How Would “Collective Bargaining” Work at PLU, How Might It Affect the Way We Make Decisions, and What Kind of Dues Might Our Faculty Have to Pay?

One reason we oppose the contingent faculty union is that we do not believe the collective bargaining process will benefit our faculty. It is certainly not worth the dues SEIU will charge or the “battlefield campus climate” that SEIU typically creates. We also expect significant changes to the way we make decisions on academic policies. In this FAQ, we explain why we reach these conclusions.

Q: How does collective bargaining work?

A: Collective bargaining is another term for a negotiation. If SEIU becomes the legal bargaining representative for contingent faculty, then the PLU administration would meet with the union to negotiate over wages and other terms of employment. While both parties have an obligation to bargain in good faith, neither party has an obligation to accept any specific terms. There is no hidden pot of money available for contingent faculty. PLU would have to be certain that the pay and benefits for contingent faculty agreed to in negotiation is in the University’s long term best interest. This is exactly what we do now. There is no reason to believe that this would be any different with a union.

Q: Will I get more money if there’s a union?

A: No. Voting in a union only requires a negotiation. That does not mean more money. The results of that negotiation could be the same, worse or better than what contingent faculty have now. It would depend on individual circumstances and the outcome of negotiation. This is particularly true in this current situation at PLU where the NLRB has combined a wide range of different contingent faculty groups into the same bargaining unit. No one can promise or guarantee how this negotiation would turn out.

Q: Does SEIU have its own interests in negotiation?

A: Yes. At the top of the list of the union’s priorities will be a contract requirement that all contingent faculty join the union and pay union dues. Experience has shown that unions make this clause their highest priority in negotiations. Unions have even traded away better pay for their members in exchange for a requirement that everyone has to join the union and pay dues. This clause benefits the union, not our faculty. Experience suggests that SEIU will have little regard for individual faculty at the expense of their own interests.

Q: How will collective bargaining work for the different contingent faculty classifications?

A: We don’t know. PLU contingent faculty range from those who teach full time and receive full benefits to faculty who teach on a per course or hourly basis. “They all teach” was the union’s argument as to why these diverse groups should be combined into one unit, ignoring the differences in the needs and expectations of our contingent faculty. This aligns with their view that all faculty are “workers.”
Q: What can the union offer PLU’s contingent faculty?

A: Campaign promises. Where they have successfully negotiated contracts for contingent faculty at other schools, SEIU’s so-called “victories” have usually resulted in less than what PLU contingent faculty already have in salary and benefits.

Q: Are there any guarantees with a union?

A: The highest certainty if a union comes to PLU will be a requirement that our contingent faculty will have to pay union dues. Unions always ask for a provision that would require employees to pay union dues. If such a provision were in a contract, then all contingent faculty would pay union dues, even if they teach only one class or do not favor the union. There is no ability to “opt out” if such a contract clause were in place.

Q: How much are union dues?

A: Based on the dues SEIU charges contingent faculty at other places, dues are likely to be 1.5-2.0% of the person’s annual salary, plus a monthly fee.

- Senior lecturers in music are paid over $50 per hour and teach slightly over 200 hours per year. Their dues could be $200 per year.
- A person teaching two courses per year at PLU on a course-by-course basis could pay about $200 per year.
- Many of our full-time contingent faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences could pay $1,000 per year or more.
- Many of our full-time contingent faculty in Nursing and Business could pay well over $1,000 per year.

“What can I get for those high union dues that I can’t already get for free by taking part in the collaborative process we have in place at PLU?” That’s the question we hope all contingent faculty will answer before voting for the union.

Q: How might voting in a union affect PLU’s faculty culture?

A: If a contingent faculty union is voted in, PLU faculty would be divided – legally – into two separate groups: those who are governed by the faculty handbook, and those who would be subject to the terms of a collective bargaining agreement. This could permanently “lock in” a potential for divisiveness within the faculty or within a department or school. We do not think dividing faculty in this way is in anyone’s best interest.

Q: How might the presence of a union affect future decision making?

A: SEIU would become the legal representative of our contingent faculty. We would have to go through the union on all matters involving wages, hours and working conditions. SEIU would have the legal authority to make decisions on behalf of our contingent faculty. This raises two concerns for us.
First, individual contingent faculty could no longer negotiate contracts or terms of employment with their deans or chairs. Instead, by law, those discussions must be with SEIU – and then only between the PLU administration and SEIU. We would regret the loss of collegiality and flexibility we think this change would cause.

Second, we envision the need to centralize decision making in order to manage the academic program under a union contract. If there is a single contract covering all contingent faculty, deans and chairs will likely have significantly less discretion than they do now with regard to staffing the curriculum, for example. While we cannot predict how bargaining would come out, the most likely scenarios we see would require the central administration to manage the union contract, not deans and chairs.

Q: How else might the presence of a contingent faculty union cause a shift in decision making away from faculty, deans and chairs, and toward the central administration in setting policies?

A: The Faculty Assembly could no longer make decisions covering all faculty. “Working conditions” - things like office hours, office space and perhaps many other academic policies that affect all faculty could no longer be decided by the Faculty Assembly for all faculty. Most universities don’t have the kind of faculty engagement in setting policy that we have at PLU. In fact, our system is rare, and the union does not understand it.

We have a collegial community, and when problems arise we talk through them and work them out within our system of shared governance. Tearing that system apart into two separate pieces will bring about a major change in our faculty culture and the way we conduct business, and it’s not clear there is an upside for anyone on the faculty, either contingent or tenure-line.

The union isn’t accustomed to this kind of place. They don’t understand us. Their instincts are to be adversarial; our instincts are to be collaborative. An adversarial, divided, two-track system would damage our collegiality and hamper open communication among faculty, and between contingent faculty and their chair or dean. That would not help anyone.

Whether we can continue with the steps that were underway to address the concerns of our contingent faculty prior to the union filing its petition will depend on the outcome of the election.

We want you to understand what collective bargaining is, how it works and what its impact might be before you decide whether to vote to insert SEIU into the PLU campus community. There is also a lot of information about collective bargaining available on line. Do your own research if you have questions. No matter what source you trust, you will find that no one can guarantee what will happen in bargaining. If someone tells you differently, ask them to put that promise in writing. They will not do so, because no one can.