Collective Bargaining in Action

Since collective bargaining rights were extended to UW academic staff and faculty, academic professionals throughout the UW System have expressed interest in forming collective bargaining unions. Activists on each campus have started the process of unionization to gain a meaningful voice on their campus.

Faculty at UW-Eau Claire and UW-Superior were the first to form unions. In May 2010, both groups voted overwhelmingly to represent themselves through collective bargaining.

Faculty on both campuses have begun to realize the benefits of collective bargaining. At UW-Superior, for example, collective bargaining has been a vehicle for implementing a faculty salary decompression plan.

UW-Superior, like many other four-year campuses throughout the System, has seen the salaries of associate and full professors stagnate or become “compressed” over time. Between 2008 and 2010, faculty at UW-Superior had worked to develop a plan to address issues of faculty salary compression. For the first time in that campus’s history, administration was required to meet with the faculty union and come to an agreement on the decompression plan. Based on that agreement, faculty most severely affected by salary compression will see increases in their paychecks beginning this fall.

According to UW-Superior history professor Joel Sipress, the decompression agreement will likely be codified with the union’s initial contract and will likely become part of a long-term strategy for bringing the salaries of UWS faculty up to parity with those of faculty at peer institutions.

“The discussions surrounding the implementation of the UW-Superior faculty decompression plan are a clear example of how cooperative relations between faculty and administration can flourish in a collective bargaining environment,” stated Professor Sipress.

Faculty at both UW-Superior and UW-Eau Claire are preparing for contract negotiations, which will likely begin during this academic year.

Why I Support Collective Bargaining

By: Eric Yonke, Professor of History

Why do I support the union? For me, it all boils down to a simple issue: having a voice in the budget negotiation process. I don’t expect a large pay hike with collective bargaining, or a quick benefits increase, especially not in the current economy. But I will expect our local union representatives, whom we select from our ranks, to be our voice in the budget process. Through collective bargaining negotiations, the UW System and the university are required to come to the table and to negotiate with the us on such important issues as health benefits, pay increases—including merit pay—and summer and overload courses.

A collective bargaining union will also expand the campus understanding of shared governance. Anyone involved in the faculty senate knows that the senate and its committees do not discuss salaries, funding for positions, budgets, or benefits. With unionization, we will have a body that takes action on these matters.

We all know that these are tough times economically. But we need to educate the public about the opportunities that are lost when academics do not have a voice in the workplace – opportunities for UWSP employees, for students, and for the community at large. In order for UWSP to live up to its full potential, we, the stewards of our campus, cannot rely on others to speak for us.
Frequently Asked Questions

Why should we unionize during such a bad economic climate, when raises are unlikely?

UW System faculty and academic staff are by far the largest group of nonunionized state employees. When the state budget is tight, legislators know that they can inflict cuts on faculty and academic staff because we don't have the protections of a union contract. This is what happened last year, when unionized state employees received their 2% cost of living raise because it was negotiated into their collective bargaining agreements. The legislature took back the 2% increase for faculty and academic staff, however, because we did not have the protection of a collective bargaining agreement. And while furloughs must be negotiated with unionized state employees, there are no limits on or protections against furloughs for nonunionized faculty and academic staff. Unionization is the best way to make sure that faculty and academic staff are not treated unfairly by the state during times of economic crisis.

Since state employees are prohibited from striking, what power will we have if we unionize?

Plenty. First, state labor law requires that both the administration and the union negotiate with one another in good faith. This means that both sides must be reasonable at the bargaining table, and that there is recourse available if that does not occur. One such method of recourse is called fact-finding, which is a process that will be initiated if either the union or the state declares that negotiations have reached an impasse. In fact-finding, a neutral third party will study the points of disagreement, examine the relevant context—including System and university finances—and make a recommendation to resolve the impasse. Such procedures have proven to be very effective in negotiations across the country. And away from the table, unionization will give faculty and academic staff a strong, unified voice to advocate for UW-Stevens Point to the UW System, the state legislature, and the public at large.

How will unionization affect shared governance?

Shared governance for faculty and academic staff in the UW System is protected under state labor law. Moreover, many universities with collective bargaining also have robust shared governance institutions. On these campuses, shared governance is often strengthened because of the presence of a union. Governance bodies at these institutions are able to focus on their mission of overseeing the academic enterprise without the distraction of economic concerns, and these bodies are able to perform their work without administrative interference because of protections outlined in their contracts. The contracts negotiated by unions at UM-Duluth, Wayne State, Eastern Michigan, the University of Cincinnati, and the University of Vermont explicitly protect and strengthen their universities' governance bodies—you can read more about them at www.aftwhighered.org.

Do you have questions about faculty and academic staff unionization at UW-Stevens Point?

- Visit www.aftwhighered.org and click on “Resources.”
- Contact Kathy Fleming at fleming@ aftwhighered.org or (920) 216-8408.

We would be happy to hear from you!

For more information, visit www.aftwhighered.org.