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Academic Collective Bargaining: Patterns and Trends

Curtis R. Sproul¹, Neil Bucklew², Jeffrey D. Houghton³

Introduction

The purpose of the current paper is to examine recent trends in academic collective bargaining and to compare these trends with the current unionization and collective bargaining situation in other major industries in the United States. While mainstream views of unions might induce thoughts of blue collar workers in mines, mills, and manufacturing plants, today's union members are much more likely to wear white collars than blue. In particular, union representation in American universities has reached an all-time high, with faculty unions in place at nearly one third of all university campuses (Wickens, 2008). Indeed, the most recent data suggest that approximately 27% of all U.S. faculty, which includes some 430,000 faculty members and graduate students at more than 500 institutions and 1174 campuses, are represented by collective bargaining agreements (Berry & Savarese 2012). The highest levels of representation are for public 2-year institutions where more than 42% of the faculty covered by collective bargaining agreements (Berry & Savarese 2012). Furthermore, faculty unions have extended their reach to include part-time and adjunct faculty who now comprise more than half of higher education's teaching professionals (Wickens, 2008). Graduate student employees (GSEs), such as teaching and research assistants, are one of the most controversial and fastest growing segments of faculty representations with more than 40,000 GSEs nationwide represented by collective bargaining agreements at more than 40 universities (Berry & Savarese 2012; DeCew, 2003; Junius & Gumport, 2002; Singh, Zinni, & MacLennan, 2006). Clearly, Aronowitz's (1998) predictions that representation of faculty and GSEs would become an important part of "labor's new frontier" (pp. 174-181) continue to materialize as evidenced by the rapid 14% increase of nearly 50,000 unionized faculty members since 2006 alone (Berry & Savarese 2012).

As data such as these suggest, education in general, and higher education specifically, has slowly, methodically, and rather quietly become one of the most heavily unionized segments, with much greater representation than traditional labor segments such as steel and mining.

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Collective bargaining has historically been thought of as the domain of manufacturing and mining, with images of blue-collar workers covered in dirt after a long day working in the steel mill or coal mine. While these workers are still heavily engaged in collective bargaining and unionization, other industries have surpassed them both in terms of the number of people employed, total union members, and the percentage of industry workers who are represented by a union. Indeed, higher education is something of a "sleeping giant" within the current landscape of the labor movement. Despite such dramatic and rapid shifts, the rise of academic collective bargaining has not been especially well documented.

Unionization by Industry

To examine the size and unionization of industries within the United States we draw upon information from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Union Membership and Coverage Database (Hirsch & Macpherson, 2013; for a description of the database see Hirsch and Macpherson, 2003). The CPS is a joint effort by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (census.gov). About 60,000 households are surveyed monthly for four months. There is then an eight month break period, followed by an additional four month period of surveying. After the second four month period that household is removed permanently from the survey. The survey gathers information on various labor force statistics and breaks these down into industry categories, industry sub-categories, and occupational categories. Hirsch and Macpherson (2013) summarize this data into the Union Membership and Coverage Database, which is updated annually. The summary information presented below is from the 2014 update (Hirsch & Macpherson, 2013) reflecting 2013 CPS data.

In terms of number of employees, educational services ranks third in overall employment, behind only health care and retail, with 12,718,235 employees (see Table 1). Educational services also have the highest number of union members as well as the highest percentage of total employees represented by unions. Educational services employs almost 4 million union members, comprising about 31% of total employees (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 1

Overall Employment by Industry

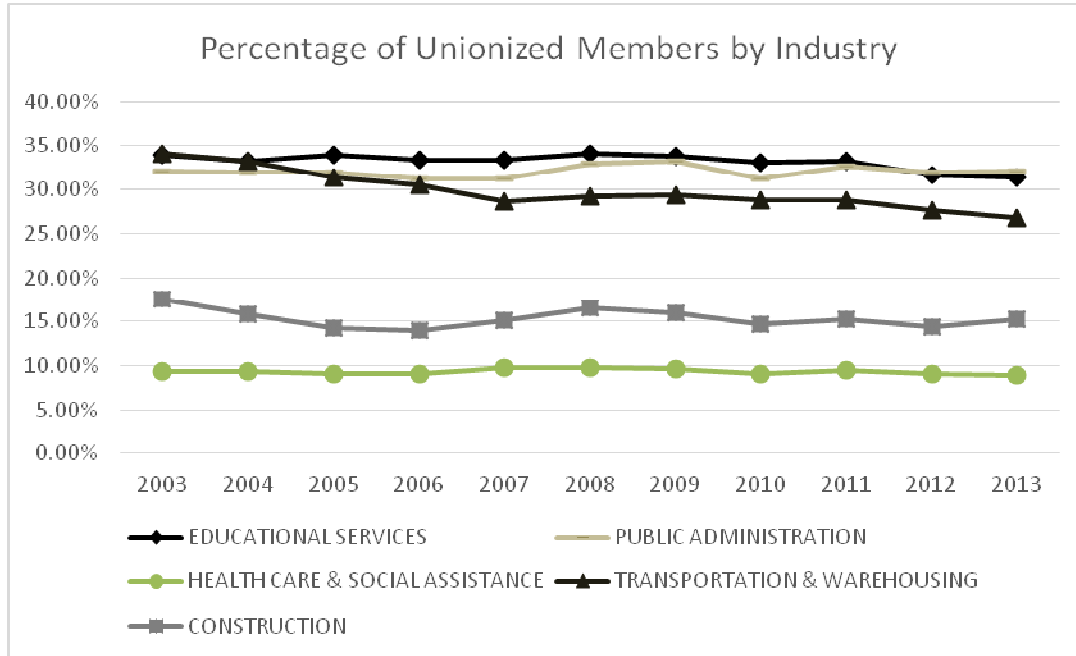
| Industry Name | Employment | Annual Growth Rate |
|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Health care & social assistance | 18,163,698 | 1.85% |
| Retail trade | 14,867,427 | 0.23% |
| Educational services | 12,718,235 | 0.94% |
| Accommodation & food services | 9,837,968 | 1.49% |
| Durable goods manufacturing | 9,022,165 | -1.13% |
| Prof., scientific, technical services | 7,955,025 | 2.28% |
| Public administration | 6,694,610 | 0.69% |
| Construction | 6,898,634 | -1.00% |
| Finance & insurance | 6,540,604 | 0.30% |
| Other services, exc. public admin. | 5,810,644 | 0.62% |

Table 2

Union Members and Percentage of Members Covered by Industry

| Industry Name | Employment | Members | Covered | Membership % |
|---------------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| Educational services | 12,718,235 | 3,988,577 | 4,430,529 | 31.36% |
| Public administration | 6,694,610 | 2,147,612 | 2,359,233 | 32.08% |
| Health care & social assistance | 18,163,698 | 1,624,932 | 1,823,136 | 8.95% |
| Transportation & warehousing | 5,724,464 | 1,532,493 | 1,625,916 | 26.77% |
| Construction | 6,898,634 | 1,058,637 | 1,119,313 | 15.35% |
| Durable goods manufacturing | 6,898,634 | 903,735 | 979,158 | 13.10% |
| Retail trade | 14,867,427 | 683,593 | 751,832 | 4.60% |
| Nondurable goods manufacturing | 5,276,365 | 551,755 | 605,913 | 10.46% |
| Utilities | 1,197,355 | 319,628 | 337,151 | 26.69% |
| Information | 2,760,721 | 263,133 | 285,996 | 9.53% |

Figure 1



Compared to other industries it becomes clear that educational services is very large and very highly unionized. In order to more closely examine collective bargaining representation, we break the major industries into 272 sub-categories. Educational services consist of four categories and shows that colleges and universities rank only behind elementary and secondary schools in terms of total employment within educational services (see Table 3).

Table 3

Total Employees in Individual Educational Services Categories (2013).

| Educational Services | Employees | % of Total |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Elementary and secondary schools | 8,661,445 | 68.1% |
| Colleges and universities, including junior colleges | 3,497,677 | 27.5% |
| Business, technical, and trade schools and training | 103,378 | 0.8% |
| Other schools, instruction, and educational services | 455,734 | 3.6% |

An examination of all 272 industry sub-categories in the United States shows that colleges and universities ranks 4th in overall number of employees. Only food services, elementary and secondary schools, and hospitals rank higher (see Figure 4). The pace of employment at colleges and universities has also been strong, increasing by 12.83% over the period 2003-2013. This rate

of growth only trails the restaurant and food service industry, which has seen substantial growth since the financial crisis and recession.

Table 4

| <i>Overall current employment by industry sub-category and cumulative growth from 2003-2013</i> | Employment | Annual Growth |
|---|------------|---------------|
| Elementary and secondary schools | 8,661,445 | 7.01% |
| Restaurants and other food services | 8,270,776 | 20.08% |
| Hospitals | 6,156,555 | 9.01% |
| Colleges and universities, including junior colleges | 3,497,677 | 12.83% |
| Justice, public order, and safety activities | 2,806,629 | 11.55% |
| Grocery stores | 2,750,883 | 8.25% |
| Insurance carriers and related activities | 2,379,282 | 8.28% |
| Department stores and discount stores | 2,158,126 | -4.79% |
| Banking and related activities | 2,069,223 | 11.17% |
| Computer systems design and related services | 1,989,898 | 47.45% |

The historical patterns of unionization in the United States were centered in manufacturing, construction, and transportation industries. This can create a misleading image of unionization being concentrated in these sectors. More recently unionization in the United States has expanded into other industries—service, retail, and governmental industries.

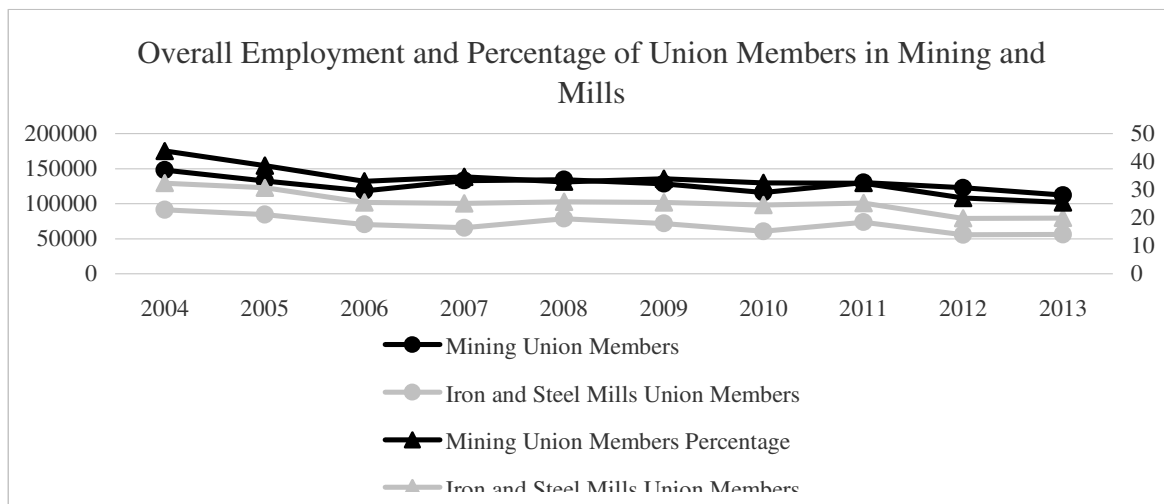
Table 5 shows the current picture of unionization in the United States based on the number of employees covered by union contracts within industry categories. The conclusion becomes clear—colleges and universities represent a much more significant industry in this regard than many of the historical homes of unions. Notably absent are iron and steel mills, which have steadily declined in overall employment and percentage of employees who are unionized (see Figure 2).

Table 5

| <i>Unionization by Employer Category in the United States</i> | |
|---|-----------|
| Employer Category | Members |
| Elementary and secondary schools | 3,485,531 |
| Justice, public order, and safety activities | 1,211,934 |
| Hospitals | 894,999 |

| Employer Category | Members |
|--|---------|
| Colleges and universities, including junior colleges | 472,969 |
| Postal Service | 428,474 |
| Grocery stores | 424,928 |
| Administration of human resource programs | 279,944 |
| Executive offices and legislative bodies | 211,177 |
| Air transportation | 219,336 |
| Motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment manufacturing | 215,030 |
| Bus service and urban transit | 209,319 |
| Individual and family services | 156,984 |
| Couriers and messengers | 176,456 |
| Electric power generation, transmission and distribution | 162,320 |
| Rail transportation | 169,615 |
| Other health care services | 150,537 |
| Administration of economic programs and space research | 130,405 |
| Services incidental to transportation | 134,078 |
| Truck transportation | 134,997 |

Figure 2.



The Union Membership and Coverage Database (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2013) also provides information on specific occupations within each industry sub-category. These occupational categories were also gathered from the CPS and total 484 individual occupational listings. The 18th largest occupation category is postsecondary teachers with 1,331,979 employees. Of that number, more than 250,000 are unionized. Table 6 shows the top 10 occupational categories based on the number of employees in that category who are represented by unions. Postsecondary teachers makeup the 9th most union members by occupation, but have the 6th highest percentage of overall employees who are union members. However, the union membership rate for postsecondary teachers is only 17.1%. This low rate compared to secondary school teachers (52.2%) and elementary and middle school teachers (47.7%) offers further opportunity for the growth of labor unions in higher education.

Table 6.

Union Members by Occupational Category

| Occupation | Employment | Members | % Unionized |
|---|------------|-----------|-------------|
| Elementary and middle school teachers | 3,048,038 | 1,454,946 | 47.7 |
| Secondary school teachers | 1,067,487 | 557,223 | 52.2 |
| Registered nurses | 2,829,985 | 480,124 | 17.0 |
| Police officers | 701,090 | 414,311 | 59.1 |
| Driver/sales workers & truck drivers | 2,930,527 | 371,729 | 12.7 |
| Janitors and building cleaners | 2,149,153 | 307,952 | 14.3 |
| Teacher assistants | 924,223 | 294,478 | 31.9 |
| Laborers; freight, stock, and material movers | 1,757,390 | 236,223 | 13.4 |
| Postsecondary teachers | 1,316,153 | 224,500 | 17.1 |
| Postal service mail carriers | 313,124 | 218,572 | 69.8 |

Academic collective bargaining in colleges and universities represents occupational categories in addition to faculty members. Examples include librarians, counselors, adjunct teachers, and graduate assistant employees. The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions (NCSCBHEP) reports that the total number of unionized employees covered by labor contracts in colleges and universities to be 432,897 (Berry & Savarese, 2012).

In summary, our analysis illustrates the overall employment impact of the educational services industry to be third of all such industry categories in the United States. Not only is it a major employer on a national basis but it is the most highly unionized industry in the nation.

Academic Collective Bargaining in the United States

The college and university industry sub-category is a significant part of the educational services industry. It is ranked 4th of 272 industry sub-categories as classified by the CPS. Within the college and university industry classification there are numerous occupational classifications (COC listings).

The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions (NCSCBHEP) has maintains a comprehensive database of information regarding unionization of faculty and affiliated professionals (including graduate student assistant employees) in the United States. The database includes figures on the number of postsecondary teachers and affiliated professionals who are covered by academic collective bargaining contracts and reports that number as of 2012 to be 432,897. Like only a few other industries, the percentage of unionized employees in colleges and universities exceeds one quarter (27% in Colleges and Universities). Some additional highlights from their most recent *Directory of U.S. Faculty Contracts and Bargaining Agents in Institutions of Higher Education* provides a picture of this phenomenon as of 2012 (Berry & Savarese, 2012):

- Two-Year/Four-Year Public Institutions: 42% of all public two year college faculty members are unionized; 25% of all public four year faculty members are unionized.
- Private Four-Year Institutions: 7% of faculty members at private four year institutions are unionized.
- Geographic Distribution by State: California has 25% of all unionized faculty in the United States; New York has 23%. Other states with a large concentration of unionized faculty are New Jersey, Illinois, Michigan, Massachusetts, Florida, Pennsylvania and Washington.
- Unions: The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Association of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA) are the three major national unions representing faculty, these three [individually or collectively] represent nearly 80% of all unionized faculty.
- Graduate Student Employees: Twenty percent of graduate student employees in the United States are unionized (65,000). Two-thirds of this group have been organized since 1995. The United Automakers Union (UAW) represents 43% of this category, and the AFT represents 26%.

Recent Trends and Patterns

Since 2000 there have been 120 new bargaining units established in colleges and universities. Twenty-two were in Illinois; 11 in Florida; and 9 in California. The remainder were distributed over 16 other states and the District of Columbia. (Berry & Savarese, 2012)

- The most active of the unions representing the new contracts was the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). By itself or in affiliation with another union it represented 79 of these new collective bargaining arrangements.
- The NCSCBHEP reports that since 2006 there have been 53,545 additional faculty represented in Academic Collective Bargaining. Of that number, AFT (individually or jointly) represents 29,499 and the NEA (individually or jointly) represents 21,070.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities represent a significant sector in the overall employment picture of the United States and an even more significant element of the field of labor-management relations. Academic collective bargaining represents a growing element within unionization within the United States. It is expanding at a faster rate than overall union growth. The expansion of graduate student employee unionization is an area of special activity. Future growth patterns will also be influenced by changes in state labor legislation and interpretation of national labor law by the National Labor Relations Board and the courts. Academic Collective Bargaining deserves additional attention from those analyzing unionization patterns in the United States.

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