

Study confirms faculty union influence on institutional decision-making

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new Iowa State University study of 341 public universities has found that faculty unions do exert the desired influence over institutional decision-making in areas such as salaries, appointing department chairs, teaching loads, curriculum and appointment to institution-wide committees. But that influence varies depending on the category and the institution.

Stephen Porter, an Iowa State associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies (ELPS); and Clinton Stephens, a research graduate assistant in ELPS, conducted their analysis from a 2001 survey on [faculty](#) governance sent to presidents and faculty leaders at every four-year institution accredited to grant bachelor's degrees in liberal arts. They screened the data to only include public institutions with a Carnegie classification ranging from "bachelor's" to "research university," since those are the schools most likely to have faculty [unions](#)

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Porter will present the study's results on Saturday, Nov. 20, at the Annual Conference for the Association for the Study of Higher Education at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown.

"To my knowledge, this is the first time someone has really looked at this," Porter said. "And the findings for faculty salaries were strong [on the influence by unions], which meets with what people would expect faculty unions should be doing. But that's also in contrast to some studies that don't find much of a difference in salaries between unionized and

non-unionized faculties."

"This is a serious study, and very well done," Ronald G. Ehrenberg, the director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute and a professor of industrial and labor relations and economics at Cornell University, said in The Chronicle of Higher Education's story about the study.

Survey assesses faculty participation in 15 areas

The faculty governance survey initially asked respondents to describe the extent of faculty participation in institutional decision-making for 15 different items: faculty appointments, tenure promotions, curriculum, degree requirements, degrees offered, size of faculty in disciplines, construction programs, teaching loads, appointing deans, appointing chairs, faculty salary scales, individual faculty salaries, budgetary planning, faculty governance and institution-wide committees.

Porter says the problem with understanding the effect of unions on faculty influence is that unionization is often driven by low levels of faculty influence on their institutions, since "each affects the other." So he had to find a measure of unionization that was not affected by low levels of faculty influence. Porter realized that a statistical technique called "instrumental variables" could solve this problem. He used state employee collective bargaining rights to create a proxy of unionization that is unrelated to faculty influence.

The study found unions' most significant faculty influence to be on salaries, followed by the appointment of department chairs and the selection of institution-wide committees. There were also more modest effects on tenure promotion, curriculum and teaching loads, although Porter says those findings "weren't very robust."

"The teaching loads wouldn't be that unexpected because a lot of these collective bargaining agreements sort of spell out job duties and teaching loads," he said.

The study also didn't find unions to have any negative effects on faculty influence in decision-making. Porter reports that there was either no difference or positive differences when comparing faculty influence by unionized vs. non-unionized institutions.

He plans to continue studying one perceived negative effect of unions on faculty productivity.

"One of the concerns in the literature is what unions do because they want to codify compensation and also work duties, and it's difficult to monitor research output," Porter said. "So one of the arguments is that these unionized schools tend to focus on certain number of courses and so forth, which then may cause a drop in research productivity because that's not as rewarded. And that might be one of the reasons that you don't tend to see that many unions at big research universities, such as Iowa State and Iowa."

Expect more unionization at public institutions

But he writes in the paper that he expects there will be an increased call for unionization at large public universities with continuing cuts to state appropriations nationwide.

"State appropriations are certainly going to continue to go down and I would be astonished if they went up," he said. "I think it's this idea that faculty are basically getting squeezed all over. And so then the question becomes, 'If unionization increases, what is this going to mean for institutions?' It's really hard to figure that out, but I've come up with a way that gets at the true causal effects of unions."

And in the final analysis, the study tells him that faculty unions may be good for some institutions, but not worth all the time and effort for others.

"I don't know that I'd necessarily say unions are a good thing across the board," Porter said. "I think a lot depends on where you are and what you want to accomplish. If you're at a school where you don't have any faculty voice and your pay is low, then it's probably not a bad idea."

Provided by Iowa State University

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