

# First Principles

## A Commonsense Agenda for Higher Education

### American Federation of Teachers

#### Introduction

Most Americans care deeply about the availability, and quality of higher education, and they care about the same things - after all, we have built our lives around teaching and scholarship.

That's why we think it's time for us to stand up - before elected officials, before our students, before the citizens who pay taxes and tuition - and talk plainly about first principles: what we stand for in education, what we will fight for, what is going well and what we must change.

#### First, the good news...

There's a lot to be proud of. America is home to the finest colleges and universities in the world. We offer a variety of education and training programs at community colleges, four-year colleges and universities that is unique in human history. Since the second world war, government at all levels has provided billions of dollars to help students pay for their education and launched millions of citizens on the road to success. Our university-based research is the world leader.

#### But the news isn't all good...

*The basic right to an affordable education is eroded daily by cuts in government support and rising tuition.* Real or manufactured budget crunches at the state and local level are terminating important programs and cutting necessary jobs, while money for the classroom, the library and direct student services is losing out to rising administrative costs.

*Far too many students are coming to college unprepared to handle college-level work.* To remedy this, public colleges have developed extensive and costly remedial programs. Many students succeed in these programs but others do not; college retention rates are too low, as poorly prepared students find it hard to persist and succeed in their education. Colleges and universities must work with the schools and become full partners in reform. And concern for standards cannot stop there. Community colleges, four-year colleges and universities must make sure that their own teaching and academic standards are first-rate and that the preparedness of their graduates is unquestioned.

*There is a real danger of shortchanging educational quality as colleges rush to offer video or computer-based college courses.* The Internet, video, computer courses and e-mail are important tools professors can use to enhance education. "Distance learning" courses delivered by video or computer can enable colleges to reach new at-home "markets" and cut costs. But distance-based courses vary greatly in quality and work better for some students than others - for example, they

are too isolating for many students. Decisions about technology should be based on what helps students most in the long run, not on what looks easiest and cheapest.

*Campuses across the nation face the crisis of the vanishing professor:* Too many permanent faculty are being replaced with temporary or part-time faculty. Part-time and temporary faculty often teach with distinction, but a quality college must have a corps of full-time permanent tenured faculty who are in charge of the academic program and teaching most of it.

America's higher education system, then, is strong but also faces serious challenges. Public officials, boards of trustees, administrators, faculty, librarians, staff and students should stop pointing fingers and start working together to strengthen education.

In order to get that process started, we offer here a set of “first principles” that can be used to judge whether students are getting the college education they need and deserve. For our part, we pledge to keep these principles front and center as we go about our daily work and participate in policy debates about education. We hope these principles will also serve as a focus for organizing public support to maintain and strengthen the world's best system of higher education.

## **AFT First Principles**

The Public deserves ...

Opportunity

Quality

Accountability

..... from higher education and from college faculty.

### **Opportunity**

**All citizens have a right to a high-quality education that carries them as far as their ambitions, talents and hard work will permit.** Access to postsecondary education is a central part of this right.

**Public higher education should be affordable for everyone.** No one should be forced to give up on college for financial reasons, or take on an unmanageable debt to attend a public college and university in his or her own state. When the real problem is lack of public funding, faculty will resist attempts to link salary gains and needed improvements at our campuses with tuition increases.

**Students should have a broad variety of choices for educational advancement after high school and throughout their lives,** from technical education to an associate or bachelor's degree, from graduate study to lifelong learning.

**Required courses should be readily available.** No one should have to attend college extra time and incur extra costs because required courses or learning resources are unavailable.

**Students must be given access to the technology tools and skills they need in today's information age.** It is unacceptable to create classes of “have” and “have-not” colleges when it comes to training in technology.

## Quality

**Every student has a right to expect high-quality teaching by well-educated and prepared faculty in every course.** We repeat: *A quality college must have a corps of full-time, permanent, tenured faculty in charge of the academic curriculum and teaching most of it.* Courses should be taught only by highly qualified people - whether full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary - who are paid a professional salary and included in academic processes. College administration should support training in effective teaching for new faculty, mentoring of junior faculty by senior faculty, and continuing professional development opportunities for all faculty.

**Research, scholarship and creative activity are essential to the success of American higher education.** For ideas to flow between students and teachers, and reach society at large, knowledge must be continually *expanded* as well as *transmitted*. Colleges and universities differ greatly in their research activity, but good teaching *always* draws on new scholarship, and vice versa. Scholarly and creative activity is the engine that keeps America on top in commerce, medicine, science and technology. It enriches our culture and generates breakthroughs in every walk of life.

**Students must be held to high standards of achievement.** Today, too many students are coming to college unprepared to handle college-level work. Colleges and universities have established hundreds of programs to bring students up to par, but the *real* solution is to raise public school students' achievement levels in the first place. Higher education must become a full partner in K-12 reform, working closely with the schools to raise high school curriculum, graduation and college entry standards. In addition, the college's own program of study must be coherent and challenging, with high grading standards. A certificate or degree from an occupational or academic program should always be a mark of achievement and readiness to assume new responsibility. Faculty should be supported in putting standards first by college administrators, state approval agencies and college accreditation agencies.

**Faculty must make themselves personally available to students for advice and guidance.** Students need opportunities to talk to their professors and advisors about their

plans and ambitions, as well as their coursework and research. Technology should not be allowed to turn professors into just faces on a screen or names on a computer. Faculty should not be plagued with unreasonable teaching loads, concerns over job security, and insufficient time or office space for advisement.

**The classroom and scholarly activity must be kept free of outside pressures.** For higher education to work, students *and* faculty must be confident that college is a safe place to test their creativity and analyze the conventional wisdom. Students must understand that they will not be punished for expressing unorthodox or controversial ideas and that their teachers, within professional bounds, are also able to think and speak freely. A good tenure system reinforces this by assuring that professors cannot be fired without due process. Outside pressures to follow a ideology, or to pursue or avoid particular lines of research, hurt the educational process.

**The vast majority of campus resources should be directed, not to top-heavy administration, but to the classroom and activities that support student success.** This is not just a matter of paying teachers and researchers and buying supplies. It is equally important to provide adequate support to the front-line staff who, among other things, see that students are registered properly, take the right courses and receive financial aid, as well as the specialists who operate college libraries, communication systems and laboratories.

**Supporting student success means keeping the physical plant on campus in safe and working order.** It is hard to teach, hard to learn and hard to provide support services in buildings that are hazardous or laboratories that don't work.

## **Accountability**

**Taxpayer - supported colleges and universities have an obligation to explain to the public how they operate, how they measure success and how well they do in achieving their goals.** Some important elements of success cannot be reduced to numbers and the definition of achievement will differ from college to college. But factors such as student success in getting jobs or moving on to further education, student performance on advanced tests and the contributions of our institutions and students to the local economy are legitimate to consider.

**Faculty should be held accountable for their role in furthering institutional quality.** Thus, as stated earlier, we should expect faculty to be well-educated and up to date in their subject matter. They should be prepared to conduct effective classes and, as it relates to their job, to pursue quality research or creative activity and to take an active part in institutional governance. Faculty members should be personally available to students and promote free academic inquiry. Faculty should be receptive to new ideas and to professional development opportunities. All of these can be accommodated within a strong tenure system: one that includes evaluation by peers and students, rewards for success' incentives for improvement and help in overcoming deficiencies.

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