Making Progress Without a Union

One of the reasons we oppose the formation of a union is that it is unnecessary for making progress at PLU on contingent faculty issues. Two initiatives specific to contingent faculty were underway, and we were making progress on the issues identified without incurring the individual union dues and costs associated with collective bargaining. These initiatives stopped in April 2013 when the union filed its petition with the NLRB. By law, these initiatives are now “on hold” until SEIU’s effort to become the legal representative of our contingent faculty is decided.

However, a separate faculty-driven initiative aimed at improving compensation for all faculty that is supported by the Board of Regents will continue to move forward.

In a broader context, an outside adversarial union that does not understand our culture of collaboration impedes the kind of faculty-driven initiatives that were already generating results. In this FAQ, we explain what was underway prior to the union filing its petition and how we would hope to address these issues going forward without a union.

Q: With a union, who would speak for the University on matters pertaining to contingent faculty, and how would this impact faculty-driven initiatives for contingent faculty?

A: The administration would speak for the University in bargaining over contingent faculty issues. The Faculty Assembly’s voice would be silenced on all matters pertaining to contingent faculty because those matters would be bargained. The authority to speak for the university on these issues (to “bargain”) would fall to the administration. The Faculty Assembly would act only on those things that affect only tenure-line faculty. Individual divisions, schools or task forces could not pursue the kind of contingent faculty initiatives that were underway but are now “on hold” because those matters would instead be bargained between the administration and the union.

Q: What were the initiatives underway prior to the union filing its petition?

A: There were three: (a) a faculty-driven initiative aimed at improving compensation for all faculty that led to a Board of Regents resolution in May 2013; (b) a faculty-driven initiative in the Division of Humanities that led to the adoption in March 2013 of a statement of principles and best practices for contingent faculty in Humanities; (c) a faculty task force that studied the issues involving PLU contingent faculty campus-wide and filed a report in May 2013.

Q: Is there a plan in place to improve faculty compensation?

A: Yes. In May 2013, as a result of a faculty initiative, the Board of Regents adopted a plan for improving faculty and staff compensation. A copy of that resolution is on the Provost website.

The adoption of the resolution was an historic step for the Board to take, and it culminates the work of the Faculty Affairs Committee in bringing this issue to the highest levels. Our success in implementing this plan and improving compensation for all faculty will depend on our ability to create new sources of revenue. This initiative is moving forward, and everyone will benefit if we are successful. A union will not change this, but a union will add costs to doing business.
Q: Would a union help with this plan to improve compensation?

A: No. The union will do nothing to help us put this plan in place. The union will not help us raise new revenue; in fact the costs associated with the collective bargaining process will drain university resources away from this initiative. Union dues will offset the positive effects of salary increases for our contingent faculty. The union will not improve the quality of our education, nor will it help improve faculty compensation.

Q: What was the faculty initiative in the Humanities Division?

A: Starting in fall 2012 – six months before the union filed its petition - the faculty in the Division of Humanities began deliberations on contingent faculty issues. In March 2013 the Humanities faculty adopted a “Statement of Principles and Best Practices Relating to Contingent Faculty.” It is meant to guide Division practices in a manner consistent with the faculty handbook. See the Provost website for a copy of this statement.

Q: Would the Humanities Division statement of best practices remain in effect under a union contract?

A: No. A union contract would specify the rules regarding wages, hours and working conditions for all contingent faculty. To the extent that any policy or best practice was different than the union contract, the law provides that the union contract would override it. Moreover, the administration, not the Faculty Assembly nor any subgroup of faculty within the university, would represent the University in bargaining. No one can promise how bargaining comes out but it is certain that a union contract would override existing PLU policy if the two were different.

Q: What was the Task Force that dealt with campus-wide issues and how was it created?

A: In the Spring of 2012 – a full year before the union filed its petition - the provost began discussions with key faculty members about issues involving contingent faculty. During the summer and fall of 2012, the provost worked with several interested faculty on putting together the best approach to address contingent faculty concerns. He consulted with faculty leaders and members of key faculty committees, and there was a wide range of opinion on how best to proceed. The task force got rolling early in 2013, with the charge from the provost to issue a report by May 31, which they did. The report may be found on the Provost website.

Q: What are some of the recommendations of the Task Force?

A: The Task Force’s main recommendations are in three categories: 1) build into our faculty governance system a more effective means of consulting contingent faculty on matters that affect them; 2) put more contingent faculty policies into the faculty handbook; and 3) require each school and division to adopt its own set of specific policies and best practices. The full report is on the Provost website.
Q: Would implementing these recommendations be possible under a union contract?

A: No. By law, the union would be the representative of all contingent faculty. The “terms and conditions of employment” for a contingent faculty member would have to be negotiated with the union. Our faculty governance system, the Faculty Assembly, the faculty committees, and the individual academic units would be prohibited from unilaterally adopting or implementing any policies pertaining to contingent faculty because all such policies must be negotiated with the union. The faculty handbook – a document that describes our shared governance system and is approved by the Faculty Assembly - would be superseded by a union contract as to contingent faculty.

Q: What’s going to happen to the Task Force recommendations?

A: We’d like to move forward on them for wider discussion and consideration, but whether we can or not will depend on the outcome of the union election.

If the union wins, our system of shared governance will end abruptly on all matters pertaining to contingent faculty and we enter a new and unpredictable era of collective bargaining. The Task Force report could not serve as a basis for an agreement, because much of that report makes reference to the Faculty Assembly’s ability to enact policy. If the union wins, the Faculty Assembly no longer has that ability, because such “policies” must be bargained.

If the union loses, we pick up where we left off before we were interrupted by the union petition. We would submit those recommendations to the PLU community through the normal process - a process where everyone can participate in the conversation free of charge, and without third party interference.

Q: What would a union contract contain?

A: Voting in a union only requires a negotiation. It does not require the two sides to agree to any particular terms. A union contract, if one was successfully negotiated, would speak to wages, hours and working conditions for contingent faculty. There is no guarantee – and no one can promise – what specific provisions a union contract would contain. The most likely provision would be a requirement that all contingent faculty pay union dues, with most of our faculty likely paying hundreds of dollars per year, and many paying perhaps over $1,000 per year in union dues. See the earlier FAQ on union dues.

Q: When is the election, how will it be conducted, who will be affected, and who can vote?

A: New ballots replacing the old ones mistakenly sent earlier by NLRB will be sent to all eligible contingent faculty voters on September 19. The results of the union election will be determined by the majority of votes cast. Ballots must be returned (not just postmarked) to NLRB no later than October 10 at 1:00 pm. All contingent faculty will be affected by the outcome of the vote regardless of whether they voted or were eligible to vote under the rules of voter eligibility established by the NLRB. There is no ability to “opt out” if the union wins the election. The list of eligible voters and the criteria for eligibility that NLRB used in creating the list are posted on the Provost website.