



Academic Dispatch

September 5, 2019

Thoughts on Faculty Unionization

On October 16 and 17 two groups of UNM faculty will have the opportunity to engage in separate votes to either form or not form a collective bargaining unit represented by a union. The two groups comprise, roughly: on the one part, all adjuncts and term-faculty who teach courses on short-term arrangements covering one term only; and on the other part a group comprising all tenure-track, tenured, research, and continuing lecturers who work with an expectation of continuing appointments over multiple terms and years. Faculty whose appointments are in the HSC are not included in these groups, nor are those who happen this fall to be on administrative appointments such as academic directors, chairs, deans, or provosts. A few other groups such as working retirees and visiting faculty are also excluded.

I've been asked several times for my views on this choice — to form or not to form a collective bargaining unit of faculty. I must first state firmly that this is a choice for the faculty involved. Whatever choice they make, I will work with our faculty to continue to make the University of New Mexico a great research institution, a center of education that allows learners to pursue their individual dreams and reach their aspirations, and an organization that serves the state to grow and develop as a rich cultural environment for our communities and families.

The American labor movement has been a historically important one, starting in 1794 with the creation of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers, the first U.S. labor union, which represented shoemakers in Philadelphia. While the success of the Society was mixed, in part due to unfavorable legal rulings, during the 19th century the founders of the early American labor movement built the needed legal and philosophical foundations for collective action. They saw their practical mission as supporting the job interests of skilled craftsmen like these Philadelphia journeymen, and saw their aspirational interest as protecting the American ideal of an egalitarian society. Over time, and as the industrial revolution swept across the nation, the movement focused increasingly on the economic and job conscious goals of unionism and protecting the rights of workers in the newly growing American industrial factory system. But the aspirational element has influenced many union activities, including the AFL-CIOs strong support for civil rights legislation in the 1960s. Without question, the union movement has had many positive influences on the ecosystem of American work.

The union movement has been founded on collectively developing and ensuring the conditions of employment, touching on pay and other non-compensation conditions such as hours and shop safety. Groups like the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers published lists of standard rates for their work and defended their trade against lower quality (as they saw it) work by non-member craftsmen

when their interests ran at odds with the Master shoemakers (the shop owners, or management if you will). This fundamental separation of the proletariat as distinct from the capitalist who employs them is deeply embedded in the union system. As the industrial revolution swept across the US and the factory system and corporate structure became the primary method of organizing hand labor, unions developed notions of standardized pay based on standardized work, seniority as a basis for compensation, and protection of union members from competition by non-union labor. These are important principles that unions have protected.

In contrast, the modern university faculty developed from the foundations of the earliest European universities, which arose in the 11th and 12th century out of preceding periods of less organized but geographically localized teaching and scholarship. These first universities were loose federations of scholars who came together in associations to share students, and loose federations of students who came together to share teachers, and through these federations to also share the necessary business infrastructure to support that shared teaching and learning. Over time the core principles of these faculty collectives came to be intellectual merit and accomplishment in scholarship, peer review, and faculty shared governance of the academic enterprise. This is a system driven by distinction, quality of the ideas and impact of individuals, continuous expectations of creative original work, and peer review as a fundamental means to assess these. These values are fundamentally inconsistent with the core labor protection ideas of unionism: standardized work and collectively-set pay, seniority, and the privileged role of the union as the arbiter of labor conditions on behalf of each worker.

The principles that animate our university system prefer that leadership within universities — what in a union perspective would be deemed as management: directors, chairs, deans, provosts, presidents — are in fact faculty. This ensures that the leadership deeply understands academic values and principles, even while having to protect and successfully operate the institution as a whole. Within this system the management roles are transitory and individuals move into and out of these roles continuously while retaining their core faculty role — so a department chair is chair one day, and no longer a chair the next, and yet she remains a faculty member throughout. This constant transition into and out of management is inconsistent with the design of the union approach, in which management and worker are two separate classes within an industrial business.

To form one or two or no collective bargaining units is a faculty choice. I have no vote in the matter and will support our faculty in their choice. But if I were voting, I would vote against the formation of a union. While unions are important tools within some industries and business sectors, I believe the fundamental values of faculty life are inconsistent with the approach unions must take to work and compensation. I believe that UNM would not benefit from having another layer of organizational bureaucracy — a union —

through which some decisions must be forced. UNM is not nimble now; I don't see that improving with a union. By placing yet another organization into our university system, a union only burdens or even subverts the shared governance system on which the university relies.

A union will not solve any of the pressing issues that challenge UNM. It will not grow our enrollment, change the state funding formula, increase the university's revenue, or create greater collegiality and a sense of shared purpose. As I said publicly when I interviewed last February, I fully understand our faculty's frustration after 10 years of shrinking budgets and no raises. But additional processes and steps, and new bureaucracies to navigate founded on inconsistent principles and conflicting goals, will not improve our financial outlook or continue to build the university to the scholarly heights it must achieve.

I hope that our faculty can give me and the rest of our new provost office team a chance to address UNM's problems. I make no claim that this is simple, but I'm an optimist, and I'm here to work!

For more information on the unionization process, visit the [Faculty Unionization Website](#). The university has established an email address faculty.union.info@unm.edu for those colleagues who wish to share questions or seek information about faculty unionization. Questions sent to this address will be used to update the information on this website.

Sincerely,

James Paul Holloway

Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Professor of Nuclear Engineering

A PDF version of this Academic Dispatch is available on the [Academic Affairs website](#). Your feedback and input are welcome at provost@unm.edu.