Welcome

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National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions

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Welcome

Richard Boris
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This inaugural edition of Collective Bargaining in the Academy (CBA) begins a new and long overdue platform for research and comprehensive discourse about labor relations in American higher education. The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions is pleased to have assisted with the birth of this journal, a project envisaged seven years ago when we began to re-stabilize the National Center. The CBA’s voices will be many, including those of academic researchers, university administrators, and union leaders. In short, the CBA seeks a true ecumenicalism of research and opinion as well as vigorous debate within its digital covers.

Although the editorial direction of the CBA is rigorously independent, its character and preoccupations are guided by those of the National Center. During the previous seven years, the National Center’s work has situated the study and analysis of labor relations within the larger picture of American academic life. The health of collective bargaining, measured by the quality of its contracts, fundamentally depends on the prosperity of the American system of higher education. We all know that the academy is now at a critical juncture facing profound public policy questions about its funding, resources and, indeed, its role in American life.

Public institutions of higher education – with over 500 bargaining units – have not been dealt a fair hand nationally, in our states, or locally. Historically this was not always the case.
Our higher education institutions, from the land grant era through the first G.I. Bill and during the years of American national prosperity and international leadership, were widely acknowledged as a critical seedbed for intellectual capital, for scientific and technical discovery as well as, in the humanities and arts, for our national culture. The prosperity of higher education and American national destiny were inseparable.

Today that vision has been lost. Although our public academic institutions collectively comprise a major national industry and the organized academic workforce constitutes one of the largest unionized labor cohorts, numerical size has not yielded historically positive results. In the competition for public monies, in good times and bad, public universities, colleges, and community colleges fare badly. But this resource deficit, if we were to face the problem honestly, is not fundamentally about developing more successful political lobbying techniques and strategies although, to be sure, state and local support are critical to our universities. More profoundly, the deficit results from our inability to develop an authoritative national voice or find a place, alongside other major “interests,” such as health care and K-12, at the national table. The CBA could serve as an incubator of a national joint management/labor strategy to restart and sustain a national conversation about the American academy and our national interest.

Part-time faculty now teach more than half of the courses at many of our universities, colleges, and community colleges. Faced with years of declining governmental assistance and imposed restrictions on inability to covering shortfalls with major tuition increases, academic institutions have been forced to balance their books by reducing costs for teaching and other vital areas, such as capital improvements. In too many cases, this has resulted in an over-reliance on part-time and non-tenured faculty and dangerous levels of deferred maintenance. The challenge
presented by this system – to both full-time and contingent faculty, to academic culture, to the unions concerning representation – is a topic worthy of CBA consideration. But we can’t stop there. United management/labor advocacy for a more rational academic labor policy must find a voice in these pages.

During the last seven years at National Center meetings, serious and frank management/labor conversations have taken place. Until now these exchanges have been limited to the 350 attendees at our annual conference. The CBA will extend this dialogue to a wider audience. Campus discussions and negotiations will benefit from what is written here. And the CBA will set a tone worth emulating. More is hoped for, however. There must be a widening acknowledgement that management and labor together will look beyond their campuses to develop a compelling national agenda for American higher education. Only then can we negotiate about more than scraps and leftovers and establish an academic labor system worthy of our academic traditions.