"Only Connect"
Sandra Feldman, President
American Federation of Teachers
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Let me start by thanking you for inviting me here to speak at your annual conference. Though I haven't had a direct relationship with you, I know from my predecessor, Al Shanker, and from my higher education colleagues at AFT, that over the years, AAUP has made an invaluable contribution to the ideals and professional standards of higher education in the United States. The very language we use to talk about academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance is largely AAUP's creation. The "redbook" is the unquestioned canon of the profession.

AFT, I'm pleased to say, also plays an important role in higher education. We represent over 100,000 higher education faculty and professional staff, more than any other union. We're

proud of the way in which we have used that strength in collective bargaining and in the public arena to advance professionalism and high academic standards as well as the financial needs of our members. AFT and AAUP have worked together on many of these issues, particularly in recent years, and we have joint affiliates on a number of major campuses. I feel sure we'll continue this fruitful collaboration on into the future.

With that in mind, and because I know you must be thinking about it, I want to say a few words about the possible merger between the AFT and the NEA. As you know, negotiating teams from both organizations have been talking about a merger for a number of years. We now have agreed on a proposed statement of unity, and the leadership bodies of both unions have endorsed the statement.

In July, we take another big step: submitting the statement of unity to the delegates at our national conventions. I can't predict the outcome of those votes, but even if merger fails, a strong relationship has been built, and we expect the wars of the past to be over. Whether as a unified union or not, we will work as a team on big issues, and I believe that unity will happen, and soon.

If the principles are approved this summer, AFT and NEA representatives will begin drafting a constitution for the new organization, which would be adopted by both conventions either in 1999 or 2000, and the first unified convention would take place shortly after the year 2000. The new organization would be affiliated with the AFL-CIO and include representative bodies for each of our constituencies—K-12, higher education, paraprofessionals, and classified employees, nurses and health professionals, and public employees.

In my view, a united teacher organization offers tremendous promise for a revitalized labor movement and for all of us who care about the future of education and the teaching profession. The new union--it does not yet have a name--would be the largest in America, with 3.2 million members—in the neighborhood of 3,000 members in every Congressional district in the country. I believe that the strength of this organization would encourage faculty at institutions where there are currently no unions to become part of the labor movement. And there's no question that the new organization would allow us to do much more for our members and our students.

We'd be in a better position to elect pro-education public officials and to shape and influence the debate on education at every level. We'd have more clout when we pushed for better collective bargaining laws, and we'd certainly have a better

chance of getting legislation passed reversing the Yeshiva decision.

I hope that the members of AAUP see the great potential in what we're trying to build. Down the road, our own two organizations may want to talk about moving closer together, and I personally would like to see that. But let me state plainly that I fully understand – and respect – AAUP's special position in the academy and I assure you that if merger comes to pass, the leadership's first responsibility will be to integrate AFT and NEA – and that's a plenty big enough job for anybody.

I know some people are asking why AFT and NEA are expending so much time and energy in an effort to achieve this unity. They wonder why union leaders, at all levels, are willing to sacrifice some of their own power and influence to create a new union. One reason, obviously, is because we know that we will

need the strength merger can bring to combat the serious threats that education will face in the next several years. But even more importantly, and frankly – personally, to me -- merger will help us improve education; enable us to combine our resources and expertise to help our members do a better job for our students. That's our fervent hope.

Now, let me get to the title of my talk, "Only Connect."

The title comes, of course, from the epigraph to E.M. Forster's novel, *Howard's End.* Forster is alluding to the fact that his characters--indeed most human beings--don't perceive the connections that link them to other people and to events beyond their immediate sphere. And their failure to see and comprehend these connections often costs them dearly. The applicability of Forster's point to our two educational communities-- people in K-

12 and higher education—is, sadly, an appropriate one. Because we -- present company excepted, no doubt -- consistently do not see that K-12 education and higher education, though discrete, are also connected by our responsibility for the students we serve; that we face similar threats --- and that, ultimately, we are linked in success and in failure.

This omission of connection is understandable. Everyone tends to think and talk about K-12 and higher education as though they occupy totally different worlds. And to some extent they do. There are very real differences in the way teaching and learning are organized and experienced in K-12 schools; and in colleges and universities. But we serve the same students – and, after all, we share the same fundamental values. So, it's too bad that we so seldom acknowledge our connectedness or sit down

together to deal with our shared problems. I'd like to say a little about that today.

First, though, I want to make a few observations about a striking paradox concerning American higher education. On the one hand, our college and university system is admired all over the world--and deservedly so. But, on the other, as I don't need to tell you, it is a system under attack. And it is being threatened by changes that could alter it beyond recognition.

What would you put at the head of your list of threats? As a leader of a union with higher education locals, I have a good idea about some top candidates.

One of the big ones--for higher education as for K-12--is financial, because we are in a political climate of cost-cutting.

As politics have moved to the right, even public services that used to be considered fundamental are being questioned. Will Social Security as we know it survive in this climate? Medicare? We can't be sure. Added to a general spirit of meanness, are the pressures from the extremists who frankly want to dismantle government. It's really no surprise that K-12 is threatened by vouchers, and public funding for colleges and universities is increasingly cut back.

Advocates of higher education, particularly public higher education, have to fight for every penny. And the financial crunch has led to a major erosion of our country's commitment to offer a college education to all who can benefit from it, regardless of their ability to pay.

Colleges 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 will have to defer or even forgo a college education?

The problem becomes even more acute when we look at what it means for black and Latino youngsters. 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 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. 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--which, incidentally, is one of those institutions represented by both AFT and AAUP. 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.

I became an activist at Brooklyn College — and I also learned the sheer joy of sitting back and immersing myself in great books and great music. But the golden opportunity that I and so many like me benefited from is being threatened.

We are in danger of reneging on that quintessentially American promise to provide access to higher education for all students who have the talent, ambition, and willingness to work, regardless of their ability to pay. And, ironically, it is happening at a time when our country is enjoying enormous prosperity. If it happens, it will be a tragedy for the young people who are denied the opportunity to get what a college education can offer; and it will be a tragedy--and a shame-- for our society. I intend to do everything in my power to thwart that trend.

Another result of the drying up of money, as my higher education colleagues point out, is the tremendous growth in part-time faculty, coupled with the loss of full-time tenured faculty positions. Of course, part-timers have a legitimate role in higher education. They are usually highly qualified and dedicated

teachers, who make real sacrifices in order to continue college teaching--and make real contributions to the students they teach. At the same time, however, it's obvious that the level of growth we're seeing in part-time faculty has little to do with improving the quality of education. The overriding motivation is to save money and to take power away from the faculty, not to make education better. AFT is making some inroads here, by organizing part-timers, raising their salaries and benefits and negotiating some regularity, including caps, on their use in the university.

So there are many problems...and we're fighting for solutions...

But most troubling, in my view, is the general alteration and coarsening in our perception of what education is and why it is valuable. 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. Some students may think they want this; indeed, proponents of this change see it as a manifestation of a chic new consumer orientation in higher education. But an education narrowed like this limits students, and it 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.

And of course faculty and union leaders are nearly unanimous in their concern about the attacks on tenure, self-government, and faculty unions. These attempts to curtail the autonomy and academic freedom of college teachers using the pretense of hard-headed improvement are yet another way of diminishing institutions of higher education. For those of us who have fought to professionalize K-12 teaching, the freedom and

self-determination of college faculty have been something to envy and emulate, and the efforts to destroy them are unacceptable.

One of the great voices of AAUP, Professor Matthew Finkin from the University of Illinois, described today's attacks on tenure as nothing less than a mugging.

Frankly, these attacks can and should be seen in the context of the attacks being made on faculty unions; in fact on all of organized labor. So-called "paycheck protection," an attempt to muzzle union voice, was recently defeated in California. But it will come up again elsewhere. And it is related to attempts to muzzle faculty by withdrawing tenure. Dissenting voices are dangerous and unsettling to those who seek a more controlled and stratified society. But freedom of association, and voice, are the stuff of democracy, and we'll fight to keep them with all we've got.

So we are all facing tough challenges--not only to individual teachers and scholars but to the integrity and even the future of the institutions we represent. And the same is true of people in K-12. All of these challenges need to be vigorously contested--and we in the AFT, like you in AAUP, are doing that--by political action, and by working to inform citizens, who often know little about how education systems operate, about exactly what is being threatened.

But--and I want to speak frankly here- I think that the same educational quality problems that made K-12 vulnerable to attack are also endangering higher education. Facing these problems--and doing something about them-- is the real and the best answer to most of the threats I've been talking about.

I say this because ordinary citizens seem to have so little problem with the attacks on higher education that I've been

describing : They too often accept or even applaud financial cutbacks and the disappearance of tenure, and they are unmoved by the growth of part-time faculty members at the expense of full-timers. And I believe that people would not put up with serious threats to an institution in which they had real confidence. (NYC)

But 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, often at taxpayer expense, in institutions of higher education. They feel that they are being taken advantage of when they read stories about grade inflation in colleges, high dropout rates, and dumbed-down curriculums. And after a time, they even begin to believe that the stories about colleges as hotbeds of radicalism are true and that the caricatures of college

professors as lazy drones who have jobs for life are a good likeness.

Obviously many of these criticisms are ludicrous, and some are just plain wrong. But it's essential to be honest about the ones that stick. Now, this could lead to a lot of finger pointing and unproductive efforts to decide who is *really* to blame for poor student achievement. Obviously, the K-12 system doesn't do a good enough job of educating many of its graduates. But the higher education system that admits them to college anyway, isn't helping. And when teacher education graduates don't measure up, poor student achievement becomes a K-16 issue. We are joined at the hip, whether we want to be or not, and until we look honestly at our problems and move in tandem, we won't solve them.

Without a stronger more challenging high school curriculum and higher graduation standards, students will continue to come to college unprepared to do college work--and the result will be extensive and expensive remediation or classes that are dumbed down to accommodate student deficiencies. And unless we have teachers prepared to teach the more demanding curriculum and help students master it – not to mention seeing to it that all third graders can read – unless we do these things, we will fail.

High college admission standards help. Students need to know that they have to work hard and achieve in high school if they expect to be admitted to college. The standards need not be the same for every school--in fact they probably should not be--but they must be demanding enough so that students come to college ready to do *college* work at the institution they attend.

As you are well aware, this is not 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.

The good news is that people are already engaged in K-16 collaborations, and they are succeeding.

One example in New York City, the College Preparatory Initiative, (CPI) coordinates college admission with tougher standards. Under CPI, higher standards are being phased in at both the New York high schools and the City University of New York. The unions – the UFT and PSC -- took the lead in implementing this program, and early results are promising. High school students who want to be admitted to CUNY are taking tougher courses, and the grade averages of CUNY applicants

are rising--a nice example of how raising standards leads to higher achievement. And once in college, CPI students are earning more credits, achieving higher grade point averages, and are more likely to return to school after the first year. Over and over again, our students rise to the challenge. Nothing wrong with our kids.

Teacher preparation is also inextricably connected with student achievement, and yet one of the most common complaints I hear from teachers is about the irrelevancy of their teacher education programs to the real world of teaching. In Cincinnati, the school district, the teacher union, the business community, and a local university have sought to answer the usual complaints with a five-year program to prepare teachers. The extra year gives graduates a chance to get a more solid grounding in the material they will be teaching. They also get a

year's paid internship in a Cincinnati public school, where they are supervised and assisted by a team of excellent and experienced teachers so they get the practical guidance they need before they step into their own classrooms.

K-16 collaborations like these are just beginning to get off the ground. But there are already examples from all over the country, as well as a number of outstanding college and university-based programs that are helping public schools insure better achievement by providing them with research-based successful practices. New Standards, developed by Lauren Resnick and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh, and Success for All, Bob Slavin's work at Johns Hopkins, are just two examples.

So, I'm optimistic that people in K-12 and higher education are beginning to recognize that we are connected by common interests--and common problems. And that we must work together to preserve our institutions and to do the job we want to do for our students.

I hope you will make the effort to get your institutions involved in programs like CPI that make change in a systemic way. I hope you will find ways to get together with your colleagues in K-12 to learn from each other about how to best reach the students you have in common. I urge you to work with your colleagues in teacher education to make sure that new teachers have the best possible subject matter training. And I urge you to work with them to bring the best of K-12 pedagogy to the college classroom and to document the best of your own teaching and share it with your colleagues.

Yes, there is no shortage of disturbing trends and wrongheaded ideas. But we have the power and the capacity to do the best that can be done for our students, and achieving that, by working together, by connecting with each other, we will be able to set things on the right track, to make sure that accessible high quality education is available to every American who wants it. And, by doing that, to ensure 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 prevail. Thank you.

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