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Unions Hold Mostly Pluses for Faculties at Public Colleges, Study Finds

By Peter Schmidt

When faculty members discuss unionizing, the debate tends to revolve around the question of whether so banding together gives them more say over their college's affairs or actually leaves them worse off, by hurting their ability to work cooperatively with their institution's administration. A new study of public four-year colleges concludes that unionizing appears to give faculty members considerably more clout in some key areas and does not seem to do them much harm.

Unionization "greatly increases faculty influence" over faculty salary scales, individual faculty salaries, and the appointments of academic department heads and of members of institutionwide committees, concludes a paper summarizing the study's findings.

The study also found at least some evidence that unionization gave college faculty members more say over their institution's curriculum and faculty teaching loads. Unionization was found not to have a significant impact on several other key areas of college operations, such as the appointment of faculty members, tenure and promotion decisions, and policies dealing with degree requirements.

"There are basically no negative effects at all. It either had positive effects or no effects" in the areas examined, says Stephen R. Porter, an associate professor of research and evaluation at Iowa State University who conducted the study with Clinton M. Stephens, a graduate student in higher education at his institution.

"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 an e-mail after reviewing the study last week.

Mr. Ehrenberg said the study's findings "are all in accord with what people would expect."

Christine M. Wickens, who exhaustively reviewed the research on faculty unionization in a 2008 article in *Higher Education*, said on Monday that most previous studies of the impact of faculty

unionization had focused on salaries and dealt little with other areas of college governance. "With so little out there, I am happy to see this subject addressed again," she said.

Mr. Porter and Mr. Stephens plan to present their findings this week in Indianapolis, at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. They based their analysis on a 2001 national survey of faculty senate leaders and college presidents at four-year colleges, working with data from 341 institutions where at least one of the two responded. Those surveyed were asked to describe the extent of faculty participation in 15 different areas on a survey instrument that let them account for differences between various academic divisions and departments in terms of faculty empowerment.

Telling Cause From Effect

Perhaps the biggest methodological problem the researchers faced was finding a way to sort out which aspects of colleges' operations were a result of unionization and which aspects likely helped cause the unionization to take place. A finding that unionized faculties are lower paid than nonunionized faculties, for example, might reflect that collective bargaining had done little to improve wages, or it might reflect that frustration over low wages often leads to unionization.

The researchers sought to measure the impact of unionization itself through the statistical technique of using an "instrumental variable"—or, in other words, examining an influence on union activity that had nothing to do with the college policies they were studying, to determine which college policies appeared more attributable to the factors fostering unionization than to unionization itself. The analysis took state collective-bargaining laws into account as a rough proxy for measuring which states had conditions that were union-friendly and then teased out whether unionized colleges were more likely than others operating in the same labor-related conditions to empower their faculties.

Past studies of how unionization affects faculty compensation have produced mixed results, with some finding that unionization had no impact on salaries at all, and others saying its impact was positive but modest. In trying to reconcile such findings with their own conclusion that unionized faculties have more say over the setting of faculty salary scales and decisions about individual faculty salaries, Mr. Porter and Mr. Stephens say studies focusing on mean salaries might miss differences between institutions in how salaries are distributed. It is also possible, they say, that faculty unions' impact on pay comes mainly through their influence on the associated

workloads, which studies focused solely on mean salaries would miss.

Skeptics of faculty unions as a tool for improving work conditions note that the power of bargaining units tends to be limited by state laws prohibiting them from striking and by their colleges' reliance on state officials for funds, which limits the institutions' ability to accede to union demands. Critics of faculty unionization also commonly argue that it actually erodes faculty members' power, by creating an adversarial relationship with the administration and leaving college officials unwilling to cede to their faculty any power not specifically spelled out in a contract. Faculty advocates also see a risk that unionization leaves faculty members less willing to become involved in shared governance, out of a belief that the union will adequately represent their interests.

Mr. Porter and Mr. Stephens did not find anything in their study results to affirm such fears and criticisms. Their paper says they were surprised, however, to find that unionization did not appear to give faculty members significantly more power over faculty appointments and over tenure and promotion decisions, all areas of college operations that tend to be a focus of collective-bargaining agreements.

John W. Curtis, director of research and public policy for the American Association of University Professors, says the study's bottom-line conclusion that unions have a positive effect on overall faculty conditions does not surprise him. "We emphasize very strongly the supportive role that unions play in establishing and maintaining shared governance," he says.

But David A. Hollinger, a professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley who has expressed concern that the AAUP's emphasis on unionization represents a departure from its mission, is not convinced that unionization is the right choice for faculty members at every public college campus. "There is some record of unions bargaining away policy influence in return for salary increases," he said in an e-mail. Generally, he said, faculty unions "are more or less valuable depending on the circumstances at particular institutions and are especially valuable when you have weak [faculty] senates."

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