Campus Unions: Organized Faculty and Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education

TIMOTHY REESE CAIN
Campus Unions: Organized Faculty and Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education

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Executive Summary

The unionization of instructional workers is a central feature of U.S. higher education, with more than a quarter of those teaching college classes covered by collectively bargained contracts. Though dated, the best existing numbers indicate that more than 430,000 faculty members, graduate students, and related personnel are in bargaining units; thousands more are in nonbargaining units affiliated with organized labor. As recent events in Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa, and elsewhere have demonstrated, faculty unions are also controversial and subject to attack. Opponents question the need for faculty unions and claim that they lead to inefficiencies, inhibit needed flexibility, and operate in opposition to both traditional notions of professionalism and ideals of shared governance. Some further attack them on purely political lines. Proponents counter that, among other benefits, unions bolster professional status, provide faculty with a needed voice in governance, and help increase salaries in a sector that has often relied on poorly paid instructors. Graduate student unions are even more contested as stakeholders disagree about whether student status supersedes instructional roles and precludes employee status. Too often, conversations about and arguments regarding faculty unions take place in the absence of research evidence. Just as problematic, many considerations ignore the existence of unions of instructional workers.

This monograph examines the existing research literature on the attitudes about and effects of faculty and graduate student unions. In so doing, it highlights the great scholarly interest in the topic in the early years of widespread
bargaining but the increasing neglect as the growth of faculty unions slowed after the Supreme Court of the United States’ decision in National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva University (1980), which severely limited the abilities of tenure-line faculty at private colleges and universities to collectively bargain. This neglect is especially unfortunate as the broader changes in U.S. higher education and its staffing, as well as the methodological advances of recent decades, might offer new or different information about this key aspect of higher education organization and policy. Still, useful research does exist and helps shed light on the causes and effects of unionization both historically and in the modern era. Capturing, analyzing, and synthesizing this research is the main purpose of this monograph.

Following an introduction to key issues, this monograph begins with a brief overview of the history and context of unionizing in higher education. Now nearly a century old, the unionization of college faculty began in late 1918, when a small group at Howard University affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in hopes of improving their conditions and influence while also securing additional federal funds for the institution. The Howard local was soon joined by those at other institutions but only one survived for more than a few years. The 1930s saw renewed interest in the AFT although most faculty did not unionize and many viewed it as antithetical to the professional status they sought. By the late-1940s, faculty unionization had suffered significant setbacks, but in a handful of cases union locals experienced success, including negotiated contracts at Howard, Fisk University, and Tri-State College. Widespread bargaining began to take hold in the 1960s, fundamentally changing the nature of faculty unionization; at a number of institutions it changed the conditions of faculty work. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and National Education Association (NEA) joined the AFT as national organizations vying for collective bargaining units, and by 1980, a quarter of faculty were organized, many at community and regional colleges. In the aftermath of the Yeshiva decision, the spread of bargaining slowed significantly but by the turn of the century graduate students increasingly turned to unions to improve their working conditions. In the years since, their efforts have continued and been joined by the significant push for non-tenure-line faculty to unionize
in their own bargaining units, including the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) drive to organize on citywide bases.

After addressing this history and describing the larger modern trends—unionization is more prevalent in public than private institutions and at those that emphasize teaching more than those that emphasize research, for example—this monograph turns to the research on the effects on unionization, taking into account how it has changed over almost five decades. It begins with an area that dominated the research on faculty unionization in the early years of bargaining: faculty attitudes and voting behaviors. Early studies pointed to demographic characteristics including age and gender as being related to support for unionization, although as methods advanced similar findings were less prevalent. Looking across studies, level of compensation, general political and union attitudes, views on faculty influence on governance, satisfaction, perceptions of union instrumentality, and having a peer network that is in favor of unionizing generally appear to be related to support for bargaining.

Numerous studies have addressed the effects of unionization, including dozens that have considered various aspects of compensation. Early studies that matched unionized and nonunionized institutions largely found short-term union wage premiums but diminished returns in later years, though many lacked consideration of cost of living or other important factors. More recent research using large-scale data has raised questions about whether premiums continue to exist at 4-year colleges and have suggested that they are smaller at 2-year colleges than previously believed. Evidence regarding whether wage distribution is different at unionized and nonunionized institutions is inconsistent, though some evidence of the continuation of existing distributions exists. There is also some evidence that unionization is linked to greater pay equity, although it does not come close to overcoming gender wage gaps. Finally, several studies have also found that unionized faculty are more satisfied with their salaries than nonunionized faculty, though more work needs to be done.

Among the most significant concerns of opponents to unionization are the effects it might have on governance, including potentially shifting authority away from existing senates or encroaching on issues traditionally
under their purview. Although some senates have been negatively affected—even abolished—and the overall shifts in power are unclear, much research associates collective bargaining with gains in faculty influence. Where strong senates had existed, they retained authority; where they did not, unions provided new ways to provide faculty voice. The existing research further points to union effectiveness in establishing formalized tenure and grievance procedures, but little success in providing robust protections against retrenchment.

Some research has explored issues of collegiality and climate, highlighting that organizing campaigns can be divisive but also providing counterexamples where they were not. Studies of administrators’ attitudes toward bargaining have emphasized negative experiences but questions remain over how widespread such views are. Some have suggested that studies considering only the views of those at the bargaining table necessarily find conflict and dissatisfaction that the broader faculty and administration do not experience. Moreover, a negative climate is associated with the decision to unionize, raising questions of causality even when such a climate exists. Similar questions are implicated in the research on satisfaction. The research is fairly consistent that unionized faculty are not globally more satisfied than nonunionized faculty and may be less so, but whether that is because of, a cause of, or unrelated to unionization is less clear. At the same time, there is some evidence that unionized faculty may be more satisfied with certain aspects of their jobs, such as compensation, but less satisfied with others. Some scholarship has focused on other potential effects of unionization although it has failed to offer definitive understandings. The few studies that have explored institutional effectiveness, for example, have offered little clarity on its relationship to unionization.

The unionization of non-tenure-line faculty and graduate students has begun to receive attention in recent years, largely in the form of insider perspectives and individual case studies. Early work on part-time and non-tenure-line faculty in larger bargaining units was conflicted, as some found that benefits accrued to workers in these categories whereas others found those at the highest and senior ranks gained most from unions. The limited recent research on non-tenure-line faculty offers evidence of substantial gains for unionized faculty in areas including compensation, security, and
status, with only some concerns about potential loss of flexibility. Graduate students in unions have reported that they believe their unionization has resulted in important gains in wages and protections, although the actual research is sparse. Importantly, however, despite widespread fears that unionization would damage student–faculty relationships, research is consistent that it does not; in some situations it has improved them.

These and the other findings detailed in the monograph point to much more research-based knowledge about unionization in higher education than might be presumed considering how rarely it is brought into broader conversations in the field. At the same time, much more work needs to be done. The bulk of the research was undertaken decades ago in a different context and with methods that would be considered basic in the modern era. Since the end of the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty in 2004, true national studies have been difficult to undertake necessitating that most understandings are based on limited samples, usually from one or a few institutions. Additionally, research has suggested that the outcomes might differ not just by institution but by sector, yet the implications have not been fully addressed in the literature. For example, despite the fact the unionization is more prevalent at 2-year than 4-year institutions, most work focuses on the latter. Additionally, more non-tenure-line than tenure-line faculty are unionized, but most research focuses on the latter or considers all faculty regardless of employment status. As such, though substantial research exists, much more is needed to fully assess the impacts of unionization on faculty, institutions, and higher education as a whole.
Foreword

RECENTLY, RESIDENT ADVISORS at a small private college sought the right to form a union. Doctoral students serving as graduate teaching assistants have also sought the right to unionize as have adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty, faculty at community colleges, and other faculty groups at both public and private 4-year institutions. Underlying these decisions to unionize lie issues of faculty career trajectories, overworked graduate students, work–life balance issues, and increased demands on faculty. These issues have been frequently cited as important concerns about higher education in the academic as well as popular press. Despite these headlines, the role of unions in shaping faculty and graduate student life, as well as the role they play in establishing relationships between faculty, emerging faculty, and administrators in higher education, has been somewhat overlooked. This is in spite of the fact that close to a half million faculty members work in unionized environments. Why they are overlooked is uncertain; perhaps it is a function of the general decline in union participation throughout the country or perhaps it is a by-product of more managerial environments in higher education, where shared governance is compromised. Regardless of the reasons of the lack of attention to unions, the topic remains important given the role that unions play in negotiating contracts, supporting fair work environments, and maintaining the principles of shared governance. Understanding the research-based perspectives on the role of unions in higher education is more important than ever.

In this monograph, Campus Unions: Organized Faculty and Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education, author Tim Cain provides a comprehensive
review of the literature related to all aspects of faculty and graduate student unions. The monograph includes a history of unions and the context in which they were established and have evolved. Further, the monograph points to the nuances associated with unions for graduate students and faculty, as well as the important roles unions have played in creating workplace structures that support faculty and graduate students. Looking at the research collectively sheds interesting and important light on unions, but perhaps more important, about the relationship of unions to important milestones in the history of academic life. For example, Cain’s review of the literature highlights the roles that unions have played in supporting academic freedom and shared governance. The findings from the analysis and synthesis related to unions are also interesting because existing research looks at relationships between faculty satisfaction, collegiality, and attitudes as correlates to unions.

The monograph is also timely in that it addresses topics associated with non-tenure-track and part-time faculty as well as graduate students—topics that are integral to any conversation related to contemporary academic life given the important roles these individuals play in carrying out central research, teaching, and service functions. The emergence of unions for contingent faculty and graduate students has highlighted the complexity and totality of what these groups do to fulfill the mission of U.S. higher education. The monograph is a great companion piece to other monographs in the series, for example, the monograph on contingent faculty published by Kezar and Sam (2010), the monograph on faculty careers and work life published by O’Meara and her colleagues (2008), and the forthcoming monograph by Alleman and colleagues (in press) on collegiality and non-tenure-track faculty. Although these monographs do not focus on unions per se, when read in tandem with Cain’s work they highlight the roles that unions play in shaping faculty work life and realities.

The monograph is sure to be of interest to those who study topics related to collective bargaining and unions and other faculty-related topics. Those who study history will also find relevant the thorough historical coverage in the monograph. This monograph will be of interest to faculty senate leaders, deans, provosts, and others with responsibilities related to faculty in
unionized environments. As researchers of faculty-related topics, we learned from reading this monograph about the important and overlooked roles of unions in multiple aspects related to faculty life and we think you will as well.

Kelly Ward
Lisa Wolf-Wendel
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Introduction

IN LATE MAY 2016, the administration of Notre Dame de Namur University formally recognized Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 as the agent for its entire faculty, becoming one of only a handful of private institutions in the 21st century to agree to collectively bargain with a union including tenure-line faculty (Flaherty, 2016b). One month later, the City University of New York (CUNY) and the Professional Staff Congress (American Federation of Teachers Local 2334) tentatively agreed to a new contract that will provide 10.41% salary increases to the faculty over a 7-year period, much of it retroactively, as well as health insurance and increased security for adjunct faculty members. The local’s overwhelming ratification of it at the beginning of August ended more than 6 years of contractual struggles in a period of economic austerity, although it left some concerned that more was not gained for adjuncts (Schmidt, 2016; Zamudio-Suaréz, 2016). The next day, August 4, faculty at Tallahassee Community College voted to affiliate with the United Faculty of Florida (UFF), becoming the faculty of the 26th institution to be represented by the union (Dobson, 2016). Concurrently, graduate students at private universities across the nation prepared their own organizing efforts, hopeful that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) would overturn earlier precedents and grant them the right to bargain with their institutions (Trottman & Belkin, 2016). On August 23, those hopes were met when the NLRB ruled that graduate students working in teaching and research roles had employee relationships with their universities, and thus, had the legally protected right to unionize (Columbia University, 364 NLRB 90). Each of these events in the summer of 2016, and numerous similar