

KEYNOTE
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UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS
of the
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Celebrating UUP's 25th Anniversary
May 8, 1998

Good evening. It's a pleasure to participate in this wonderful event. I congratulate you on reaching this goal, and on doing so in such fine form. I just want you to know how very proud AFT is to have UUP as an affiliate. Yes, you are the *largest* higher education union in America. But more to the point, you're one of the most *successful* higher education unions in the country.

I know how difficult that was in the last go round. Bill Scheuerman kept me in close touch during the long and incredibly arduous struggle that led to your last contract. I've been around the world of negotiations a long time and I want you to know that UUP and its leadership showed a level of guts, determination and creativity in getting that agreement that will be a national model of what a strong, well-led union can do under the most difficult circumstances. Not only was this union able to bring home a good contract financially, but you managed to buck the attack on tenure and the privatization steamroller. You were able to build your political operation dramatically, develop impressive coalitions--and, bucking another national trend, you even managed to win money to hire new full-time faculty. I'm sure you're proud of all that.

To get all that done, you are fortunate to have such strong leadership at the top. As an AFT vice president, as a member of the AFT executive council, Bill is one of the union's top three advisors on higher education policy and activities. The other two AFT vice presidents for higher education--Irwin Polishook and Norm Swenson--are also here tonight. The truth is that AFT's policies which promote strong, gifted, experienced leadership like this are important in putting us in a strong position as we contemplate unity with the NEA.

So I think there is plenty to celebrate tonight. At the same time, we all know that there is plenty to be concerned about, plenty of concern for those who care about a strong and affordable public higher education system.

At the present moment, almost everything about the American college and university system seems to be open to question. The practices and policies that direct our institutions of higher learning, the ideals that underpin them—all are being challenged.

This is ironic. After all, we have many, many reasons to be extremely proud of our higher education system and grateful to it. Our colleges and universities are admired all over the world—and deservedly so. University-based research is

fundamental to this country's economic growth, and it continues to improve our quality of life. SUNY, of course, is home to world-class research by some of the most gifted scholars in the country. On an individual basis, a college education is still seen by most people—and correctly so—as the best road to a financially secure, professional future.

Yet, this excellent higher education system is also a higher education system in deep and serious trouble. There are many reasons for this. Social change contributes to the challenges faced by higher education. So does technological change. But I think that the most obvious reason is the political climate that we're living in now, in which the center hasn't held and politics have moved to the right.

Basic questions are being raised about spending the taxpayer's money on public services that almost everyone used to believe are of fundamental importance to the country. Extremists who frankly want to dismantle government altogether have tremendous influence in the air waves and many pundits taking up their causes—people who are proposing vouchers, for example, for K-12 education, who really want to see public education totally weakened, if not destroyed.

It's no surprise in that kind of an atmosphere that public higher education is facing challenges that could alter its character and, indeed, could really destroy it as we know it. Mind you: there is nothing wrong whatsoever with being more efficient and saving money. We are always and properly responsible for doing that. But this single-minded preoccupation with saving government money has become a very negative engine of change.

I'm afraid, too, that the perception of what education is and why it is valuable has undergone an alteration—and a coarsening. Instead of educating the whole person, intellectually and morally as well as professionally, we now see a nearly exclusive focus on preparing students to earn a living. This limits the students and, I believe, robs our society of people who can think beyond their own narrow area of expertise—or who care beyond the circle of their immediate lives.

One basic challenge, as always, is money. Public colleges and universities depend on public funding, of course, and state funding per full-time student at public institutions declined substantially between 1980 and 1996, even after adjusting for inflation. Though salaries went up a little this year and funding has apparently recovered a little in some states, the overall picture is still not good.

I don't need to tell you what this has meant. Fighting for every penny to improve, or even maintain, salaries and benefits. Too little money to hire the proper number of full-time faculty members, coupled with a huge increase in part-timers, who usually face terrible pay and working conditions. But something even worse is happening as a result of the diminished funding for higher education: a reneging on our country's commitment to offer a college education to all who can benefit from it, regardless of their ability to pay.

Schools are passing on more and more of the cost of education to students and their families. Between 1980 and 1994, tuition at public four-year institutions rose 234 percent, more than three times the rate of inflation. Some families can afford the rising prices. But many other families have to face some unacceptable alternatives: Do they find a way to borrow? Do they ask their children to go deeply into debt before the kids even get started on their first real job? Or do they just resign themselves to the possibility that their children won't get a college education?

The problem has even more meaning when we look at the educational attainment of minorities. For example, the high school graduation rate of African American students is still 7 percent below whites; the Hispanic high school graduation rate is fully 23 percent below whites. The percentage of 14 to 24 year olds who have attended some college is more than 10 percent lower among African Americans than whites and 12½ percent lower among Hispanics. Today's trends in funding—or, rather, de-funding—public higher education can not help but threaten access for all students, but especially minorities.

I find this more disturbing than I can tell you: Higher education meant everything to me, as did my entire public school education, and as I know it did to many of you. As most of you probably know, I grew up poor in Coney Island and would not be here today but for the free, and excellent, education I got at Brooklyn College. In my classes there, I was introduced to the principles of philosophy and civics; I was introduced to authors whose work influenced and shaped my life. I discovered that it's okay to think and express contrarian thoughts, to debate ideas with others, and to push for my point of view. College was the cauldron in those days for me, it was a cauldron in which was shaped my sense of responsibility to the planet and my fellow human beings. I became an activist at Brooklyn College—and I also learned the sheer joy of sitting back and enjoying great books and great music. But the golden opportunity that I and so many like me benefited from is being threatened. So one aspect of our fight is to buck this trend, so that people who can't afford college get the same chance as those whose parents can lay out the money.

Another source of concern is the explosion of educational technology, particularly the move to distance learning on so many campuses. I, for one, do not want to be in the position of rejecting distance learning out of hand. Computer and video coursework offers exciting prospects for breaking the bounds of time and place, and for allowing students to draw on a broader pool of scholars and scholarship. But it is also clear that our unions need to be in there negotiating hard on technology, as I know you are, in order to make sure that education, not cost-cutting, drives policy; that faculty control is maintained; that fraud and abuse is avoided; and that the precious value of interchange among students and teachers is not lost.

But if we all feel apprehensive about money, about access, about issues surrounding the rise of part-timers and technology, I know you join me in feeling outraged about the never-ending attacks on faculty autonomy that are currently going on. New York, unfortunately, has been a leader in suffering political assaults from high

places, but, thanks to our efforts individually and through NYSUT, we have also done better than many other states in surviving those assaults.

Let me spend a moment on the attack on tenure, which particularly disturbs me. It's one we are fighting tooth and nail at the national level. One of the great students of tenure, Professor Matthew Finkin from the University of Illinois, described today's attacks on tenure as nothing less than a mugging.

Here's one aspect of that mugging. Last year at the AFT national higher education conference, Bill Scheuerman debated a Harvard professor named Richard Chait, who has become the leading opponent of tenure in the academy. Chait began by intoning that, quote--one size should no longer fit all--unquote, when it comes to tenure. Clever phrase. But when you really think about it, I'd like to know which faculty member, which institution exactly, does academic freedom and due process *not* fit? The only possible result of this mindset would be to leave faculty more uncertain in their position and therefore more subject to pressure in what they are willing to say and do, or *not* say and not do.

Another argument tenure opponents like to make, one which really upsets me, is the idea that professors should get to decide between tenure or a higher salary. But we must be clear here; tenure is not simply an individual property right. We have tenure to assure freedom of thought in the academy and *no one* should have the right to bargain that away for him or herself or anyone else.

Bill Scheuerman recently cut through a lot of the bull in an article that appeared in NEA's academic journal. Bill wrote, "Will institutions entice people with lucrative offers to give up tenure only to dump them later on for cheaper labor? So instead of 30 year old Ph.Ds driving cabs, we'll have 50 year old Ph.Ds driving hacks." Perfect.

A natural outgrowth of the attack on faculty is the all-out attack we see on faculty unions. In fact, all of organized labor faces this kind of threat. The latest and most awful incarnation is a referendum in California, the so-called Paycheck Protection Initiative. If that passes in June, unions will have to get the written permission of *each member* each year to use his or her dues for political purposes. The State of Washington has already enacted a variant of that, reducing union contributions up to 80% in some cases, and 28 states are considering proposals to do the same. The ultimate aim of the sponsors, of course, is to muzzle the voice of the worker in the political process—and we're in a fight of our lives over this issue, working with all the rest of labor and with the NEA and we have to win that referendum in June.

The attacks on the members of our higher education unions have a clear aim in mind. They are an attempt to de-professionalize college teaching, and they sound very familiar to those of us who have fought in the K-12 wars. But let me be very frank with you and say that there's another similarity. Quality problems made K-12 vulnerable to attack and the same is true with higher education.

When the public reads story after story about college students taking all kinds of remedial courses, it doesn't sit well. People don't like to think that students are getting their high school education at taxpayer expense in institutions of higher education. They don't like the low standards in K-12 education that we're fighting to do something about. And they feel that they are being taken advantage of when they read stories about grade inflation, high dropout rates, and dumbed-down curriculums, whether its in K-12 or higher ed.

The imbalance between rewards for teaching and research is not a right wing fantasy; it's often a reality, one that students and their families do not like. And frankly, I've heard little but criticism about the quality of teacher education from our K-12 leaders and new teachers. All of which adds up to lots of problems all around. Quality problems I don't have to spell out for this audience.

Some of these criticisms may be misplaced, but it's essential to be honest about the ones that stick. With so many unprepared students coming to higher education's door—especially in the community colleges—too many classes are being conducted at a high school, or even a middle school level. Too many students *aren't* making it. And it would be foolish to argue that this has no impact on the content of courses and grading. The K-12 education standards clearly need to be raised.

"Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" isn't a helpful discussion, in my opinion. K-12 educators and higher education simply need to work together to strengthen the high school curriculum and raise graduation standards and to create tougher admissions standards all around.

As you are well aware, this will not be an easy lift. To the degree that we succeed, some people will criticize us for being elitist. But when we settle for giving college students—or K-12 students—a substandard education, we are cheating them—and we are contributing to the demise of our institutions. Not our fault, but we've got to be in there, as so many of us are, fighting it. Besides, kids will rise to the challenge. We have seen this over and over again. They want more rigorous courses—when they are required to take more rigorous courses, they do well at them, and do better as they go forward.

So, what do we need to do in the face of all these challenges? Let me start with two things you as faculty and professional staff can *not* do. You cannot ignore the political arena because you don't like it; you can't even leave it to your own leadership. You have to be out there yourselves if you want your ideas to prevail. Second, you cannot let yourself get fooled into defeatism by the people who tell us that the disaggregation of higher education is a force of nature--inevitable as the sunrise, impossible to stop as the tides.

The truth is that we're at a point where higher education is in a period of flux. Many things are to be decided. Nothing is set in stone. We still have the chance

not merely to fight things that we know are wrong but also to shape the new university according to our ideals and dreams.

In order to do that, of course, you need to know--and the public needs to know--what your ideals and dreams *are*. That's where AFT's First Principles campaign comes in. The idea behind First Principles is that it is a lot easier to win in negotiations and the legislature if you—and the people whose support you need—have a clear understanding of who you are and what you stand for, and therefore, why you take the positions you do.

I think the First Principles statement does that very well, boiling down our program into three overarching ideas: opportunity, quality and accountability. I'm pleased to say the program is off to a great start. I know you adopted the statement at your last delegate assembly and your sister unions around the country are doing the same. But we all need to remember that we have to do much more than adopt a statement and publicize it. For the campaign to succeed, we have to embody what we say by working to move our students and institutions forward. For my part, I want you to know that the national office will give this campaign prominence and support. I urge you to continually build new activities around the principles.

Our union, then, moves into the 21st century with a set of principles and a commitment to improve education. But having principles and commitment does not guarantee prevailing in the political arena. How do we work up the tremendous strength we will need to move our agenda forward?

Luckily, we start with assets. You are extremely fortunate--as I know from my many years at UFT--to have NYSUT. NYSUT is probably the best example in the country of how much can be accomplished for union members when financial and political strength, backed by strong leadership, is amassed at the state level. You also have the support, I'm happy to say, of a strong and healthy national union. Our political, legislative and higher education operations are extremely effective and we have influence far beyond our numbers.

But we need more. One thing we need to do is grow. And we are going to grow whether or not AFT and NEA achieve merger. But think of the possibilities if the merger goes through. A unified organization would be the largest union in America with 3.2 million members--which means 3,000 in every Congressional district in the country. Our greater power is likely, in turn, to attract new institutions into the fold, to encourage faculty in unorganized institutions to try to unionize. We'd also have more clout when we pushed for better collective bargaining laws, and we'd be in a better position to get legislation passed would reverse the absurd Yeshiva decision, which continues to deny the right to organize to faculty at most private colleges and universities.

We'd be able to expand upon our leadership in organizing part-time college faculty and teaching assistants. And outside higher education, whether or not we achieve merger, we will work hard to bring more teachers, school personnel, nurses and health

professionals and government workers into the union, increasing our finances and our ability to influence policy.

So, as we look to the next century, there is no shortage of disturbing trends and wrongheaded ideas, but there is also a prospect for growth in higher education unionism and with it, growing power to advance our quality education agenda. We could use that power to maintain strong academic institutions. We could use it to move educational considerations front and center in policymaking. We could use it to ensure that the wages and working conditions of college faculty continue to attract the best people into academic life.

I don't know if we can carry all our points or win everywhere. I only know we're tenacious and tough and won't stop trying. I personally will not stop trying to make sure that in the America of the future, our children and grandchildren will continue to be able to explore and participate in the expansion of knowledge and to live in a society where democracy and civility are the norm, because our citizens are well educated. Thank you.

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