the NEA RA, Clinton announced new provisions to her debt-free college plan. Specifically, she called for the elimination of in-state tuition at public institutions for families earning less than $125,000 a year; an immediate three-month moratorium on federal student loan payments for all borrowers (during this time, they will get help in accessing income-based repayment plans); and restoration of year-round Pell Grants so that poor students can access summer classes, too. “It gives hope to students that if they pursue higher education, they won’t be overwhelmed by debt,” said NEA-Student member Desiree Brown, who lives at home with her parents without a car, after graduating this spring from a public university in Pennsylvania with about $32,000 in student debt.

NEA’s Thought & Action wants you to consider violence...

A NEW CALL FOR PAPERS from Thought & Action’s review panel asks authors to consider the current rash of violence on our campuses and in our communities. What are its sources, how does it manifest itself among our students or would-be students, and how can faculty, staff, and their unions create safe spaces for ALL students to learn? Consider the 26 percent of women college seniors who report they were sexual assaulted during their college years, or the more than 50 shootings on campuses in 2015, including the October 1 murders of eight students and their professor at Umpqua Community College in Oregon. Will campus-carry gun laws make things worse? Can unions bargain for safe conditions for learning? Does access to student support services make a difference? What about the growing number of racial and racist experiences on campuses? Papers are due October 1. For more information, see nea.org/thoughtandaction.
In 2013, when University of Central Florida (UCF) associate professor Yovanna Pineda learned she was pregnant, she did what comes naturally to her: lots of research. At UCF, she learned, there was no such thing as paid family leave for faculty members. “I talked to a lot of people and realized, we had a terrible situation,” she recalls. Depending on a faculty member’s relationship to her chair, a new mother might get a semester off, or “the same chair might turn to somebody she didn’t like and say, ‘you have to come back in two weeks.’” Other parents returned to work and found out that, in their absence, they had been demoted. Meanwhile, the needs of dads or same-sex parents were completely ignored. The more Pineda learned, the angrier she got, she says. Eventually it got to the point where she was like, “Hey union! Are you talking about this?”
In 2015, the United Faculty of Florida-UCF (UFF-UCF) did more than talk about family leave. They sat down at the bargaining table, armed with Pineda’s research on gender equity, on how UCF’s policies stacked up against other public universities, and on the effects of paid family leave on employees and employers.

What Pineda had found was disturbing. Compared to similar institutions, UCF was living in the 1950s. Almost every public university was offering faculty a paid, no-teaching semester, and an automatic stop on the tenure clock. University of Oregon included an option for teaching online, plus on-campus breastfeeding facilities, while University of Wyoming offered on-campus child care. Closer to home, University of South Florida recently had passed paid parental leave, plus modified instructional duties (i.e., faculty could still work on grants and research, just not teach, and get paid.)

UCF faculty wanted this, too—and not just for birth mothers, but for adoptive parents and those in same-sex relationships. They pointed out that while UCF strives for diversity and inclusivity, “it should practice what it preaches,” says Pineda. The implications for women faculty, in particular, were troubling. By forcing mothers to take unpaid leaves to care for their infants, the university was effectively prohibiting them from qualifying for UCF’s salary raises, which require five years of continuous service to qualify, and derailing their retirement contributions.

“We should be able to have careers—and children!” says Pineda. But they couldn’t. For every woman who was a full professor at UCF, there were three men, she found. For every woman who was an associate professor, there were two men. This matches the findings of Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower, a 2013 book that found women faculty often choose contingent work, or “time outs,” when family-friendly policies are not available at their institutions.

While Pineda assembled her findings and presented them to the union, assistant professor Beatriz Reyes-Foster put together a community of UCF staff and faculty parents on social media. Eventually, many of those parents formed a UFF-UCF group, the Family Life Caucus, dedicated to taking actions to advocate for family-friendly policies at UCF.

Family leave in the U.S.

Only about one in 10 private-sector workers in the U.S. has access to paid family leave through their employers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, leaving millions of American parents unable to take off from work after the birth or adoption of a child.

Nationally, we’re suffering from “a Leave it to Beaver family policy stuck in the last century,” wrote U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez last year. In fact, it has been 23 years since President Bill Clinton signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which requires many employers to provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave to new parents. “The basic promise of that law is that no one should have to choose between the job you need and the family you love,” said Perez. “For the millions of Americans who cannot afford to take leave without pay, the promise remains unfulfilled.”

Perez isn’t alone: a growing chorus of voices is saying FMLA is no longer enough, not in this global economy, where the U.S. is the only developed nation in the world without mandatory, paid family leave. (In fact, Pineda found that only three countries offer absolutely no legal guarantee of paid maternity leave. The other two are Papua New Guinea and Swaziland.) “Too many moms have to go back to work just days after babies are born…and too many dads and...”
parents of adoptive children don’t get any leave at all…none of this is fair to families,” said presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who has proposed a nationwide minimum of 12 weeks of paid family leave to care for new children or sick family members.

Parental leave reduces the likelihood of infant mortality, increases the chances of post-natal healthcare, including infant vaccinations, and facilitates breastfeeding. Meanwhile, new mothers who take longer than 12 weeks of maternity leave also have been found to have fewer symptoms of depression and stress.

But it’s the economic benefits that may be swaying policymakers and employers. As Pineda pointed out to UCF negotiators, paid leave is an effective employee recruitment and retention tool. One study found that 94 percent of leave-takers who received full pay returned to their employers, compared to 76 who received unpaid leaves. (That’s a lot of costly faculty and staff searches that can be avoided.) Another found worker productivity after paid leaves was significantly higher than after unpaid leaves.

In 2015, federal workers finally got paid parenting leave (six weeks) through an executive order by President Obama. Also last year, New York enacted a 12-week paid family leave program, which will launch in 2018. Twenty other states have coalitions pushing the issue.

In the meantime, some corporations, especially in the ultra-competitive tech industry, have moved forward on their own. In November, Facebook extended its parental leave policy to four months, no matter the parents’ gender, and Amazon announced it would offer four weeks of pre-partum leave to pregnant mothers, followed by 10 weeks of maternity leave and six weeks of parental leave. At the same time, Twitter doubled its leave time from 10 to 20 weeks, and Netflix, Adobe, and Microsoft all expanded their leave, too.

“When you have that kind of leave, you come back relaxed and ready for work, and not so resentful! You actually come back more productive,” says Pineda.

At the bargaining table

When UFF-UCF bargaining chair John Fauth sat down on the table in 2015, he never felt alone. Reyes-Foster mobilized dozens of parents to attend every bargaining session, filling rows of seats. “It was very clear to trustees the depth of our support,” says Fauth, who adds, “What they did—Yovanna and Beatriz and the caucus members—made a huge difference in sharpening our bargain. We just sort of funneled their passion and energy.”

The original proposal from UFF-UCF was for a more comprehensive family leave, one that would enable faculty to also take care of aging parents. That was a difficult sell. (It’ll be back on the table again!) What they won was tremendous: Nine-month employees now get an entire paid semester (moms and dads, inclusive of adoption and other events), while 12-month employees get 19 weeks.

“It’s a huge step in the right direction,” says UFF-UCF President Scott Launier. Not just for faculty, but for their students, too. Healthy, happy faculty members with healthy, happy families are productive, effective faculty members, he points out.

Ironically, neither Pineda nor Reyes-Foster will use the leave that they helped win—both have older children. “My kids are 7 and 2 and a half,” says Reyes-Foster. “I unfortunately did not get to benefit from this leave. But I’ve been advocating and in this fight for a long time so that others don’t have to struggle the way I did, and I struggled less than others!”

“I am just so glad others will be able to enjoy it,” says Pineda.

BY MARY ELLEN FLANNERY
Editor, NEA Higher Education Advocate
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Small changes to your teaching, implemented tomorrow morning, can improve student learning in your courses.

In spite of all of the complaints we often hear about the quality of instruction in higher education, my work on campuses around the world has convinced me that faculty want to teach well for their students. Those of us who become locked in unproductive or stale teaching habits suffer less from a lack of vision or desire than from research pressures, overextended teaching schedules, and excessive service commitments. We simply can’t find the time or intellectual headspace to consider how to engage in large-scale changes such as flipping our classrooms, or gamifying our courses, or using contract grading.

Fortunately, in recent years we have seen an increasing number of thinkers and visionaries translating the findings of the learning sciences into practical strategies for improving student learning in higher education. But the best news for busy faculty may be that a modest package of those strategies can empower us to improve our teaching in small, manageable steps. I call this approach to faculty development “small teaching,” and have seen firsthand how it can help faculty enhance the quality of their course design, their everyday teaching practices, and their communication with students.

You can conceptualize entry points for small teaching by dividing up the students’ classroom learning experience into four parts: the moments prior to the formal opening of class, the first few minutes of the class period, the long middle section, and those essential final minutes of class. For an immediately appreciable difference in your classes, consider an easy tweak to your routines in each of these four periods.
Before Class Begins

Students walk into the classroom trailing the many distractions of their busy lives, from winding-down text conversations to winding-up lunch plans. One of the first challenges we face is helping them transition from the world of distraction to the focused energy of our class. Peter Newbury, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan, offers an excellent model.

Prior to the start of his astronomy class, Newbury projects NASA’s Astronomy Picture of the Day. He then asks students:

What do you notice? What do you wonder? As students get out their materials and prepare for class, they have this small encouragement to think astronomy. But the best part about this simple pre-class activity is it provides Newbury with an opportunity for some easy student engagement at the opening of class, as he can then ask a few to share their observations and curiosity.

We need not restrict ourselves to images. In my writing class I might ask the same questions about a great sentence; a music instructor could do the same with a short composition; a marketing class, an advertisement. All it takes for us, as for our students, is keeping our eyes open to the ways in which our disciplines can spark the wonder and curiosity of our students.

The Opening Minutes

Faculty often begin class by reviewing what happened in the last class, a good practice that helps students see continuity from one
session to the next. It also helps students in the long run by giving them a taste of what learning scientists call retrieval practice.

We have excellent evidence that if we want students to remember something—facts, concepts, or skills—they must engage in frequent efforts to retrieve that material from memory. As one psychologist put it, our memories are like overstuffed closets; we can fit plenty of things in there, but we may struggle to find and pull out what we need at the right moment. When students frequently practice retrieval, they become more adept at it. This will help them call up your course material when they need it: during your exams, for future learning in another course, or in their careers.

Instead of opening class by reviewing your previous meeting, ask students to help “remind” you of what you covered last time. Use questions that move beyond simple recall into reflection and evaluation: What was the most important topic we covered in the last class? Last week we talked about Concept X; can anyone remember some of the examples we used to help illustrate that concept?

You might consider using the syllabus for exercises like these. Ask students to have their syllabus in class every day, and occasionally begin class by having them pull it out and brainstorm whatever they can remember about some previous class period. But remember—for this technique to work, they have to practice retrieving from their minds, not their notebooks.

**Mid-Class Connections**

One way of understanding knowledge is as the network of connections between all of the things we have learned and remember. Researchers tell us that experts in a discipline have rich webs of connections between all of the facts, concepts and skills of their discipline, whereas novice learners (like our students) tend to have thin or nonexistent networks. As you walk through the world, you continually see ways in which your experiences connect to your field of study. Students don’t think that way. They tend to learn course material in isolated units, separate from their lives outside of the classroom. Good teaching helps students develop richer knowledge networks.

Unfortunately, we can’t simply hand fully-formed mental networks to our students; deep, long-term learning happens when students make the connections themselves. One strategy to help them do this is the connection notebook, which is designed to help students brainstorm connections between that day’s class material and the world around them. My students keep a dedicated connection notebook, which I collect and review three times per semester, but you might prefer to have them complete connection prompts in their regular notebooks, or post them online, or share them in small groups. Whatever option you prefer, put connection notebooks into practice by pausing once per class or per week and asking students to respond to prompts like these:

- Describe one way in which today’s course content manifests itself on campus or in their home lives.
- Identify a TV show, film, or book that illustrates a course concept from class.
- Describe how today’s material connects to last week’s.
- Explain how today’s material connects to something they learned in another course.

Ask a few students to share their answers. You’ll be astonished, as I have been, at the creative and intriguing ways in which they see connections to the world, or across the different units of the semester. And with those connections, they’ll be inching closer to the kind of expert knowledge structures we want them to obtain.

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**BEST PRACTICES > CREATING YOUR OWN SMALL TEACHING**

Part of the joy of small teaching stems from the opportunity and encouragement it gives you to invent your own small ways to improve student learning. These four principles can provide guidance for thinking about your own small teaching techniques.

**Retrieving:** Students who engage in frequent retrieval practice have better long-term retention of course material. How can you give students frequent opportunities to retrieve material and put it to use?

**Predicting:** Learners who make predictions, or tackle problems before they are ready, open themselves up to deeper learning. Can you ask your students to try their hand at your material before you teach it to them?

**Spacing:** Small, repeated exposures to new material leads to better learning than long, intensive exposure. How can you provide small bites at the skills students are building, weeks and months after first exposure?

**Connecting:** What will enable your students to see connections between the course material and the world around them, or between the material from the first and last weeks of the semester?

See *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* for more.
The Final Minutes

The final minutes of class can represent one of the great wasted opportunities for learning. As the minute hand ticks, students begin packing their bags and mentally checking out of class; meanwhile, faculty rush frantically to squeeze in one or two last points before students exit. A closing ritual that requires student engagement can help ensure that learning continues through the end of the class period and beyond.

The best way I know of to make the closing minutes count is The Minute Paper, a classic technique articulated by Angelo and Cross in their book Classroom Assessment Techniques. The Minute Paper involves asking students to write answers to two questions: What was the most important thing you learned today? What question remains in your mind? These simple questions pack a lot of cognitive punch. They engage students in quick retrieval practice; they invite reflection and evaluation (the students must decide what was most important); they encourage students to see the day’s material as a starting point for a new journey, as opposed to the final resting place of a completed one.

“DON’T WAIT UNTIL NEXT SEMESTER TO MAKE TEACHING TWEAKS; START TOMORROW MORNING.”

When I speak to faculty about The Minute Paper, they ask me all kinds of questions about its implementation: Should I collect them? Should I grade them? Should we do it every day or weekly? My answer: make it your own. Experiment and see what works best for you and your students.

These four strategies can give you an excellent start on small teaching. But you don’t need to follow these prescriptions to become an effective small teacher. Consult some of the books in the “Addi- tional Resources” section and see if you can identify small ways to put into practice principles from the growing body of research on human learning. Don’t wait until next semester to make teaching tweaks; start tomorrow morning. As you find new ideas that work for you, and they become enfolded into your routines, try others.

Small teaching steps forward, taken and renewed each semester, can lead you down the pathway to a long and satisfying faculty career.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


Three great websites for small teaching activities:

http://ablconnect.harvard.edu
http://retrievalpractice.org
http://facultyfocus.com

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Why do we need our students to remember facts or concepts? They have a world of information at their fingertips. I want my students to become better thinkers, not memorizers. All faculty want their students to become critical and creative thinkers, and master complex intellectual skills. But to master these cognitive tasks, students need foundational knowledge. Thinking requires (at least) two major inputs: what we take in from the environment (or Google) and what we already have in our minds. When either of those inputs is shallow, thinking will be shallow. As Daniel Willingham and other cognitive theorists have pointed out, students who have mastered basic math facts perform better on higher order math problems than those who have not. Critical and creative thought builds on concepts and ideas; those concepts and ideas build on facts. A student who has mastered her own unique set of facts and ideas about the French Revolution will create a better, more interesting, and more original essay than one who churns out a summary of what she found on Google.

Can a small teaching approach help me with those higher order cognitive skills? Absolutely. Consider the principle of connections. What we describe as “creative thinking” often consists of combining old ideas in striking or original new ways. So if we want to help students develop their creative skills, we can demystify that process by offering them opportunities to connect their ideas in new ways and see what emerges. In my classes we play a game called “the minute thesis,” in which I write categories of concepts or authors or themes from the class on the board, and then ask a student to randomly draw a line connecting one item from each of the categories. We all then take a minute to come up with a “thesis” that connects those different items. After a minute of silence and then discussion, we do it again. Over the course of a class period, we can brainstorm many new ways to connect and understand the course material, and give students a creative strategy to begin developing their own original ideas.
What I learned about higher ed assessment in a small village in South America

By Laurie Occhipinti

A few years after I began teaching undergraduates I was informed that our program needed to be doing continual assessment. But we assess students all the time, I responded. No, I was told, that is not assessment. I dutifully went through a couple of professional development workshops: writing student learning outcomes, program outcomes. I learned to use action verbs, and struggled with the definitional difference between “goals” and “outcomes” and “formative” and “summative.” I wrote student learning outcomes for all of my courses, and worked with colleagues to develop outcomes for our program. I attended meetings where I was told our institution was building a “culture of accreditation.” I was appointed to be the assessment coordinator of our multidisciplinary department, and obediently collected our results and passed them along to a larger faculty assessment committee, which reported them to our administration.

As I collected data, collated information, and presented reports, I could not find any evidence that all of this assessment actually led to its ostensible goal: improving student learning. Perhaps, I thought, I simply wasn’t doing it correctly. I experimented with what I felt were more authentic tools, ones that provided a more holistic appraisal of student work—requiring students to submit portfolios, or collecting extensive writing samples—but it quickly became apparent that these required an enormous amount of time, and relied on what I felt were subjective standards for evaluation. These experiments were frustrating to me...

As an anthropologist who studies economic development, I found myself pondering a question that echoed one asked by well-known anthropologist James Ferguson. In looking at economic development, Ferguson suggested that it was well documented that “development” was not very effective at accomplishing its stated goals: to improve the material conditions of the people that it was supposed to help. Yet governments persisted in creating new projects on top of old failed ones. At its base, in Ferguson’s analysis, poverty is a political problem: resources are not evenly distributed, but accrue to those with power...

In contemplating assessment of student learning in the liberal arts and social sciences, I find myself feeling on familiar ground...Assessment insists on reducing all of the qualitative process of learning and teaching to a technical problem—defining and measuring objectives.
THE HISTORIC PASSAGE OF THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA) promises to transform K-12 education by doing away with federal mandates on everything from assessment to accountability, and replacing them with standards designed and driven by local and state committees. But what about higher education, you ask? Yes, it has a few things to do with you, too.

TEACHER PREPARATION
A key part of the new law provides for “academies” that will provide clinical training for new teachers, along with instruction on content. These academies, which will be funded through state grants, can be created in partnership between districts, institutions of higher institution, and other non-profit entities. This is an area where faculty and staff must get involved—to make sure every student gets a teacher with the knowledge and skills to succeed, and to make sure these academies embody our values.

COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READINESS STANDARDS
The law requires every state to have college- and career-ready standards, as well as goals and targets for progress within some student subgroups. Who knows better what a college-ready student looks like than a college faculty or staff member? Work with your state NEA-affiliated union to get yourself appointed to the committees writing these standards.

DUAL ENROLLMENT AND EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL
ESSA includes grants for dual-enrollment or early college programs in states and local districts. NEA also supports articulation agreements between school districts and colleges/ universities that allow students to earn college credits—but only when the content of those agreements is determined by educators.

GET INVOLVED!
GO TO getESSAright.org TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE NEW LAW, AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN YOUR STATE OR COMMUNITY.
NEA RA 2016!

In July, the NEA Representative Assembly—a decision-making body of more than 7,000 delegates—met in Washington, D.C., to set the union’s course in 2016-2017. NEA higher ed delegates passed a number of new business items (NBIs), including:

WGU: This NBI, offered by United Faculty of Florida President Jennifer Proffitt, requires NEA to ask the NEA Academy—through NEA’s representation on the NEA Member Benefits Board—to sever all ties with Western Governors University (WGU). (How WGU’s competency-based, management-centric model of higher education isn’t actually higher education was explored in a 2012 Thought & Action article by Johann Neem. Find it at nea.org/home/57423.html.)

Homeless: Offered by California Faculty Association leader Cecile Bendavid, this NBI requires NEA to publish articles about the plight of homeless students.

Contingent Faculty: Presented by Judy Olson, chair of the NEA Contingent Faculty caucus, this NBI requires NEA to advocate for consistent definitions of faculty work to ensure equality and consistency of legal protections for part-time faculty; for resumption of and adequate funding for the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (and that it will include data collection on both tenure-track and contingent faculty); and a more comprehensive work supplement from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that includes contingent academic workers and is conducted at regular intervals beyond the 2017 update.

“Contingent faculty constitute 75 percent of all faculty,” Olson explained, “and we have no idea of their working conditions or pay. The statistics simply aren’t collected.”

Adjunct Retirement: Presented by Beverly Stewart (pictured above), higher education chair of the Illinois Education Association Board of Directors, this NBI requires NEA to advocate for equal access by faculty to retirement benefits. Specifically, NEA should investigate best practices, and promote models that provide part-time faculty with pro-rated benefits. (In a 2012 survey, 40 percent of contingent faculty said they had access to employer-provided retirement benefits—like a 401K—but only about a quarter of those faculty said the costs were shared by the employer.)

REOUIRED READING

Thought & Action’s summer issue

“As I collected data, collated information, and presented reports, I could not find any evidence that all of this assessment actually led to its ostensible goal: improving student learning. Perhaps, I thought, I simply wasn’t doing it correctly,” writes Laurie Occhipinti, in her recent Thought & Action article, which explores ways to make assessment work for faculty. Other articles in this issue consider the origins of conservative Christian students’ complaints in the classroom; alternate faculty employment models; and the power of anonymity in student writing. Order a paper copy at www.subscribenea.com—use the code NEAHIGHERED for free delivery—or download at nea.org/thoughtandaction. Also check out the latest call for papers on violence!

Photo: Rick Runion/RA Today

Beverly Stewart, an Illinois Education Association member, speaks to the RA about contingent faculty’s frequent exclusion from retirement benefits.
Welcome to Cayuga, NY adjunct faculty!
After three years of persistent work by part-time faculty organizers and countless challenges by college administrators, adjuncts at New York’s Cayuga Community College have a union! The state’s Public Employment Relations Board certified the 250-member unit this year. “It’s been a long journey,” said Greg Sevik, president of the new Cayuga Part-Time Faculty Association. Until now, adjuncts were the only employee group on campus without a union, and they desired a voice at the table. “A big part of this is about having some kind of representation, some kind of voice on campus,” said Sevik. Pay was an issue—it almost always is for adjuncts—but not necessarily the driving one, he said. Assignment of classes also was important. “There just isn’t a transparent process around that right now. For most adjuncts, it’s important to have a sense of how much work they’re going to have from one semester to the next, and to have some understanding of how those decisions are made,” said Sevik. Fair access to professional development also may be tackled in their first contract.

Ten percent raises in NYC
After working more than six years without a pay raise or contract—their last expired in 2010—the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) reached a tentative agreement with the City University of New York (CUNY) in June. The proposed contract provides 10.41 percent in compounded, retroactive salary increases from October 2010 through November 2017. Equally important, the contract enacts significant structural changes that will fortify working and learning conditions at CUNY. Specifically, CUNY agreed to work toward structuring more time for faculty to devote to individual students. The tentative agreement also provides CUNY’s first-ever system of multi-year appointments for adjunct faculty, allowing them to offer greater academic continuity to their students. “We were able to negotiate a strong, imaginative contract in a period of enforced austerity for public workers because our members mobilized,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen, who represents 25,000 faculty and staff. “The fight for our contract was a fight for investment in quality education at CUNY.” A ratification vote was to be held in August.

Another new union in FL!
By a vote of 139 to 22, the faculty at Tallahassee Community College became the 26th chapter in the United Faculty of Florida (UFF), certified on Aug. 4. “This was not a vote against administration but a vote for faculty. They have stood up for themselves. Our voices will now be rightfully heard on issues that impact our employment and student success. We will be part of the decision making process not standing outside of it. I couldn’t be more happy for our faculty,” said Jen Robinson, professor of art history and current unit president, in a press release. The new union, which will replace a non-bargaining unit on campus, includes full-time faculty, librarians, and counselors. “This vote clearly demonstrates that these dedicated faculty members understand that their collective voice is vital to improve their institution and their ability to effectively serve their students and the people of both this community and the state of Florida,” added UFF President Jennifer Proffitt. “We are excited to add their energy, knowledge, and professionalism to our cause of improving higher education across our great state.”

TWO-MINUTE INTERVIEW > SAVING THE PROFESSOR’S VOICE

NELSON ROY is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders at the University of Utah and has published extensively in the area of voice disorder assessment and management. The NEA Higher Education Advocate recently spoke to Dr. Roy about voice disorders among educators.

Research shows that on average, educators are more than twice as likely as non-educators to have voice problems and about three times more likely to see a doctor about the issue. Why?
Your voice is the primary tool of your trade. Having to speak for long periods of time, sometimes loudly in large classrooms with background noise, will lead to vocal chord vibration overdose. It’s not uncommon for educators to have about a million vocal chord collisions in a day.

Who among educators is most at risk?
Females ages 40 to 55. Women have smaller larynxes, or voice boxes, and their vocal cords vibrate more quickly. That’s compounded by the fact that female vocal chords, also called folds, are shorter and thinner than male vocal chords. Older women have less protection against the accumulated strain. But within the teacher population, not all are created equal with respect to their risk. Educators in certain subjects are at greater risk—vocal music teachers, teachers of drama... report more voice problems. Chemistry teachers are also at greater risk because their exposure to chemicals contributes to the injury.

What can educators do to protect their voices?
Prevention is more effective than intervention and the primary prevention technique is amplification. Using a personal voice amplifier (which costs about $100) reduces the need to speak loudly, thereby reducing the vibration dose and the degree of tissue injury. Also, educators should drink lots of water, and try to keep taking small sips while lecturing. They should also find ways to give their voice a rest during the day, by asking students to lead discussions or do presentations, for example. Also, avoid clearing your throat, and whenever possible, stop shouting.

BY CINDY LONG
You are a Higher Educator!

The National Council for Higher Education would like to invite you to be a part of the higher education conversation by becoming a member.

http://www.nea.org/ncche
The Court in 2016

The terrible, no-good year that wasn’t...

BY JASON WALTA

WHEN THE SUPREME COURT OPENED ITS TERM with the clerk’s cry of “Oyez! Oyez!” last October, it looked as if conservative justices were poised to push the law dramatically rightward through a series of high-profile cases. These included cases calling into question the constitutionality of affirmative action in public colleges and security arrangements in public-employee unions, as well as legal challenges to women’s reproductive freedoms and the key democratic principle of “one person, one vote.” With such a lineup, many braced for the worst.

But things looked quite different by the time the gavel fell at the end of the term in June. Some of this was due, of course, to the passing of Justice Scalia. Without his vote, the Court tied 4-to-4 in Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association, the case that threatened to impair public sector unions by transforming the First Amendment into a national “right to work” law. With the tie vote, a lower court decision in the unions’ favor stands.

But Scalia’s death didn’t influence the outcome in several other cases. In Fisher v. University of Texas, a fatal blow to affirmative action in higher education seemed likely. Just three years earlier the Court had reversed a lower court’s ruling that upheld the state university’s modest affirmative action measure for admission. When the case returned to the Court this year, many feared—particularly with the reliably liberal Justice Kagan recused from the case—that conservative justices would declare race-conscious admissions to be unconstitutional under any circumstance. Yet, in a 4-to-3 ruling that surprised even seasoned Court observers, Justice Kennedy sided with the liberal justices in a decision that not only allowed the Texas plan to survive, but offered a ringing endorsement of the virtues of promoting diversity in higher education.

The same was true of its ruling on so-called “TRAP laws” that impose restrictive regulations on abortion providers. Early on, it appeared the Court’s conservatives would use the case to narrow the reproductive freedoms recognized in Roe v. Wade. Yet, when the Court ultimately decided Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt, Kennedy again joined a decision that strengthened Roe’s protections.

Other worrisome cases turned out to be complete fizzes. In Evenwel v. Abbott, voting rights advocates feared conservative activists would convince the Court that the population for setting congressional districts should be counted in a way that excludes those who can’t vote—to the detriment of minority communities. But at the end of the day, the Court rejected that radical claim unanimously.

The term even brought some welcome news for the long-suffering First Amendment rights of public employees. In Heffernan v. City of Paterson, the Court held that the First Amendment protects public employees against retaliation based on an employer’s mistaken beliefs about an employee’s political activity or beliefs. The case dealt with a New Jersey police officer who was observed by his superiors carrying a yard sign for the police chief’s rival in an election. As it turned out, the officer was merely delivering the sign as a favor. The Court concluded the chief’s retaliation based on his mistaken impression violated the First Amendment just as much as if the officer had actually supported the rival’s candidacy.

Nonetheless, any sighs of relief should be brief. Both the narrow margin by which many cases were decided and the significance of the issues that continue to come to the Court underscore one thing: a great deal hangs in the balance with the current vacancy and for the multiple vacancies likely to arise over the next four years. After decades of losing ground on key issues for workers, minorities, and women, the tide has started to turn, and a few key appointments in the near future could continue that hopeful trend for years to come.

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CASE STUDY
Connecting with our Broader Communities is Crucial!

FOR OUR UNIONS to be relevant and influential, we must build relationships—not only internally, but with community partners who share our values of democracy, diversity, equality, and social justice! Since power is organized money and/or organized people, we must organize people to stand up against the consolidation of money by groups whose values contrast our own.

Why work beyond our own local?
1. More organizing power and influence. Our mission should go beyond bargaining and grievances, and should work to advance our professions. Becoming more influential with parents, legislators and the communities around us gains support we need.
2. Access to new resources. Some of the best leadership trainings attended by members in my local has been offered by other groups.
3. Increasing knowledge and skills. Many of our partners become aware of important information before we do, and learning to work with them increases our listening skills and our ability to work with others with whom we don’t always agree, but who share our values.

How do we start?
Many of us are active in our communities, but not always as representatives of our union, and it is urgent that we seek out such opportunities. I have found the following principles useful in community building:
1. Be invited!
2. Be like Sesame Street’s Super Grover: Show up!
3. Listen for 3 months before speaking for 30 seconds.
4. Know when to say no—so we don’t get stretched too thin and become unreliable.

By saying “Yes!” to community building, my local has become more active in our state and national organizations, and has built meaningful relationships with many groups, including Jobs with Justice, the Latino Leadership Institute, and several local teachers’ associations.

Of course, we must be careful when vetting organizations with whom we partner. We need not agree with their style. In fact, it is probably good if some community partners do things differently than we might, but we must confirm their values match our own.

This type of organizing work can take time, but can be some of the most engaging work we do.

Have questions, concerns or suggestions? Feel free to contact me and let’s start building a relationship! scottlaunier@gmail.com or 321-225-2080.

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