



Ten Common Myths about Academic Unions

Myth: *Unions will destroy collegiality—the principle of faculty, staff, and administrators working together as professionals to set policy on curriculum, teaching, and personnel issues.*

Fact: *Unions enhance collegiality by setting the rules that make collegiality possible.*

University administrators and anti-union advocates have long asserted that unionization of the academy results in decreased collegiality on campus. Yet there are numerous examples of how collegiality is enhanced when a union is present. Faculty and staff unions have negotiated provisions into contracts protecting academic freedom and intellectual property rights, guaranteeing faculty and staff a role in developing policy and curriculum and providing a contractually guaranteed voice to advocate for quality education.

Myth: *Unions weaken or eliminate shared governance.*

Fact: *Shared governance flourishes in unionized environments.*

The presence of a union does not eliminate the need for or diminish the role of shared governance institutions. At colleges and universities across the United States, senates work with unions to improve their institutions and often collaborate on issues of joint concern. Furthermore, unions can—and do—improve faculty and academic staff senates by providing a framework that allows a senate to work without unnecessary administrative interference. And, by negotiating over the common economic concerns of faculty and academic staff, unions help shared governance organizations focus on the particular academic issues found on their campus.

Myth: *Unions support mediocrity and oppose merit compensation.*

Fact: *Union contracts include provisions for equitable distribution of merit pay.*

Most collective bargaining agreements at four-year universities include provisions for equitable distribution of merit pay, as well as salary pools for compression, market adjustments, and gender equity. These contracts typically create a system that clearly outlines the standards that must be met in order to receive merit pay and money from the other pools. With these negotiated agreements, merit pay is still an important component in faculty and academic staff compensation—but it is not distributed at the whim of administrators.

Myth: *Unions are run by outsiders.*

Fact: *Unions are composed of faculty and academic staff on each campus who collectively decide how to best run their campus chapter.*

AFT is a democratic organization that believes in local autonomy. AFT-Wisconsin—our statewide federation—is composed of dozens of local unions representing professional employees in higher education, state agencies, and the tech colleges, as well as school district teachers and staff. In AFT-Wisconsin, each local union elects its own officers and bargaining committee, negotiates its own contract, controls its own treasury, and sets its own agenda. Statewide officers and staff are available to assist each local, but do not control the union. Decisions on the operation of a local union—from dues amounts to contract negotiations—are left to members of that union.

Myth: *Unions don't understand how the UW System and this campus work.*

Fact: *AFT-Wisconsin has a long history of working on each campus in the UW System.*

AFT-Wisconsin has a long history of membership from within the UW System and currently has faculty and academic staff members on every campus. Leadership of AFT-Wisconsin is composed of faculty and academic staff from campuses across the UW System. AFT-Wisconsin's long history as an integral part of life in the UW System ensures that this union will be representative of the needs of faculty and academic staff on each campus.

Furthermore, each local union will negotiate its own contract, elect its own officers, and make its own decisions. This means that the people representing you will be your peers. Union leaders will be intimately familiar with the challenges faced by faculty and academic staff on each campus and will have an intimate knowledge of how your campus works.

Myth: *A union will divide faculty and academic staff.*

Fact: *Faculty and academic staff can be in the same union.*

AFT-Wisconsin has worked hard to ensure flexibility in the composition of each local union. The collective bargaining rights bill allows for either separate or combined unions of faculty and academic staff. Based on experiences in other states, we are working to create a union of faculty and academic staff that can negotiate on behalf of all academic employees on each campus. Each local union will devise its own constitution that ensures all classifications are equally represented in that union.

Myth: *Other organizations already represent my interests on campus and in Madison.*

Fact: *None of those organizations is given the legal framework of collective bargaining that is available with a union.*

There are a number of organizations on each campus that work to improve the lives of faculty and academic staff. While these organizations do good work, none of them has the legal standing of a union with collective bargaining rights. Once you vote to form a union, the university legally has to negotiate a contract with the union. That means that the university has to pay attention to the concerns of faculty and academic staff in that union. If there are disagreements between the union and administration, there are legal procedures in place to end those disagreements.

AFT-Wisconsin is a union that supports its members. We have over 15,000 members from across the state of Wisconsin. We represent workers in higher education, in various state agencies, and in school districts across the state. We have decades of experience representing the needs and interests of our members in their local places of employment and in the halls of the capitol in Madison.

Myth: *A union will damage my relationship with my boss.*

Fact: *A union can improve your relationship with your boss.*

With a union, many of the contentious issues you now face with your boss—issues like compensation, hours of work, and job security—are items that can be collectively bargained. By bargaining over these items, you no longer need to have awkward discussions about these issues with your supervisor. Furthermore, an explicit grievance procedure—a standard part of a union contract—provides a clear means for resolving any issues that arise under the contract. By forming a union, you and your supervisor can focus on work—and not on the uncomfortable conversations that get in the way of productivity.

Myth: *Unions are great for blue-collar workers, but they can't effectively represent academic or white-collar workers.*

Fact: *Unions represent workers from all walks of life.*

Unions represent workers from all walks of life. They do represent blue-collar workers, but they also represent millions of white-collar workers. In particular, AFT—which prides itself as a union of professionals—has extensive experience representing workers in higher education. In surrounding states, AFT represents higher education workers at the University of Illinois System, Eastern Illinois University, University of Minnesota-Duluth, Wayne State University, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of Michigan, to name a few. In Wisconsin, we exclusively represent white-collar workers. We represent hundreds of classifications with the State of Wisconsin, including science professionals, professionals working in the Department of Revenue, employees in community colleges, and graduate assistants in Madison and Milwaukee. Thousands of white-collar workers just like you have joined together with AFT to protect their interests.

Myth: *I will be punished for supporting a union.*

Fact: *State law expressly prohibits your employer from harming you for supporting a union.*

The University of Wisconsin System Faculty and Academic Staff Labor Relations Act (UWFASLRA) is the law that governs collective bargaining for state employees in Wisconsin. This law prohibits your employer from punishing you for supporting a union. If you feel there are negative ramifications for you from your support for a union, UWFASLRA provides a legal framework to protect your rights.

Additionally, your employer will never know you support a union unless you make that support public. Your authorization for a union election is collected by the union and submitted directly to the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission (WERC). Your vote in the union election is done by secret ballot. At no time during this process does your boss need to know that you support a union unless you want to publicly express that support.