

Why I Worry about Bias toward Community Colleges

by Charles Selengut, Faculty Association of County College of Morris

Community colleges are now much in the news. A great deal of this public interest was generated by Jill Biden, the First Lady, herself a former community college professor who lobbied strongly to have free tuition of community colleges. There was significant support for the free tuition provision of President Joe Biden's "Build Back America" legislative proposals but due to political opposition, it was not included in the final legislation. Still educators, parents and even some legislators on both sides of the aisle championed the measure.

Despite these worthy objectives, New Jersey community colleges, their students and faculty still experience prejudice and social stigma. Community Colleges are seen as institutions geared for those who were unsuccessful in high school, students from working class families or the economically disadvantaged, not places for the successful and well born. As one of my students, a talented serious student who worked as a landscaper told me, "my friends at four-year colleges make fun of me and say you are in the 13th grade, not in a real college."

Despite the American ideology of educational equality, bias is prominent in higher education. As one student wrote on a community college blog, "My parents' friends who are decent people think I am a failure for attending community college," and the student asked, "What's wrong with community colleges?" There is nothing wrong with community colleges – many students do extremely well, as I can attest. Bradley Griffin, a higher education



researcher, explained that for well-educated middle-class families, community college attendance is seen as a last resort suitable only for the under-prepared and unmotivated.

This class bias, negative labeling, and stigma have serious consequences leading many students to see themselves, in my view unfairly, as abject failures and their institutions as mediocre and second best. This perception often leads to low expectations and less commitment to scholastic work. Four-year colleges and universities often share this negative perception. One personal example: I was a visiting professor at a New Jersey university where I taught a course on the sociology of religion which I similarly taught at my regular position at County College of Morris in Randolph. One of my students who transferred to that university was refused credit for the class because it was taught at a community college. It was only after I contacted the university dean and explained that I taught both classes similarly that credit was given to the student transferee. This prejudice extends to community college faculty who are asked to omit their community college

affiliation at scholarly meetings and in publications.

For students who are motivated, community colleges provide wonderful opportunities for educational and economic advancement. Many students do extremely well. However, due to the negative perception of community college education, many students become disillusioned and never graduate. *The Hechinger Report on Higher Education* reports that only

one out of five students graduate in three years. Unfortunately, in my half century of teaching in New Jersey, I observed how the negative labeling and stigma attached to these schools led some of my students to see themselves as educational failures. This sense of malaise often came out in conversations with students often arguing with me that despite my optimism and expectations for them, they were still in a glorified high school. As one student expressed, "Professor, sorry to tell you, this is a vocational school."

Courageous educational leadership is needed to challenge this educational bias so that all our students are treated respectfully and without prejudice.

**NJEA Higher Ed
Conference
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Building Now & for the Future: Contracts, Ideals, & Compromises

by Michael J. Ferlise, Hudson County Community College Professional Association

Not by the skillful hands of fine craftsmen, contracts are all too often negotiated, wrangled, and settled by the same clumsy but effective methods of delaying, stalling, and the crude victories of just saying “No!” Scratch the surface of any contract and you’ll find an archeological site rich in power differentials. Any section of any article betrays layers of deeply contested terrain shaping sentences and structuring language: fragments, fissures, and faults. Victories and defeats are strewn side by side over the same negotiated battlefield of power linguistically stitched together by the needle and thread of compromise. By negotiation’s end, a momentary stability is weaved together for another several years reaffirming the ol’ saw, “All is compromise.”

As unionists, with the legal right to engage in collective bargaining, we can play an active part in shaping and altering some aspect of our world, even if at the most local and immediate level. But we do not, to paraphrase Marx, make things as we please. And as anyone familiar with the rigors, demands, and absurdities of collective bargaining well knows, to quote another great source of working-class wisdom, the Rolling Stones, “You don’t always get what you want.” And even if “you get what you need,” you may not get it the way you needed.

One simple reason is because we don’t make these changes alone or in a vacuum, which, surprisingly, our membership often finds hard to understand or accept. There are other actors and other groups with their own interests, a larger history in which prior agreements and institutional arrangements and practices have been firmly set in place prior to our arrival. We find ourselves in a particular place and time, within a cultural world of attitudes and worldviews all its own.

A union can only become an effective organization and source of power if it stays on its toes and accepts that there is no universal approach or magic formula for action and seriously takes into account the sedi-



ment of these seemingly inert and living, changing realities when planning and acting. We may not walk away from our negotiations getting exactly what we wanted, but we can get some or possibly more of it if we organize ourselves in a very disciplined and thoughtful manner with a clear strategy prepared to seize the moment. Atop that strategic list stands the issue of dealing with the reality of compromise.

Compromises, necessary for any successful agreement and negotiated outcome, should be struck after we enter negotiations – not before. Prior to negotiations, our union worked very hard in all possible ways to empower ourselves and prepare for our 2022 collective bargaining sessions, but we purposely did not limit ourselves to what we thought was only possible or in anticipation of what our college administration would accept or reject. Our preparations and negotiations had already been oriented and organized by several principled goals, ideals we felt should prevail, things we thought ought to be. A vision of the qualitative value of our labor, of who we are, expectations of how we should be treated, and our rightful place in our day-to-day reality as professionals, profoundly guided and unified us around a heightened collective consciousness.

Previously we seized the fortuitous circumstance of a new college president who has since sustained a public commitment to greater equity, inclusion, and diversity at our institution. We jumped on this opportunity not only to make momentary or monetary gains or develop a healthy long-term working relationship with him, but to also put in place new

and better institutional structures in the event a less amicable and more hostile college administration were to change hands and take hold in the future. And in what might mistakenly be seen as a minor matter, we also pressed to secure a spacious new union office not only to hold in-person and remote meetings but to provide the Professional Association (PA) with an important presence and stature on campus.

We continued our push for parity in pay both from within our institution and among similar institutions of two-year community colleges and to build on gains made during our previous settlement. We pushed very hard for full release-time for our executive officers. The former addressed long-standing economic inequities at our college between senior faculty and those hired after 1997 and our low income compared to faculty at similar community colleges. The latter, release-time for PA executive officers, was intended to place our organization on a new and more sustainable, perhaps professional, footing now and in the future. Among other hard-earned advances, release-time would be a very important addition to the continued building of our union as a strong, independent, and professional organization. We also made it a priority to work with our new Vice President of Human Resources along with a new academic dean to extensively rework the disciplinary section of our contract in order to address and prevent the recurrence of past abusive practices by HR, in what might be called the “fast-tracking” and inappropriate disciplining of faculty by the prior HR department. It was important to demonstrate both to our members and college administration that the PA takes their members’ rights and job safety, as well as their economic wellbeing, as a priority.

In the end, we were able to get a general 9% increase in salaries for the first year of the contract, compounded by 3% for year two and 3% for year three. We went from capturing approximately 60% of our

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Member Support Pushes 9 of 11 Endorsed Candidates to Victory

In a strong performance by pro-education candidates in New Jersey, 9 out of 11 U.S. House candidates endorsed by NJEA members won their elections. Over the course of the election season, thousands of NJEA members worked to elect proven advocates for public education.

Higher education members can be counted among those members who pushed certain elections into the win category. They knocked on doors, made phone calls, joined text banks, and sent out postcards by the thousands to get out the vote. Success really can't be measured by the races won, but more so by the overall collective action involved in this year's elections. There are still a few races waiting to be tallied, but no matter what, higher education members gave a strong showing and they should be proud of their efforts.

Not just in New Jersey, but across the nation, students, parents, educators, and public schools were the big winners. With key races being won by advocates for public education, wheels were set in motion to improve the futures for all schools and students. NJREA members helped make this moment possible and played key roles in helping elect and reelect champions for public education. NJEA Higher Education members can affect that positive change when they make their voices heard during the elections process.

Educators across the state ran for and won offices up and down the ballot to serve their communities, be champions for students, and lift up policies that help working families. And hundreds of thousands of educators and other dedicated public employees got involved in this election by speaking with parents and community members across the state to share what they are seeing in schools and on county college campuses.

And, while the ballots may be counted, and races have been won, NJEA members will need to continue to stand strong, hold elected leaders accountable, and demand the changes and improvements students need to succeed. While some politicians try to drive a wedge between the community and educators, this election showed

once again that educators in our K-12 system and higher education are united in wanting to see every student succeed. In every community across the nation, the public is working together with educators to create more opportunities for students in higher education. And it is critical to continue partnering with students, parents, and the community to advocate for the schools and higher education institutions New Jersey students deserve.

NJEA's Officers released a statement:

"Students, educators, and New Jersey families are the winners today as our state will once again send a pro-education delegation to Congress. In a hotly contested election year, our members stepped up to volunteer and vote for candidates

who respect our profession and share our commitment to making sure students have well-funded schools and a well-rounded education. These winning candidates also know that students are more successful when their communities are strong and safe, and they are advocates for pro-family, pro-union policies. While it will be days or longer before we know the full outcome of the election nationwide, we are proud that New Jersey is once again sending a solid majority of progressive, pro-student advocates to Washington, DC."



Assemblywoman Linda Carter, Vice-chair Assembly Higher Ed Committee (right) tells an amusing story to Senator Vincent Polistina, Senate Higher Ed Committee member (left) and NJEA GR Lobbyist Fran Pfeffer (center) at the 2022 NJEA Higher Education Luncheon in Atlantic City.

Building Now & for the Future

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market value to 80%. We did not get full release-time, but every officer now receives partial release-time. This was lower than what we proposed, but 100% more than our union ever had before. We succeeded in winning a number of other proposed items as well, such as: greater eligibility (i.e., reduction in requirements and time) for advancement in all ranks and increased compensation, placing greater emphasis on teaching excellence; greater flexibility for faculty to hold office hours remotely; a new and extensive agreement that limits the job description of academic coordinators and significantly increases their compensation. We also established formal democratic procedures for the election of coordinators that ensures greater equity and fairness among faculty colleagues, and we increased compensation for minor, moderate, and major course revisions, and new course creation.

Without a doubt, our ideals and vision of who we are and should be and the

dignity of our work greatly shaped the success of our compromises. They shaped our consciousness as an organization and allowed us to imagine moving and making fluid what were previously perceived as immovable, concrete social and economic structures.

Our unions make a difference. Even if "we do not make things as we please," we can play an active, creative, and dynamic part in shaping and altering some aspect of our world for the better. Our mission empowers our members, improves their work life and their families' lives, as well as those of our students, institutions, and community. We not only dismantle policies, structures, and practices we consider unfair and oppressive, but also build for the future by creating and defending structures and policies of greater justice and academic integrity that will hopefully live on past us. One thing is for sure, they would not exist at all without us.

If you would like to submit an article for the Spring 2023 issue of the *HE News*, submission deadline is February 1, 2023 to reg29_Higher_Ed@njea.org

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We Make Change Happen by Steve Beatty NJEA VP

New Jersey’s community colleges are among the most successful institutions in our state. All those who walk through the halls of our community colleges know the value of attending one of these best-in-the-nation schools. These affordable, community-based institutions are the foundation that thousands of young people prepare to begin their adult lives. These graduates’ career and personal success are the direct result of the time, energy, and passion we pour into our profession as the hardworking faculty and staff.



The NJEA members who dedicate their careers to helping young people at community colleges are only able to do what they do because of strong local unions. Our unions improve New Jersey’s higher education institutions; it’s our efforts that make these colleges great places to learn and work. The never-wavering academic integrity of our professors inspires young minds; and the tireless commitment to excellence of all our building custodians, secretaries, and every educational support professional (ESP) helps keep our schools safe, sanitary, and functioning.

Our union sisters and brothers can do their work because our unions protect our profession. Our unions and the power we hold when we stand together ensure our members earn living wages and have quality, affordable healthcare. Our unions negotiate fair contracts and establish sufficient working conditions. Our unions protect us when bad actors wish to do us harm. Our activism will keep expanding our rights as we fight for the respect and dignity that we deserve as educators.

Of course, our unions do not operate in vacuums. We are our unions. Each of us plays a critical, irreplaceable role in our unions’ work. Only together can we uphold the principles we believe in as educators. Only when we stand together can we move forward. We must continue to

build our collective power by ensuring our unions remain strong. This means, first and foremost, we must ensure all potential members join! Whether through an informal conversation or a coordinated building blitz, the work of strengthening our union muscle is in all of us. We all must work together in our own ways to push the pendulum of progress forward.

This year, after countless conversations, meetings, and hours spent working with one another, we’re beginning to see and feel the fruits of our labor. Because of our unrelenting desire to improve our colleges, the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) began and continues to work with us. Commissioner Brian Bridges now understands how valuable our insights and voices are to keeping our community colleges the best in the nation. And as a testament to this, he’s tentatively agreed to come to our NJEA Higher Education Conference this spring. This isn’t happening by chance. This tangible change is a result of the work we’ve put in to make intentional changes – and we’re only just beginning.

So as the new year approaches, please remember you have power and a place in this union. We are stronger because of you, and we are strong together.

**SAVE
THE
DATE**

2023

March 17-19 NEA Higher Ed Conference
San Jose, California

2023

April 14-16 NJEA Higher Ed Conference &
Collective Bargaining Summit

April 14 Keynote Speaker: Jane McAlevey – Organizer, Author, Scholar