

KFT VOICE VOICE VOICE

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SHAPING A REORGANIZATION TO SAVE MEMBERS' JOBS



**James
Castiglione
PhD**

Most faculty and staff are aware that the number of high school graduates in the United States is peaking this year, then beginning a decadelong slide over which the number of graduates will decline by as much as 15%. Admissions offices refer to this as the “demographic cliff”. Clearly, the same number of colleges and universities pursuing a declining population of traditional students is going to put pressure on the financial stability of many universities.

Other national trends that are likely to negatively impact higher ed include:

- rising tuition costs;
- concerns over increasing student debt;
- changing workforce needs;
- growing public skepticism of the value of a college degree;
- and of course, declining state funding.

Exacerbating all of this is the very challenging national political climate in which we find ourselves. Early actions of the Trump administration include freezing funding for NIH and other grants to universities and moves to radically restructure or even eliminate the US Department of Education. All of the above-cited factors are likely to add to the on-going trend of college closures and mergers.

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Wetzel Re-Elected Statewide Union Secretary



Ana Wetzel

Bargaining to control rising health insurance costs and identifying issues affecting us in higher education governance are two issues KFT members can expect to hear more about in the coming year, according to Ana Wetzel. As an active union member, Wetzel serves on the KFT Executive Council and the statewide Council of NJ State College Locals (the College Council), comprising AFT education workers at Kean and 8 peer institutions.

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Shaping Reorganization

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AFT's Guiding Principles on Mergers

Our state federation – AFTNJ – organized a retreat in August to begin to develop a proactive approach to guide and influence a future system-wide reorganization here in New Jersey. Out of that retreat came several documents summarizing the discussions, from which comes the following list of AFT's Six Guiding Principles for Mergers:

- Union rights - Ensuring contract protection to protect the rights of all members—faculty, NTPs, faculty librarians, adjuncts, and professional staff. At the core of this is fighting to save members' jobs.
- Faculty role - All faculty, including nontenure-track and contingent faculty, have the professional competence and expertise to participate in guiding and protecting the educational mission of the institution.
- Curriculum front and center - Faculty, including nontenure-track and contingent, should be responsible for curriculum.
- Supporting students - Protecting students' learning experience and enabling students to complete studies or facilitate transfer.
- Centering the public good - Maintaining a broad set of curricular options for students and striving to ensure that these options are diverse and accessible to all students.
- Workplace solidarity - Utilizing the collective power of the community internal and external to the college/university.

Our statewide leadership at the College Council and AFTNJ will be guided by these principles as we seek to protect jobs and strengthen public higher education in New Jersey. Locally, KFT leadership will similarly be guided by these principles now that Kean University has been selected as the merger partner for New Jersey City University. Members should note that the Kean administration can still back out of the deal, but it is our expectation that it will proceed.

Member Feedback Requested

To assist our leadership team, both locally on the KU/NJCU merger, and statewide on a possible system-wide reorganization, our Union will be distributing an electronic survey to members to solicit your input and feedback on reorganization priorities and to help shape any plan that Union leadership would support. If you have difficulty in responding to the survey, please reach out to any member of the KFT Executive Council or email your feedback to the KFT office.

The timing of the NJCU merger announcement arrives at a challenging time, coming as it does in the era of:

- The “enrollment cliff,”
- State of New Jersey cuts in funding for higher education for next fiscal year,
- Trump administration cuts to NIH, NSF, and other research grants,
- Trump administration cuts to Pell Grants and student loan programs that our students rely on and which may lead to additional enrollment drops.

Nonetheless, should the University proceed, our Union leadership pledges to do everything it can to protect members, and to advocate for the needs of our students and the quality and integrity of the education that we provide them. We ask all members to remain vigilant and to report developments related to the merger to us as you become aware of them.

We believe that our members' experience and expertise serve as a tremendous resource for us and for the State and we urge your participation and involvement in this process so that all of us, working together, can ensure the best possible outcome for ourselves, our institutions, and the students that we serve.

We Told You So

The Predictable (& Predicted) Outcome of Elimination of State Oversight

In 1994, one of the first acts of the administration of Governor Christine Todd Whitman, working with the Republican-controlled NJ Legislature, was to eliminate the NJ Department of Higher Education, and with it, all State oversight of New Jersey's public colleges and universities. Our Union, while open to reasonable reform of the DHE, opposed this drastic move at the time, noting that spending billions of dollars on any governmental function without oversight and accountability was a recipe for disaster.

Oversight functions of the Department that disappeared with the DHE include:

- Vetting of nominees for Board of Trustees to ensure there was appropriate higher education experience and training among Trustees,
- vetting of top-level managerial hires,
- independent reviews of budgets and university finances,
- monitoring and approval of acquisition of institutional debt,
- monitoring and approval of academic program initiatives to ensure statewide coverage while avoiding wasteful redundancies.

In the absence of DHE oversight, individual Board of Trustees became "captured" by their administrations and/or local political concerns, neutering independence and accountability. Thus empowered, individual college and university administrations became focused on "empire-building", regardless of the needs of the State and without any statewide strategic planning. Spending sprees on new construction and projects not directly connected to classroom education were fueled by massive increases in debt-load, now no longer regulated by the DHE. Debt service payments were contingent on shaky projections of growth that have now turned into enrollment declines, leaving the institutions in financially vulnerable positions, all long predicted due to the absence of state oversight and accountability.

The situation at NJCU is now the most acute example of the dire consequences of the elimination of the DHE. Some estimates place NJCU's debt-load at \$315 million. Debt-service payments that were merely burdensome, are now catastrophic due to large enrollment declines. And the debt-service has crowded out other critical investments, leaving NJCU with more than \$50 million in deferred maintenance costs.

Finally, in what seems like one more indignity due to the elimination of oversight, the complicated process of a proposed merger between two of the state's largest public universities is not being guided by the expertise and best practices embedded in a statewide strategic plan. Rather, it is the politically appointed Board of NJCU alone - the very entity of fewer than ten members which failed to prevent the university from getting into an unsound fiscal position in the first place - that remains responsible for the process. Did I say "we told you so"?

James Castiglione, PhD



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Ana Wetzel

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Completing a first term as Secretary from 2023 to 2025, Wetzel was nominated without opposition and said she is looking forward to a productive second term on the Council's Executive Board.

Wetzel brings a wealth of higher education experience to her position as a Financial Aid Counselor, having worked at Kean since 2012 after working at Union County College. The Kean double graduate empathizes with her students as a first-generation college graduate. "I see their struggle and understand what they are really going through," she said.

Wetzel said it's important for everyone to get involved in the union. "Member participation is what makes our union stronger," she said. Working with members of all the schools throughout the state, Wetzel said she sees mostly similarities, "but each has different issues at different universities," Wetzel said. "Through College Council, we are all seeking to ensure fair working conditions and defend our institutions."

For more on College Council see <https://www.cnjscl.org>

AFT Defending Higher Education in 2025 Resources



Visit the **AFT Defending Higher Education** page for Do's and Don'ts for students and faculty if ICE authorities are on campus, 10 steps college campuses can take to support students, faculty and staff, how much the Department of Education funds New Jersey (spoiler alert: Estimated cuts to services supporting our continuing students: \$46.89 billion).

Sections of the page include current status of attacks on funding and research, DEI and immigration. These actions will have major implications for academic freedom, free speech, and university autonomy in American higher education. Colleges and universities are entering an extraordinarily difficult period, as many recent proposals aimed at restricting ideas on campus are now more likely to become law or policy.



Jasmine Jaywant: Professional Voice At Work

“If you feel strongly about something, being active in the union provides a forum where you can articulate your positive suggestions for constructive change and humane working conditions,” Jasmine Jaywant said. Accordingly Jaywant, a Financial Aid Counselor who is completing her fourth year working with students applying for loans, has joined the KFT Executive Council.

Jaywant has advocated for positive changes in the university community by suggesting a bereavement policy in bargaining. After the death of her father in her native India three years ago, Jaywant felt “shattered” and was shocked by the lack of bereavement leave. Out of the tragedy, she proposed such leave in bargaining and it would eventually be implemented into Kean policy, benefitting all workers.

During her time at Kean, Jaywant has witnessed colleagues work together in the union to address workplace hostility. She has witnessed classic bullying tactics such as members being criticized in meetings, work questions going unanswered or being personally ignored. Subsequently, Jaywant advises members to document everything, collaborate with colleagues in the department and stand up for each other in a professional manner. “I believe in the power of collective action and collective bargaining,” she said. “Otherwise your rights get trampled over.”

Job security for individuals and advocacy against group layoffs remains critical and Jaywant credits the union for saving jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. “It is pretty powerful to be able to protect jobs, when there were efforts to eliminate them,” she said. “If we didn’t have a strong union and a collaborative working relationship with the university and at state levels we wouldn’t have seen reinstatements.” Based on her experiences as a KFT member thus far, Jaywant said her “belief in the power of the union has ascended.”



Jasmine Jaywant

April 26: AFTNJ Legislative Conference

The AFT New Jersey Legislative Conference will be held Saturday, April 26, 2025 in Monroe. Attendees will hear from gubernatorial candidates a few months ahead of the primary election. We will ask them about their proposed platforms for public workers including pensions and the high cost of SHBP health insurance as well as what New Jersey will need to do to react to federal policy changes of the new federal administration.



To attend, go to the AFTNJ site www.aftnj.org or directly to <https://aftnj.org/2025-legislative-conference/>. AFT New Jersey is our statewide network of locals including College Council, AFT Rutgers locals, Community College locals and pre-kindergarten through 12 locals. To learn more, visit www.aftnj.org

Faculty and Staff Promotions

On behalf of the entire membership, I congratulate all of these colleagues receiving promotion and I ask them to join with the KFT Executive Council in advocating for increased promotional opportunities for our professional staff, librarian, lecturer and faculty colleagues. - KFT President James Castiglione

Academic Year 2024-2025

Full Professor

1. Mahmoud Affouf
2. Richard Conti
3. Verneda Hamm-Baugh
4. Jack Sargent
5. Heather Stokes-Huby
6. Evros Vassiliou
7. Gail Verdi

Associate Professor

1. Jacqueline Keil
2. Thomas Koc (with tenure)
3. Efe Kutuk (with tenure)
4. Qian Joyce Mao
5. Patrick McManimon
6. Gregory Shepherd
7. Brian Teasdale (Admin with Faculty rank)
8. Jung Ah Claire Yun (with tenure)

Academic Year 2025-2026

Full Professor

1. Louis Beaugris
2. Claire Mulry

Associate Professor

1. Denise Anderson
2. Victor Camacho (with tenure)
3. Gabriel Fuentes (with tenure)
4. Maria Denise Gemmellaro (with tenure)
5. Ipek Kocoglu (with tenure)
6. Matthew Niepielko (with tenure)
7. Edward Olsen (with tenure)
8. Pablo Pintado-Casas
9. Raza Rafique (with tenure)
10. Tin Shan Suen (with tenure)
11. Kung Kuen Tse
12. Jenna Tucker (with tenure)

Professional Staff Promotions

Effective January 1, 2024:

1. Daniel Flores-Caceres, Admissions
2. Dali Gao, Chemistry-Physics
3. Maria Ingelmo, College of Liberal Arts
4. Stephanie McCluney, General Education & Interdisciplinary Studies
5. Ellen Scavuzzo, Financial Aid
6. Chris Swenson, Athletics – Women's Swimming

Effective January 1, 2025:

1. Chrysten Colacicco, Educational Opportunity Fund Program
2. Norberto Mapoy, Department of Biological Sciences
3. David Salon, Fire Safety Grant Program
4. Zakeeyah Speight, Educational Opportunity Fund Program

Thank You Wanda Vazquez



Wanda
Vazquez

KFT Office Manager Wanda Vazquez announced her retirement in March. Vazquez started in 2015, bringing a keen fiscal eye, working with many of our KFT Committees and acting as a very effective liaison between our Local and our statewide union organizations, the College Council and AFTNJ.

“We want to give Wanda her due, and thank her for her decade of outstanding service to our Union and, in particular, to rank-and-file members,” said KFT President James Castiglione. “We hope all members will join with the KFT Executive Council in wishing Wanda a happy, healthy, and well-deserved retirement!”

Welcome Jeff Gomez



Jeff Gomez

This semester KFT welcomed Jeff Gomez as Office Manager. He has an Associate’s degree in History from Middlesex County College and a BA in History from Kean University, graduating Summa Cum Laude in 2022. He has served as an academic specialist in the History Department at Kean for the past several years, where he has handled many of the functions of an office administrator. We believe his familiarity with Kean is already showing itself to be a great asset in learning the ropes of his new position.

Q. What has your experience been at KU as a student and worker? My experience with Kean University, both as a student and an employee, has been eye-opening and mostly positive. As a transfer student, I entered an unfamiliar environment but quickly felt like I had found a place where I could express my educational interests and be supported by the faculty and staff, with whom I continue to work today. Working in the History department, I have consistently felt that the professors have supported me and that my work is appreciated. I have never felt undervalued.

Q. How have your studies shaped your understanding of organized labor and social justice movements? My educational background in History laid the foundation for learning about the struggles involved in organized labor and social justice. In the US, particularly, the concept of workplace representation and organized labor was, and in some cases still is, often attributed to a socialist/Marxist phenomenon, as if it were a negative label. My reality, and that of many others, demonstrates that workers of all kinds are frequently exploited by those in power for unjust and undue gain, whether monetary or political. The struggle for representation and justice in the workplace is a timeless narrative. Contributing positively to the side of the exploited is a goal that I, and anyone, should be happy to pursue.

Q. What do you do for fun? I am an avid reader, gamer, tech enthusiast, and aspiring creative writer. I consider myself a "Jack of all trades, master of none." Ultimately, learning is my passion, and if there is something new to learn, I am likely trying it or at least willing to do so.

AFT Member Benefits

We support one another in the union to build power, bargain fair contracts, demand respect and dignity in the workplace and raise our professional voices for higher education. In addition to the many direct benefits of being a union member, visit the Member Benefits page on the KFT (www.kft2187.org) site for information about additional services and benefits of your union membership. Negotiated through the 15 million member AFL-CIO, KFT members can save money and access valuable services.



Union Plus Scholarships help union families with the cost of college. The 2025 Scholarship Winners will be announced the first week of June. Coming soon: The 2026 application will be available in mid-June. In the past 25 years, union members and their children have received more than \$4 million from Union Plus scholarships.



Union Plus Credit Cards were designed to meet the needs of union members, with competitive rates, U.S.-based phone customer service and more.



AT&T Wireless Discounts: Extra savings for a limited time

As the only nationwide unionized wireless carrier, AT&T has a deal to help keep money in your pocket this spring.

The KFT Voice

The Voice is the newsletter of the Kean Federation of Teachers (KFT). Established in 1978, the KFT is a union of professors, professional staff and librarians. KFT Local 2187 is a member of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the AFL-CIO. The KFT is one of the locals under the Council of New Jersey State College/University Locals (CNJSCL), the statewide bargaining agent for state college locals in New Jersey.



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