

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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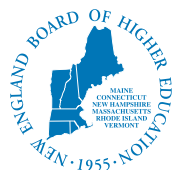
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The New England Board of Higher Education is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to promote greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.



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Fifty Years

Maybe it's the retro NEBHE logo that makes the few remaining copies of the NEBHE newsletter titled *Higher Education in New England* feel so *fifties*. Maybe it's the black and white photos of suit-and-tied men, nearly all men, around meeting tables.

Or perhaps it's the global threat *du jour*. An item on inadequate college faculty salaries from the November 1957 issue describes a NEBHE conference where "participants realized anew that Russia is putting its schools ahead of almost everything else in its mad rush for world domination." A 1959 issue notes that New England colleges have refused a half-million dollars in National Defense Education Act funds because of a requirement that students receiving the new federal aid sign a statement disclaiming membership in subversive organizations.

The collection of dog-eared *HENE* newsletters is the closest thing NEBHE has to a storytelling grandfather, so to prepare this issue of CONNECTION marking NEBHE's 50th anniversary, I began reading.

The specter of the Cold War aside, the story line is hauntingly familiar: a new technology looms, manpower shortages develop in this or that field, worries about teacher effectiveness and regional competitiveness follow. But there is another feeling in those newsletters that seems quite foreign today: namely, the sense of a regional higher education enterprise in full-bore growth mode.

True, New England was bleeding manufacturing jobs at the time of NEBHE's founding, and the regional economy was stagnant. But college enrollment in the region had nearly doubled from 1939 to 1954, and more were on the way: nationally, nearly twice as many babies were born in 1956 as in 1936. *HENE's* editor (who one suspects might have moonlighted for CONELRAD) asked in boldface type: "***When our children are ready for college, will our colleges be ready for them?***"

At first, of course, the answer was no, the colleges were not ready, and there weren't enough of them. But those bygone newsletters also reveal a palpable commitment to regional action, which found its medium in the young New England Board of Higher Education. NEBHE raised alarms about lack of space for the bulging student cohort, commissioned expert reports, convened conferences, forged collaborative agreements, prodded, pondered, then prodded some more. "Our Plans Aren't Big Enough!," shouted the NEBHE president in a 1957 *HENE* editorial.

The plans grew. The number of New England colleges increased from under 190 at the time of NEBHE's founding to roughly 270 today. Graduate and continuing education programs proliferated. Public higher education systems emerged and public missions blossomed. The higher education-economic development nexus flourished along Route 128 and elsewhere. In time, New England's colleges were associated with solutions and connections to all manner of New England challenges from early childhood education to workforce development to fixing deteriorating cities. With NEBHE's help, the region was reinventing itself as the world's premier "knowledge economy."

Now again, new technologies loom. Shortages develop in key fields. There are global threats and sometimes rash responses. And to complicate matters, there is no baby boom to power a future with sheer numbers. New immigrant groups could pick up some of that slack, but even the vastly expanded higher education system does a poor job reaching them. There are other new challenges as well, ranging from ever-rising college costs to fierce international competition for research funds and talent. One has to wonder yet again: Are our plans big enough?

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.