The debate over unionization of faculty is not a new question, with the first consideration in the early decades of the 20th century. There was also a brief surge in campus organizing during the 1960s. In 2012, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) launched a national campaign aimed at colleges and universities called “Faculty Forward” to win more membership among faculty. These campaigns have primarily been directed at organizing adjunct faculty and part-time lecturers. Still, despite this lengthy time and intensive effort, most faculty have chosen not to be unionized.

When a faculty is unionized, the union becomes the faculty’s exclusive representative on issues that are subjects of bargaining. These consist of all issues related to wages, hours and terms and conditions of employment. Consequently, in a unionized setting the administration can no longer directly address employment issues with faculty members, either individually or through shared governance, as we do now at the UW. Instead, the administration legally functions as “management” to negotiate a new employment contract for their “employees.” Those negotiations are conducted for the employees/faculty by their designated exclusive bargaining agent.

A nationwide movement to unionize faculty
According to the SEIU, there are multiple Faculty Forward campaigns at work today on campuses across the country. The first indications of Faculty Forward activity at the UW arose last spring.

The issue that drives most union organizing campaigns is compensation. It is never the only issue, but salaries and benefits are nearly always important considerations. Adjacent issues in many campaigns are focused on governance, workload, and redistribution of a university’s financial resources. Sometimes organizing can focus on issues that are not subject to bargaining, such as academic standards and academic freedom.

The UW Faculty Forward website refers to some of those issues that are not subject to bargaining: federal policy advocacy and collaboration with a congressman from California on issues around adjunct faculty working conditions and student loan debt; a desire for a more powerful voice with the legislature in Olympia and enhancing a culture of collaboration. And, of course, it references compensation.

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**Contract negotiations**
We think it is important to focus on what would actually change if UW faculty chooses to unionize. If a union becomes the exclusive agent for faculty, it will seek to negotiate a first contract for the negotiating unit. The bargaining will be about “mandatory subjects of bargaining,” meaning wages, hours, and working conditions. The first contract is essentially the foundation upon which the future relationship between the employer and the exclusive representative of the bargaining unit would build upon for years to come. As a result, first contracts can and do take considerable time to resolve since each item must be negotiated. In the past, despite good faith bargaining by both sides, first contracts at UW have taken one to three years to resolve. See Appendix C for specific examples. A faculty contract would likely involve even more complicated issues.

During that period, the employer must maintain the status quo, meaning that all terms of employment that are subject to bargaining are frozen in place. Under the law, the University would be prohibited from making any changes to faculty compensation, benefits and a host of other issues that we currently resolve directly with faculty input and, if necessary, on an ad hoc basis. For example, merit increases, unit adjustments and retention increases could not continue. Promotions and promotional increases would continue, as that structure is part of the status quo. Discussions about and adoption of policies, outside the context of collective bargaining, that address wages, hours and other terms and conditions of employment would also cease.

**Decertification process**
One of the least understood issues with respect to union representation is the process of unwinding a union relationship once it is in place. It sounds simple: If any portion of the faculty believed that the union was not adequately representing them or meeting their expectations, they could start a decertification campaign. But the simplicity ends there.

**Decertification** would require signatures on a petition of at least 30% of the members of the bargaining unit – or in our case, over 2000 faculty members. The entire bargaining unit would be the subject of decertification – it is not permissible to remove a portion of the faculty from the bargaining unit. That petition would then be presented to the Public Employee Relations Commission (PERC). Once PERC determines that the signatures are valid, an election would be scheduled. All of this work would have to be done with no assistance or support from the University, financial or otherwise. One member of the faculty would have to be listed as the petitioner and participate in any hearings or proceedings related to the decertification.

Most importantly, decertification can only occur in a narrow 30 day window before the expiration of the union contract. Union contracts at UW generally last two to three years, so this window would not open very frequently.

It is a difficult, time-consuming and costly process, to say the least. The decision to unionize is not something to enter into with the thought of just giving it try.

**Sources:**


UW Faculty Forward website.