

## **What We Face Now: The 2012 Florida Legislative Session**

**For months, Florida politicians have been threatening to transform the structure of higher education and dramatically reduce the budget. The Governor has expressed his desire to convert public universities and colleges into “Texas style” business operations -- dissolving all missions, governance structures, and curriculum decisions that get in the way. He even has declared that we should stop funding subjects he says do not produce jobs -- like anthropology, for example.**

**He also has asked legislators to eliminate collective bargaining so jobs can be cut without resistance from faculty whose rights are otherwise protected by a contract. He has the support of last year’s legislative sponsors of bills to wipe out public employee unions who have vowed to bring those bills back again this year and to succeed in their efforts this time. (At this point, these bills are merely filed as “shell bills,” without text added.)**

**In the Senate, the incoming (2013) president said we should stop funding psychology and political science because students who graduate in these majors will not be prepared for jobs with this degree. Meanwhile, the current Senate president said tenure is worthless and could be eliminated to increase productivity.**

**As the 2012 session begins, the House speaker announced that 2012 is the year legislators will focus on accountability, reform, and cost savings in higher education. Faculty and students should be bracing for the worst.**

**Legislators have already been asking the questions that surfaced on January 12 in the House Education Committee hearings, where university presidents had been “invited” by the Committee chair to participate in a “dialogue”. In these hearings, university presidents, faculty, and other educators and officials will be called on to defend everything in the university and college budgets. What can be eliminated to save tax dollars? How can we run things more efficiently -- like a business? How can the curriculum be changed to fund only programs that produce jobs? What subjects can we phase out or scale down so we can shift money to jobs-producing STEM programs? Why not eliminate any subject that is offered at another institution in the area? How can we use on-line courses to replace faculty teaching classes? How can we increase class sizes to maximize access to the faculty? How little can we fund programs and still offer a degree that produces jobs upon graduation?**

**In other words, faculty face unparalleled threats to the nature of their professional lives. Faculty also face threats to what they can do to educate students for a developed and viable future after graduation. Yet as the 2012 Legislature opens, it is possible that elected**

**officials may be willing to listen and adapt to concerns raised by educators. The House speaker did call for a dialogue in the hearings and said he hopes for reforms that will work best for Florida, while nevertheless eliminating the duplication and waste he believes is rampant.**

**This means there are opportunities for faculty to change the conversation with legislators on what counts as quality, as we prepare for what could be a sea change in structure and funding. How can faculty affect the result? We can expand and intensify what we have already been doing successfully, namely, contacting legislators and giving them feedback on how plans under consideration affect students and hold the potential for driving away faculty.**

**We have a strong message to deliver when we contact legislators. We can point out that there is already a consensus among stakeholders in higher education -- faculty, administrators, and governance board members -- that Florida's economic future is tied to the creation of a knowledge-based economy. (Legislators know that we need to get beyond a recession-prone dependence on housing, tourism, and agriculture.) We are already expanding the existing STEM programs, and where possible, adding new ones -- with all deliberate speed. But we defeat the purpose of funding STEM programs if we take money from other parts of the higher education budget to do this. STEM programs require a heavy load of non-STEM courses to complete the degree and are already being heavily subsidized by programs in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Gutting the university curriculum to fund STEM programs is not the answer. If the Legislature takes this approach, Florida's higher education system will lose the best students at the same time that we lose talented faculty who will leave programs with a narrow, technical orientation. Join your colleagues in advocating for full funding!**

**Most important of all, we can ask our colleagues to join the union so we can defend our rights under contract. The threat of the loss of a faculty contract if a campus has less than 50% membership is real and imminent. The same cast of characters remains in power until November 2012, and our close victory in defeating anti-union bills last year has only made them more determined to wipe out union contracts in what may be their last chance to succeed.**

**We are building a strong faculty union that defends professional rights and advocates for academic excellence. Ask others to join us in our struggle to defend the integrity of the profession.**

**Tom Auxter, President**

**January 18, 2012**

**\*For references to sources on statements by Florida elected officials, visit [www.unitedfacultyofflorida.org](http://www.unitedfacultyofflorida.org) and click on "From the President."**