



FACULTY ADVOCATE

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Message from the IFT President

As most of you know, I am six months into a somewhat halting attempt to fill Nick Gier's shoes as he wraps up a 40-year tenure as President of the Idaho Federation of Teachers. Fortunately for all of us, you'll see that Nick is continuing to edit the Faculty Advocate. I'm still learning the ropes, getting to know people at the AFT national, and working on upgrading our website and communications.

Universities have rarely been as challenged as they are now. The defunding of higher education accelerates, threats to academic freedom loom larger than ever, and historical inequities on and off campus can no longer be unaddressed far too long. Then, on top of that, the ongoing pandemic and its toll on all of us, personally and professionally.

The labor movement faced unexpected challenges in 2020, and, while 2021 hasn't started off all that great, there are undoubtedly new opportunities. There is public support for unions as great as any time since the mid-1960s, and the probable shifts in federal labor policy promise to make organizing more effective. The IFT is poised to take advantage of these trends.

I look forward to working with you over the next years as we help create campuses that better serve students and our communities, and that offer employees a work environment that will continue to attract and retain the excellent public servants that Idaho enjoys. Please contact me at any time. I am excited to learn more about what is going on

across the state, hear what your concerns are, and to do what I can to help you develop your locals.

In solidarity, Marty

Coronavirus Update

An incomplete survey of 1,792 campuses updated frequently by the National Education Association has reported nearly 400,000 coronavirus cases and 91 deaths (see site at t.ly/RHpc). Considering the fact that 3,200 extra cases per day appeared in college towns from mid-July to mid-September, campus leaders have largely been successful in containing the virus.

Idaho's schools have fortunately followed this national trend. It's simply criminal that many state and national leaders have not adhered to CDC guidelines, and have placed our lives and livelihoods in such jeopardy.

UI has 802 cases and 1.8% Infection Rate

The University of Idaho has reported 802 cases since August 13, and it has experienced, for the last month, a 1.8 percent positivity (=infection) rate of those tested for the virus.

The CDC requires 5 percent or below necessary for resuming normal activities. Currently, the Alabama has the highest rate (34%), Idaho stands 5th (25%), while our neighbors Oregon and Washington with mask mandates come in at 4 and 6.5 percent respectively.

At the UI recent waste water tests—said to be a more accurate measure of infection—at the UI

indicted “fairly low” levels of virus concentrations.

The main concern among faculty is the slow roll out vaccines in Latah County and an uncertainty when faculty and staff will get them.

BSU, ISU, and LCSC

Boise State University has reported a total of 1,257 cases and the last week’s testing showed a 2.6 positivity rate. Idaho State University has had 918 cases but has not released a positivity rate. Lewis Clark State College currently has a total of 171 cases with no infection rate indicated.

American Higher Ed: Lower Funding and Higher Debt

by Nick Gier, Editor, *Faculty Advocate*

Writing for *The Nation* (Nov. 30, 2020), Eleni Schirmer states: “During the past 30 years, per-pupil public funding for higher education has declined more than 30 percent. Ten years after the Great Recession, annual state funding for public colleges is still \$6.6 billion below 2008 levels.”

Idaho Ranks 49th in Funding

According to a Pew research report, Idaho ranked 49th in higher education funding in 2017. The per full-time student amount was \$25,433, about 31 percent below the national average.

One bright spot was that Idaho’s tuition and fees per full-time student was \$6,760, about 10 percent below the national average. Idaho students are still getting good value because the difference in median household income in for Idaho and the nation was 8.4 percent in 2018.

Rise of the Corporate University

In 1960, University of California President Clark Kerr’s promoted a “multiversity” for a “higher educational system for an industrial society.” The rise of the corporate university has resulted in the ascension of faculty unions, which now represent one third of faculty where collective bargaining is legal. The number would be much higher if Congress passes a national public employee bargaining bill.

Alarming Use of Contingent Faculty

The most serious damage done in the corporate university has been the reduction of tenured professors from 75 to 25 percent, and the concomitant rise, following the use of “wise” business management, of “contingent faculty,” who have few benefits and no job security. Unions are now having success in serving the needs of these instructors as well as organizing graduate students at an ever growing rate.

Ethan Schrum calls Kerr’s “multiversity” the “instrumental university,” and even though Kerr promised that the corporate university would “afford a broader public education for the humanities and the arts,” funding for the liberal arts has plummeted. Instrumental values, those serving the needs of a modern industrial society, have supplanted the intrinsic values of knowledge and truth seeking for its own sake.

Writing about the influence of business schools, Steven Conn argues that “running universities like corporations, forcing academic departments to justify their existence, and appropriating resources on the basis of ‘productivity’ and ‘value-added’ all brought academic administration and business school ideas into closer sync.”

Student Debt is now \$1.7 trillion

The decrease in higher education public funding has led to a dramatic rise in tuition and fees—an incredible 1,120 percent average since 1978. This amounts to a quadruple increase over the consumer price index. This financial burden has forced students to borrow money at an alarming rate. They now owe \$1.7 trillion, which averages \$28,950 per student.

The Biden administration has now extended the pause on student loan payments until October, and he has urged Congress to forgive \$10,000 per student in the federal student loan program. Some activists are calling for complete loan forgiveness or at least \$50,000 debt reductions per student.

Institutional Debt is over \$300 billion

Standing in the shadow of student debt is an equally troubling phenomenon: rising institutional debt. Kasia Lundy at the consulting firm EY-Parthenon has calculated that “in 2018, U.S. higher education institutions held almost \$300 billion in long-term debt, representing about \$40,000 in debt per student at private institutions and nearly \$15,000 per student at public institutions.”

Even well-endowed private colleges and universities are borrowing on the private market, but with different reasons. Public institutions are taking out loans or selling bonds to build new dorms and recreational centers, but, as UC Berkeley’s Charlie Eaton explains, “the wealthiest are oriented toward maximizing financial revenues.”

Another strategy for cash-strapped universities is to outsource campus functions. The UI administration floated the idea of privatizing its physical plant, but the backlash was so strong that it gave up on the idea. (For the first time, the UI faculty union signed up physical plant members.) The administration, however, has put its heat plant under private management with an expectation of receiving \$8 million dollar a year in revenues.

Eleni Schirmer phrases the issue in stark terms: “In the era of debt-financed universities, administrators are merely puppets—perhaps more than they themselves realize—with the strings held by Wall Street banks and their guard dogs, the rating agencies.” Not surprisingly, those credit companies downgrade campuses with unions and those that try to limit tuition, as Idaho university presidents are now doing in a bid for a sufficient state funding.

The faculty union at Salem State University has discovered that each student pays \$2,960 annually to service the institution’s debt, a 403 percent increase since 2010. In 2019 the University of Wisconsin paid out just as much in debt interest and financial fees as it did in providing student financial aid.

Bring in the Feds

The states will never increase funding to an adequate level, so Schirmer and others propose

that this private financing be replaced with a federal program. In April of 2020, the Federal Reserve announced that it was lending over \$2 trillion dollars to businesses and strapped city and state governments.

The Fed is committed to buying up \$750 billion in the corporate loans of some big businesses. There is simply no reason why \$300 billion should be given to our public colleges and universities in order to get Wall Street creditors off their backs.

Jason Wozniak of West Chester University phrases the point well: “Every million dollars that goes to Wall Street is a million dollars we could use to give adjuncts better pay, to provide benefits to poor students, to keep classes running. Debt service is a form of extraction that we need to stop immediately.”

Nick Gier is professor emeritus at the University of Idaho. He was president of the IFT Higher Education Council from 2004 to 2020. Read his other columns on the virus at <http://nfgier.com> (search “coronavirus”) Email him at ngier006@gmail.com. Read his columns on higher education at webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/HighEdColumns.htm.

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