The Higher Education Committee

By Mecheline Farhat & Alan Kaufman, Bergen Community College

This year, during the first meeting of the NJEA Higher Education Committee, a new chair was installed. Longtime chair, Alan Kaufman of Bergen Community College announced his resignation after serving in that capacity for 13 years. Mecheline Farhat of Bergen Community College was appointed as the new chair by NJEA President Marie Blistan.

During his tenure, Alan testified before the N.J. state legislature and senate budget committee, advocating for increased community college funding and directly challenging the Christie administration’s, and Sweeney’s senate, reduction of support. On several occasions, Alan met with the Chair of the N.J. Senate Higher Education Committee. And when Zakiya Smith Ellis was appointed N.J. Secretary of Higher Education, Alan, fellow committee members, and NJEA staff met with her to discuss issues of importance to the community college sector.

Resulting from Alan’s leadership, in April 2020, Aaron Fichtner, president of the N.J. Council of County Colleges, was to speak at the NJEA Higher Education Conference and meet with the committee. Unfortunately, the conference had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the relationship fostered by Alan with the Council provides great optimism for our continued collaborative working relationship.

Over the years, Alan worked with many NJEA staff, including Region 29’s UniServ field reps Chris Berzinski, Ron Topham, and currently Marcia Kleinz and Maury Koffman. One of the most positive achievements during Alan’s tenure as chair was the expansion of the committee membership. When he began as chair, there was representation from only half of the state’s community colleges. The committee now boasts representation from 13 of the community colleges as well as NJREA.

With this chair transition, Mecheline Farhat is taking on many new challenges and working to advance higher ed members across the state. She is a fierce advocate and has served at the local, state, and national levels since 2015. She has testified in Washington as well as Trenton. She serves as an NJEA and NEA Delegate, a member of the Congressional Contact Committee, Political Action Committee, and the Censure, Suspension, and Expulsion Committee. Mecheline has also participated in meetings, roundtables, and events with the Secretary of Higher Education and congressional leaders to discuss the need for increased funding and support for community colleges.

As chair of the Higher Education committee, Mecheline intends to continue the significant work of her predecessor and focus on growing the committee with full

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STANDING TOGETHER

9-10 A.M.
KEEP CALM AND PREPARE FOR RETIREMENT: GET THE MOST OUT OF THE ALTERNATE BENEFIT PROGRAM (ABP)
Presenter: Kimberley Brown, consultant specialist for ABP
As we anticipate new stages in our lives we plan for them, except when it comes to retirement. We expect to transition into a stress-free life with sandy beach walks. Retiring comfortably and being able to do the things you dream about requires a steady stream of income that lasts as long as you do. Join us to learn how to plan and manage your ABP account.

YOU AND YOUR PENSION (PERS)
Presenter: Bob Bobik, NJEA associate director, Research
This workshop provides an overview of the New Jersey Public Employees’ Retirement System (PERS). The workshop is recommended for all higher education members enrolled in PERS to learn the ins and outs of the system.

10:15-11:15 A.M.
COVID-RELATED EMPLOYMENT ISSUES
Presenter: Keith Waldman, Esq., Selikoff & Cohen, P.A.
This workshop addresses a broad range of issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the higher education workplace, both in person and remote. Topics include:
• Emergency paid sick and family leave provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act have expired. What’s next?
• Are employees who refuse in-person work because of COVID-related concerns entitled for unemployment?
• When is remote teaching a “reasonable accommodation” under the Americans with Disabilities Act and/or NJ Law Against Discrimination?
• Can a college force its employees to quarantine?
• What policies can a college impose without negotiation?
• Can the COVID vaccine be mandated by colleges?
• What whistleblower protections are available for employees who report workplace safety violations?

CONTRACT ENFORCEMENT
Presenter: Ed Carmien, Oron Nahom, NJEA UniServ consultants, Higher Education
Participants will receive guidance on how to draft a Statement of Grievance following review of a nuanced case study as well as applicable contract language. Distinctions will be drawn between grievable contract violations and nongrievable actions.

11:30 A.M.-12:30 P.M.
MEMBERS OF COLOR HIGHER ED ROUNDTABLE – ELEVATING YOUR VOICE, MAXIMIZING YOUR INFLUENCE
Presenters: Naomi Johnson-Lafleur, NJEA field rep., UniServ Reg. 9-Monmouth Co.; Eric Jones, NJEA field rep., Organizational Development
This interactive, engaging workshop explores individual and collective strategies to ensure the power and sustained presence of higher education members of color in their professional communities and beyond. Join us.

12:30-1:15 P.M.
GREETINGS / BREAK
Keynote: Sean M. Spiller, NJEA vice president

1:15-2:15 P.M.
NEGOTIATIONS 101: THE BASICS
Presenter: Nicholas DiCicco, Mingyon McCall, NJEA UniServ consultants, Higher Education
Learn the fundamentals of negotiating a collective bargaining agreement. Basic organizing, planning, membership engagement, communicating, and negotiating strategies will be discussed. Our goal is for you to understand and be able to execute the basic steps in the negotiating process.

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR COLLEGE SUPPORT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF
Presenter: Michael A. Rollins, NJEA field rep., Organizational Development; Heather L. Sorge, organizer, Healthy Schools Now, NJ Work Environment Council
Stress. The mere mention of the word can bring on feelings of anxiety. Work pressure, hectic schedules, life events, and financial obligations all contribute to the constant strain placed upon us. But what can we do about it? This interactive, engaging and entertaining workshop helps members learn how to:
• Define it and understand it
• Identify the causes
• Find ways to manage it

2:30-3:30 P.M.
BUILD YOUR POLITICAL POWER TO MOVE HIGHER EDUCATION EVEN HIGHER
Presenters: Marybeth Beichert, Fran Pfeffer, NJEA associate directors, Government Relations
As the organizer Ernesto Cortés once said, “If I want to organize you, I don’t sell you an idea. What I do, if I’m smart, is to try to find out what’s your interest. What are your dreams? I try to kindle your imagination, stir the possibilities, and then propose some ways in which you can act on those values and act on your visions. You’ve got to be the owner.” Join us as we learn how to understand your power, build it, and use it to influence those who make the decisions about your professional life as a higher education member.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A DIGITAL MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN
Presenter: Justin Conley, NEA senior digital strategist; Justin Tzanos, NEA organizational specialist, NEA Center for Organizing
In this session, participants will be introduced to the research, best practices and digital platforms needed to implement a strategic virtual component to their membership campaign efforts. Participants will be led through case studies, take part in interactive exercises around content creation, and learn how to initiate and receive the resources to launch a digital membership campaign on their campus.

To register, go to njea.org/2021higheredconf
Members will need their NJEA PIN to register. For more info, email highered@njea.org
The Higher Education Conference will be virtual this year. There will be no cost to participate.
This has been a time of tremendous change and upheaval in our nation’s history and in our personal lives. Whether working on campus or remotely, NJEA members in our community colleges are working hard to ensure that students continue to receive an excellent education while meeting their unique social and emotional needs.

The global pandemic exacerbated an economic crisis that has been brewing for some time. We have seen well-paying jobs evaporate and more Americans have been pushed into the gig economy. At the same time, as higher education costs continue unabated and the debate rages about student loan forgiveness, community colleges continue to provide a world-class education at an affordable price.

As educators, we believe that education is the great equalizer. But for too long, our community colleges have struggled with flat funding even as our students and our communities require more of them. NJEA was very pleased when Gov. Phil Murphy and the new Secretary of Higher Education Dr. Brian Bridges announced $29.5 million in federal funding. That is a step in the right direction. However, every penny and more will be needed to help community colleges meet the goals set forth in the State Plan for Higher Education.

On February 26, fulfilling his promise to make tuition-free community college a reality, Governor Phil Murphy signed A4410, permanently establishing the Community College Opportunity Grant Program (CCOG), which will allow qualified students to attend any New Jersey community college without tuition or educational fees. And, for the first time in 13 years, the governor proposed increasing county college operating aid by $5 million.

Because of the challenges higher education uniquely faces, we have seen some creative solutions that are worth celebrating. For example, the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges partnered with industry leaders to provide college-accredited professional development to current employees of Robert Wood Johnson and the St. Barnabas Health Systems. In fact, roughly 200 employees of Robert Wood Johnson are currently taking courses at 11 different community colleges; their tuition is being paid directly from RWJ to the college.

As higher education members, regardless of job title, the work you do uniquely and universally benefits our communities. We have seen community colleges become centers for COVID testing and vaccination, hunger relief efforts, and much more. The work you do matters every day and it is essential that you receive the support and resources you need as professionals and as people. Thank you for the work that you do every day.

Change & opportunity in Higher Education
by Sean M. Spiller, NJEA VP

NEA Auto and Home Insurance by California Casualty

California Casualty offers insurance protection you need with benefits you deserve. The NJEA and NEA sponsored program is not available to the general public and provides $500 personal property coverage; vehicle vandalism & collision waived deductibles on school property; $500 fundraising money coverage; $3,000 personal property at school coverage; and special rates/generous discounts.

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Preparing for an Inclusive Semiquincentennial
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Museum Director of Curatorial Affairs and Chief Historian Dr. Philip C. Mead shared documentation showing that three New Jersey African American men were found to have voted in the state before 1808 – the year when Blacks were specifically excluded, along with women, from voting in the Garden State. The black male voters from that era that have been found so far are Ephraim Hagerman, Tom Blue, and Caesar Trent, all of whom are documented to have voted in Montgomery Township in 1801.

New Jersey is fortunate to have so many people dedicated to protect, preserve, and present its rich and diverse history from the New Jersey Amistad Commission to the New Jersey State Archives, for example.

For a longer version of this article containing many more resources, see its online version at https://www.njea.org/aaresource/nj
Art Schwartz retired in 2020. In the great scheme of things, this appears unremarkable. People retire all the time. But at Mercer County Community College (MCCC), Art’s passage into retirement equates to removing a substantial part of the college’s foundation. Art Schwartz began teaching at MCCC three years after the college was founded. For all but three years of the college’s history, he has been a rock supporting and inspiring generations of students and colleagues.

His work in the mathematics classroom was stellar. Art was recognized during his career many times: in 1991, he received the college’s Distinguished Teacher Award – and this less than halfway through a career touching six decades. In 2004 he received the highest honor for the teaching of mathematics in New Jersey, The Distinguished College/University Teaching of Mathematics Award, from the Mathematical Association of America. Art completed the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University. And Professor Schwartz published articles supporting the teaching and learning of mathematics.

Outside the classroom, Art Schwartz’s union activism and organizing efforts also span decades. He served as the MCCC Faculty Association president and/or chief negotiator for more than 40 of his 52 years at the institution. Art served at the state level in the NJEA Higher Education Committee for more than 30 years. At the negotiating table, Art always brought hard-won research into institutional financials and a no-nonsense style that got results. As a union leader he relentlessly supported faculty, and through a MCCC union coalition, all organized labor at the college.

Art Schwartz taught and organized at MCCC for 52 years, from 1969 through the fall of 2020. But he started teaching calculus at Hopewell Valley Central High School before he joined the college’s faculty – so his career is even longer than that. His own words recap a lifetime of service in higher education best:

“I have had a passion for teaching mathematics for more than 50 years. I have been fortunate enough to receive recognition for my efforts, but my greatest rewards have come from my students. To see them succeed in mathematics and become better critical and analytical thinkers has been a wonderful experience. The fact is, my students have inspired me. I also feel privileged for the opportunity to have worked alongside so many dedicated and outstanding colleagues.”

Professor Arthur “Art” Schwartz: 52 years
By: Ed Carmien, Mercer County Community College