Unionization of Higher Education in the U.S.

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Abstract

Unionization is a leading trend impacting higher education setting the stage for the struggle between faculty and the administration over the future direction of higher education.

Higher education in the U.S. is under pressure to make some profound changes to increase its productivity, to lower costs, and to globalize. Recent trends show movement towards centralized management, revenue-based education models, focus on short-term input/output student outcomes, revised curricula driven by digital media, modified learning environments, and MOOCs – massive open online courses. Trends also show that faculty is losing its ability to influence curricula as colleges change their fundamental operating model to increase efficiency. In the U.S., faculty responded to this trend through unionization with 38% of U.S. faculty unionized by 2013, and faculty unionization is increasing while private-sector unions are in decline. In 1986, Louis L. Jones made the claim that "unions are a permanent fixture in higher education." Few, if any, faculty or administrators would deny that claim today. However, the question remains: "Is the unionization trend good for higher education in the U.S.?"

A second and closely related question is: "Will unionization enable faculty to influence the future of higher education?" The answer to these two questions must begin with an understanding of the forces that push-and-pull faculty to seek unionization.

Model of Unionization of Higher Education in the U.S.

Based on a literature review and first-hand experience as a union organizer, member of the negotiating team, and union representative for a college, the following seven fundamental forces provide an explanation of the push-and-pull effect on faculty to unionize. The concept behind the push-and-pull factors is that faculty will be pulled to unionization by their own internal or intrinsic forces, e.g., desire for job security, while being pushed to unionize by external forces, e.g., growth of online education reducing the need for faculty. The basic model used to explain unionization of higher education in the U.S. is shown in Figure 1. The figure shows three pull factors (students, faculty, and higher education) that motivate faculty to have an interest in unionizing and four push factors (administration, demise of the status quo, technology, and globalization) that provide external causes for unionization.

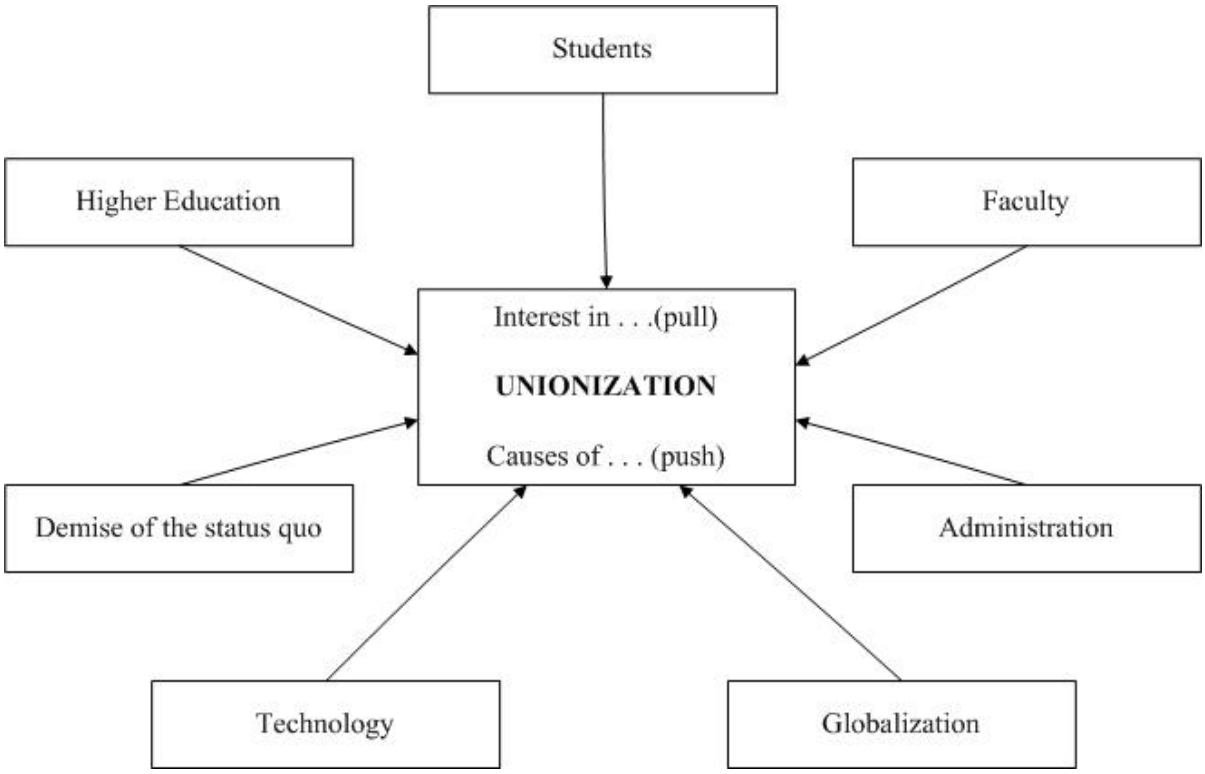

Figure 1 – Basic model to explain unionization of higher education in the U.S.

Pull Factors Creating an Interest in Unionization

Students

Student demographics, lifestyles, and expectations are causing higher education to become more aggressive marketers that promise short-term returns on the students' investment in education. According to the Economist (June 2014), costs are shifting to students as ". . . universities will soon receive more money from tuition fees than from public funding. . . . For two decades the cost of going to college in America has risen 1.6 percentage points more than inflation every year." Student debt is over $1.2 trillion and now exceeds credit card debt with more than 7 million in default.

In addition to the aggressive marketing, focus on short-term goals, rising costs and rising debt, faculty must now teach a very diverse student population: "There doesn't seem to be a traditional student anymore." (Makkian, 2008) and "Students come to us unready for college and in need of remediation . . . (and) . . . levels of collegiate learning and graduation rates are too low, and both are marked by achievement gaps" (Rhoades, 2011). Consequently, today's professor needs more support and resources, not less, to teach students, and a university-wide collective solution across all colleges would be more effective than being negotiated at the individual professor level.

Students are classified as a pull effect due to the faculty's intrinsic desire to teach, and that students are central to faculty's academic career.

Faculty

Faculty profile in higher education has experienced a dramatic shift as the meager growth of 23% in full-time tenured and tenured-track faculty over the past 35 years is

overshadowed by the 141% increase in full-time executive; 259 % increase in full-time non-tenured faculty, and 286% increase in part-time faculty (Curtis and Thornton, 2014). According to Kelderman (2014) nearly 80 percent of faculty members were full-time, tenure-track positions in 1969. Today, 75% of faculty is contingent faculty and they total one million. Some claim that the increasing exploitation of contingent faculty represents a threat to the teaching profession (Moser, 2014).

However, the shift in faculty profile is only the beginning of the story as ". . . tenure-track professors with stable salary, firmly grounded in the middle or upper-middle class, is become rare" (House Committee, 2014), and the issues of compensation, governance, and the increasing tension between full-time tenured and contingent faculty are making unionization a more attractive alternative than seeking tenure.

Governance may rank of equal or greater importance than compensation as Rhoades (2011) found that faculty want a voice in the future direction of higher education, because they believe that academics are being undervalued and the university is moving from it historical mission; Porter and Stephens (2012) found that faculty also believe academic freedom and shared governance are under attack and faculty's influence is weaken due to the dominance of contingent faculty.

The dominance of contingent faculty in higher education is of great importance. From the faculty perspective, Desrochers and Kirshstein (2014) hypothesized a relationship between contingent and full-time faculty that few would disagree with: "As the number of part-time instructors grows, job security continues to erode among full-time faculty." Then Riley (2011) makes the connection between the erosion of job

security and unionization: “With the job market in academia so competitive and positions so unstable, many have decided that if they can’t have tenure, they’ll take the security of the union instead.”

Interestingly, the rapid rise and dominance of contingent faculty is creating another intrinsic demand for unionization. Contingent faculty is facing their own problems due to exploitation as reported by Kelderman (2014) and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (2014). Kelderman reports that contingent faculty faces a lack of professional development, exclusion from curriculum design, little access to office space and support staff, and last minute hiring decisions that leave contingent faculty with lack of time to prepare for their courses. The House Committee confirmed that today’s contingent faculty have to teach at several schools as a way to “cobble together full-time employment in higher education.”

Faculty is classified as a pull factor as faculty would be expected to have an intrinsic motive to seek unionization to alleviate their job security concerns and to gain a sense of control over their employment situation and careers.

Higher Education – A Public Good

Higher education could be a macro-level push factor, i.e., be a stimulus for economic growth and sustaining the middle class, but from a faculty perspective, at the micro-level, higher education is a pull factor, because it is the setting within which faculty attain their academic credentials and build a career through secure employment. Consequently, the state of higher education directly impacts faculty’s careers, and based on the latest reports, the state of higher

education is becoming less conducive for high-quality academic careers. The following reports describe a rather grim picture of today's higher education landscape:

> "The search for the truth, critical thinking, intellectual creativity, academic standards, scientific invention, and ideals of citizenship has been discounted in favor of maximizing profits, vocational training, career success, applied research, and bottom-line considerations" (Moser, 2014).
>
> "The chief catalyst for this transformation will be money . . . which assumes steadily rising tuition and heavily indebted graduates. . . " (Butler, 2012).
>
> "Three decades of decline in public funding for public education opened the door to increasing corporate influence. . . . Corporationalization (the name given to what has happened to higher education over the last 30 years) is the reorganization of our great national resources, including higher education, in accordance with a short-sighted business model. . . . The most striking symptoms of corporationization shift costs and risks downward and direct capital and authority upward" (Moser, 2014).
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> "If colleges were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with serious cost-cutting and painful reorganization" (Butler, 2012).

Push Factors Creating Causes of Unionization

Administration

The administration is a push factor that provides faculty external motivation to unionize. As the administration has grown to become beyond the reach of faculty at many universities, unionization becomes a more attractive option. In addition to the 141% increase in full-time executives as previously reported, full-time non-faculty professionals increased 369% in order to meet the increasing demands for students' services, increased government regulation, and the need to meet today's social goals. Curtis and Thornton (2014) observe that ". . . too many decisions regarding the spending and employment priorities of our colleges and universities are carried out in secret by a few individuals, and that secrecy has clouded our collective focus".

The Goldwater Institute (2010) is more blunt in identifying the bloat and diseconomies of scale in higher education:

> ". . . universities are suffering from 'administrative bloat,' expanding the resources devoted to administration significantly faster than spending on instruction, research, and service. . . (There is a) . . . whopping 61.2 percent increase in expenditures per student for administration that has occurred between 1993 and 2007. . . (and) . . . It now takes more employees – especially more administrators – in higher education despite innovations in technologies and increase in scale."

Bloomberg (2014) provides a powerful yet simple analysis to show the dominance of administrators in higher education: "So far for every $1 spent on instruction, $1.82 is spent on non-instructional things. . . " These findings certainly support what many believe – administrators are quickly increasing their control of all areas leaving faculty few options other than to unionize.

Demise of the status quo

For better or worse, the status quo of teaching students as Aristotle taught at the Athenian Lyceum where ". . . young students . . . gathered at the appointed time and place to listen to the wisdom of the scholars" (Economist, 2014) is under great pressure to change, if not, be replaced entirely by cheaper, more effective, and asynchronous methods of teaching.

Insights from a recent AAUP report confirms the ways in which the centuries-old, status-quo model of in-class lecturing and basic research is being seriously challenged today. The AAUP report identified three disruptive waves threatening to upend established ways of teaching and learning. (1) Funding crisis – some analysts predict mass bankruptcies within two decades, (2) explosion of online learning, and (3) shift from the education of a tiny elite to providing training and re-training throughout careers.

The AAUP report (2014) went on to provide even more details about the "disruptive" events effecting higher education and seriously challenging the status-quo model:

> There is no question that as higher education enrollments continued to rise, institutions are faced with increased reporting and regulatory burdens, and students come to college from more diverse academic and cultural backgrounds than ever before. But the massively disproportionate growth in the number of administrative employees, coupled with the continuing shift to an increasingly precarious corps of mostly temporary, underpaid, and insufficiently supported instructors, represents a real threat to the quality of our academic programs.
>
> Disproportionate salary increases at the top also reflect the abandonment of centuries-old models of shared campus governance, which have increasingly been replaced by more corporate managerial approaches that emphasize the 'bottom line.
>
> Increasingly outrageous salaries for a few senior administrators send a signal to faculty, staff, and students alike that their college or university is not the engine of expanding opportunity and enlightenment they may have thought it was.

These challenges to the status-quo model of higher education are ubiquitious affecting all colleges within a university giving faculty little choice other than to unite across campus through unionization. Without some form of collective action, the disruptive events described above are likely to have a negative impact on faculty's work environment and career prospects.

Technology

Without a doubt, technology is transforming the face of education. Codification of knowledge using digital technologies coupled on-demand access as well as dedicated online universities and MOOCs are forcing higher education to significantly repackage their curricula for the first time since Aristotle. The startling fact is that many key technologies that are transforming student-professor interactions were created about ten years ago. Companies like Skype, Google, and Twitter along with cloud computing and the social media landscape have only just begun their transformation of higher education.

This shift to teaching and learning in “digital spaces” from the traditional classroom environments, challenges both faculty and administrators to find new models for education and causes both to question the present structure of the institutions for higher learning. Without a doubt, faculty must have a voice in this transformational process to ensure that the business-model advocates are not the only voice.

Globalization

Globalization in this paper means the exporting of U.S. higher education. Exporting occurs in three ways: foreign students on American campuses, American international campuses, and online education. Presently, the U.S. is the leader in exporting higher education as the U.S. hosted 723,000 of the 3.6 million foreign-exchange students in 2011, operated 78 of the 162 international university campuses, and education was fifth on the list of services exported from the U.S. according to Britannica Online Encyclopedia (2012).

However, the Britannica noted that U.S. staffing of international campuses can be problematic, because established standards mandate that faculty at the international campuses must have the same credential as faculty at the home campus. The challenge is to attract home-campus faculty to staff international campuses as career risks can be very high for both young faculty who may experience an interruption in their career progression as well as senior faculty with major research agendas.

In addition, compensation packages can easily be inadequate to cover the professor’s full cost of teaching at an international campus. With a few exceptions, it is unlikely that the majority of professors will negotiate favorable compensation and career packages for their international teaching assignments. Most assuredly, the demand for unionization will follow the increased demand for U.S. higher education as an export.

Conclusion

Today the terrain of higher education has changed dramatically as the pillars of higher education, tenured faculty, are being outflanked by professional administrators and contingent faculty in the battle over control of curricula and spending.

Tenured faculty could survive the onslaught from both flanks if it were not for the frontal attack from politicians expecting immediate and measureable results, technological advances in codifying knowledge, globalization making the competitive landscape for higher education more intense, the shift in student profile burdened by record debt, and the demise of the middle class facilitated by hyper-inflated tuitions.

In short, whatever one's views on unionization, much of the impetus for it comes from changing educational, social, and political conditions that our higher education system and society confront today.

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