REFLECTIONS OF A RANK-AND-FILE FACULTY UNION ORGANIZER AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

VICTOR G. DEVINATZ
Illinois State University, Normal

ABSTRACT

Wheeler and McClendon's model provides an excellent framework for understanding the dynamics of faculty union organizing drives, many of which occur at public universities. Since few faculty members are ideologically committed to unionism, it is important to utilize the rational calculation path and the emotional path during the organizing campaign, as opposed to the political/ideological beliefs path. When collecting authorization cards, the rational calculation path can be effectively utilized, but for a successful election vote to occur, the emotional path must also be successfully used. Based on the author's personal organizing experience, this article provides tips, consistent with the use of the rational calculation path, for faculty union organizers to use when collecting authorization cards. In addition, there is a discussion on the importance of utilizing the emotional path to achieve a union victory in faculty certification elections.

Although college and university faculty are not traditionally viewed as a widely unionized occupational group in the United States, faculty representation by unions has increased substantially since the arrival of faculty collective bargaining in the 1960s [1]. According to Rhoades' figures, 242,221 faculty members on 1,057 campuses were covered by collective bargaining agreements in 1994 [2]. Unions represent nearly 44% of full-time faculty (if part-time faculties are added in, the figure drops to 26%) on 29% of all campuses throughout the United States. While faculty members at research universities remain

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largely nonunion, the major exceptions are the unionization of the faculties at the State University of New York system and Rutgers University (New Jersey). Considering only full-time faculty in public universities, union density rises to 63% of full-time faculty members and 60% of institutions. If we eliminate the public research universities from our count, union representation expands to include 89% of all faculty members. With respect to the 1994 union densities for the entire workforce (16%) and for the private sector workforce (12%), college and university faculty experienced considerably higher unionization rates [2].

During the early 1970s, the organization of faculty unions occurred primarily because of dissatisfaction with current salary levels and fringe benefits [3]. Within several years, however, faculty dissatisfaction spread beyond these economic concerns. The issues included: 1) fewer opportunities, limiting jobs for new entrants and mobility for senior faculty members; 2) higher levels of difficulty in receiving tenure; 3) deteriorating working conditions due to increased teaching loads, outside income restrictions, a decline in sabbatical availability, and the encouragement of early retirement; and 4) threatened cutbacks for research staff, administrative professionals, and part-time/temporary faculty [4]. Due to these concerns, faculty collective bargaining agreements in the mid-1970s and 1980s included contractual clauses dealing with personnel issues (specifically, appointment, dismissal, tenure, seniority, staff reduction, and promotion) and governance issues (that is, the faculty member's perceived role in institutional decision making) [3].

In the early 1990s, a new set of problems emerged in academia. State budget crises in higher education led to the down-sizing of colleges and universities, the scaling back and/or elimination of academic programs resulting in (at times) faculty layoffs [5]. In addition, attacks on faculty governance, tenure, and academic freedom escalated [6, 7] combined with an increasing workload for the average faculty member. In the early 1990s, faculty members were working an average of 54 hours per week at their jobs, compared with a 45-hour-per-week average in 1977 [6].

With the start of the 21st century, the severity of problems confronting college and university faculty has intensified. Continuing attacks on the tenure system [8], a dramatic increase in the hiring of part-time faculty since 1970 [9, 10], the growth and implementation of distance learning programs [2], low salary increases, and the corporatization of the university with its consequent threat for the traditional shared governance system between faculty, administrators, and university governing boards [11] have all led to continuing interest in faculty unionization. A number of these problems even contributed to the occurrence of faculty organizing drives at public research universities, such as the successful campaign at Southern Illinois University and the extremely close but unsuccessful certification election vote at the University of Minnesota, in the late 1990s [12, 13].

THE WHEELER AND MᴄCLENDON THEORY OF EMPLOYEE SUPPORT FOR UNIONIZATION

A useful framework for understanding the development, process, and outcome of organizing drives is the integrative model of union joining developed by Wheeler and McClendon [14]. This theory postulates that there are three "paths" leading to union formation. One path, the rational calculation path, involves each employee's making a decision on whether to support and vote in favor of union representation based on the individual's subjective judgment of the benefits and costs from union representation. If the employee believes that the projected benefits will exceed the projected costs of unionization, then the employee will vote for the union. However, if the employee judges that the costs will outweigh the benefits, the employee will cast a vote against union representation [15].

A second path, the emotional path, posits that an employee will act against an employer and move toward supporting unionization if an individual experiences either a particular threat or a specific frustration generated by the employer with respect to the employee's current employment conditions. This can occur, for example, if the employer lowers pay or refuses to grant employees pay raises. However, this support for union representation may be altered by the presence of facilitating conditions, including solidarity, instrumentality, and saliency, or inhibiting conditions. Facilitating conditions involve the occurrence of certain events or leaders making unionization appear attractive, while inhibiting conditions include fear of employer sanctions against the employee for supporting unions, such as disciplining and/or firing the employee for pro-union activity, and norms opposed to supporting unionization. The third (and final) path, the political/ideological beliefs path, posits that an individual will support the formation of a union based on the employee's ideological commitment to unionization [14].

BACKGROUND TO THE ISUFA ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN

The first meeting to explore the possibility of conducting a unionization campaign at Illinois State University (ISU) was held at the end of July 1998 by the Illinois Education Association (IEA). It was led by Hazel Loucks, IEA's higher education director at the time, and six faculty members attended. A second exploratory meeting was held early in September 1998, attended by approximately 25 faculty members. A few other meetings were held in September to consider the possibility of organizing the faculty at ISU. This initial interest in unionization was motivated by faculty concern over the perceived erosion of shared governance at the university, combined with years of fairly minimal pay raises in a state that was doing well economically.

A meeting was held at the end of September 1998 with the president of the local American Federation of Teachers (AFT) chapter on campus, to discuss the affiliation of the organizing committee that was beginning to form. The AFT had competed against the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in a certification election vote in the late 1980s. The AFT president believed that unionization could not succeed at ISU at this time. Based on this view, the organizing committee decided to affiliate the Illinois State University Faculty Association (ISUFA) with the National Education Association (NEA) and the IEA.

Beginning in October 1998, the organizing committee, composed of approximately 15 faculty members, met once or twice a week in the evenings through the beginning of December 1998 to hammer out the ISUFA platform. The committee distributed the platform to all tenured/tenure-track faculty members in December 1998 and January 1999. At the end of January 1999, a public meeting held to officially launch the ISUFA was attended by the press and approximately 70 faculty members.

During the 1999 spring semester, the ISUFA engaged in an assessment of all tenured/tenure track faculty members, largely through departmental representatives. For departments with no representatives, faculty activists called these departmental faculty members from the IEA office in both April 1999 and June 1999. Approximately 580 of the 680 faculty members were contacted, and the union discovered that approximately one-third of the faculty members favored unionization, one-third were opposed, and one-third were neutral concerning faculty collective bargaining. Buoyed by these results, the ISUFA decided to launch an authorization card drive beginning at the end of August 1999.

TACTICS USED IN THE COLLECTION OF AUTHORIZATION CARDS

As the major ISUFA organizer in the College of Business (COB), I was responsible for collecting authorization cards from faculty members in three of the four COB departments—management and quantitative methods (MQM); marketing; and finance, insurance and law (FIL). I also talked with and attempted to collect cards from a few faculty members in the department of accounting, although since the union had a fairly active representative in this department, my contact with these faculty members was much more limited than in the other three departments.

Through the collection of authorization cards, I was surprised to learn that many of my COB colleagues possessed a general lack of knowledge of the role and activities of unions and the process of collective bargaining. This lack of knowledge was more readily apparent among faculty members opposed to or neutral toward unionization, although a number of pro-union faculty members that I talked with also shared misconceptions about unions and the collective

bargaining process. Thus, in most of my discussions with COB faculty members about unionization, I found myself trying to educate them about the role of unions and the collective bargaining process rather than trying to convince them to support the union and sign an authorization card.

Since union organizing campaign success depends on effective one-on-one communication [16, 17], to obtain faculty member support, I visited the faculty members in their offices at a time when it was convenient for them and they were alone. Since I knew virtually all of the faculty members that I visited, I wasted little time in raising the issue of faculty unionization. Even though the union had only recently concluded its assessment, to gauge current feelings about faculty collective bargaining at ISU, I would specifically ask the faculty member how s/he felt about unionization at ISU. If the faculty member stated that s/he was in favor of unionization, I would then discuss the authorization card drive with him/her. In this discussion, I would tell him/her that the union needed to collect signed authorization cards from a minimum of 30% of the tenured/tenure-track faculty at ISU so that the ISUFA could obtain a secret-ballot certification election sanctioned by the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board (IELRB). In addition, I stressed that the signing of an authorization card was a private matter and that only the staff union organizer and the IELRB would know which faculty members signed cards. I emphasized that neither the university nor the college administration would be aware of who signed authorization cards, in order to minimize fear of administrative retribution.

Finally, I told these faculty members that although one could sign an authorization card without supporting the union or planning to vote for the union in the representation election, I emphasized that the ISUFA wanted only faculty members who were in favor of the union to sign authorization cards. I explained to these faculty members that the union wanted to gauge its base of support from the signed authorization cards. Therefore, I told faculty members who were "neutral" that they should not sign authorization cards merely to be agreeable or because they thought that having a certification election would be a good idea.

At this point, many faculty members who were pro-union would tell me the reasons why they were in favor of the union and would sign a card. Concerns over salary issues (ISU's salaries lagged behind those of comparable universities), the perceived lack of faculty input in university governance, the belief that there was a decline in professional standards, individual faculty members feeling that they had not been treated fairly by the college administration, faculty members feeling that they no longer had any control over their work situations, and the recent revision of the faculty evaluation process were issues that contributed to the support for faculty unionization among COB faculty members. Thus, no single reason or even a couple of related issues generated support for the union, but rather, a number of separate concerns.

Although the majority of COB union supporters signed cards, a number of pro-union faculty members in the college refused to do so. In most of these

situations, the pro-union faculty members who refused to sign cards were tenure-track faculty who were as yet untenured, but (usually) let me know in an indirect manner about their concern of administrative retribution if it was discovered that they had signed a card. For example, one assistant professor told me that he was "officially neutral" because he was untenured, but stated, "I encourage you to continue to do what you are doing." In these situations, I did not pressure the faculty members to sign an authorization card but instead thanked them for spending the time to meet with me.

However, during my initial visits, a few tenured professors who were in favor of the union also refused to sign cards because of fear of administrative retribution. In such situations, I did not push them to sign a card but discussed with them the reasons why they were in favor of faculty collective bargaining. In addition, I reiterated that in addition to me, only the ISUFA staff organizer and the IELRB would have knowledge of their signing of an authorization card. Because they were pro-union, I made multiple visits to these faculty members to provide them with more information about the union. Through these subsequent visits, many of these faculty members eventually signed authorization cards.

My approach to faculty members who were clearly anti-union was considerably different. Once they told me that they opposed faculty unionization, I thanked them for meeting with me. I did not spend time trying to change their viewpoint or to engage them in discussion. However, if they told me why they were opposed to unionization, I would often spend a little time responding to the issues they raised. Reasons cited by faculty members for opposing unionization included: fear that the union would protect "lazy" faculty members; contentment with the way things are now; the popularity of the new ISU president and provost (even union supporters felt very positive about the relatively new administration); the payment of union dues; the feeling that the union would not be of any benefit to them personally; concern that the union would promote an adversarial climate between faculty and administrators; belief that the union would create another layer of bureaucracy; the feeling that unions are needed for blue collar workers but not for professional employees; and concern that the union would treat everyone the same and there would be no incentive for excellent performance. However, in spite of our differences concerning faculty unionization, virtually all of the COB faculty members who were opposed to unionization were polite to me when I was talking to them in their offices.

Faculty members who informed me that they were "neutral" concerning unionization were much more problematic to deal with because, as I discovered, this group actually was quite heterogeneous with respect to their viewpoints concerning unionization. Some of these "neutral" faculty members were actually opposed to unionization but did not want to tell me this, (maybe) because they felt that I would become upset or that they would insult me. When I asked these faculty members their position on unionization, they told me that they were "neutral" but that they would like to see more information concerning the union

before they made a final decision. However, when I asked them if they had read the regular newsletters that the union had distributed to them, they admitted that they had not read them. Upon hearing such an answer, to get their "true" views I would follow up by asking, "If there were a union election held next semester, how do you think you would vote? Positive, negative, or not vote at all?" When I asked them this question, most of these faculty members stated that they would probably vote against union representation.

As for other "neutral" faculty members, I discovered they were actually anti-union when I responded to their questions concerning unionization. This sentiment appeared to become stronger and more apparent in these faculty members the more questions that they asked of me.

Finally, some faculty members who claimed that they were "neutral" toward unionization appeared to be actually "neutral." This particular group often asked me questions about faculty unionization or proceeded to list both the positive and negative aspects of unionization from their point of view. With this group of faculty members, I engaged in much discussion, attempting to respond to their negative feelings concerning organizing, and visited them in their offices multiple times until they expressed either a positive or a negative view concerning faculty unionization.

TACTICS UTILIZED DURING THE
ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Having collected authorization cards from over 40% of the tenured/tenure track faculty at ISU, the ISUFA filed for a certification election with the IELRB on December 10, 1999. The campaign for the union's representation election was officially launched on January 20, 2000, early in the spring semester, with a buffet lunch held for all tenured/tenure-track faculty members. Through the beginning of February, the ISUFA's major problem was attempting to educate and mobilize a faculty that had little knowledge of either unions or the mechanics of collective bargaining. Up to this point, the union experienced a minimal amount of opposition to the organizing campaign from the university administration. In addition, no organized faculty opposition had emerged. However, the dynamics of the campaign had changed by the middle of February with the establishment of an anti-union faculty group, the Faculty for Shared Governance (FSG).

The FSG neither explicitly identified itself nor its organizational structure until relatively late in the drive. At this time, the group referred to itself as "a loosely-knit alliance of faculty members from all across campus" with "no formal leadership structure" or "official steering committee" but with "an editorial board in crafting and editing our memoranda." Three faculty members from College of Arts and Science departments "served as the public spokespersons for the group," which included a politically conservative economics professor, a self-described "pro-labor liberal" from the political science department, and a former chair of

the English department. Eight additional faculty members from a variety of departments throughout the university served as editorial board members. Finally, the anti-union group claimed that none of its members served as an "administrator" but that all of its members were "full-time, tenure-track faculty members" [18].

Throughout its short life, the FSG focused its activities around the distribution of informational memoranda to faculty members through the university's e-mail system, as well as holding debates between union representatives and FSG representatives in several of the university's colleges. However, FSG members did not appear to participate in many (if any) one-on-one discussions with ISU faculty members concerning the union organizing drive.

The FSG focused its opposition to the union around two major themes. The first theme was that unionization would lead to the standardization of resources (e.g., teaching loads, research expectations, graduate student assistance, travel support, etc.) among the different departments and colleges in the university. The second theme was that collective bargaining would lead to the creation of an adversarial relationship between the faculty and the university administration. Throughout its e-mail communications to the faculty, the FSG continually reinforced both of these arguments as its major positions for opposing faculty unionization.

The presence of the FSG and its activities affected the tactics that I used in my communications with COB faculty members. I continued to maintain one-on-one contact with faculty members who had signed authorization cards (or were pro-union) and those that were neutral with respect to faculty collective bargaining. Although ISUFA members responded to the FSG's messages through the e-mail system, the anti-union group's memoranda raised significant concerns about unionization and collective bargaining among some pro-union faculty members as well as among those faculty members who were neutral. During this time, I found myself responding to these concerns rather than merely providing information about faculty collective bargaining. While a number of the FSG's memoranda were opinions of what the FSG felt would happen at the university if the union won the certification election, some of the memoranda contained factual inaccuracies about the union's positions on a number of issues.

CONCLUSION: APPLYING THE WHEELER AND McCLENDON FRAMEWORK TO THE ISUFA ORGANIZING DRIVE

The IEA staff organizers who worked with the union and my colleagues on the ISUFA Steering Committee were quite surprised with my success in collecting authorization cards from COB faculty members. In fact, from the three departments (MQM, marketing, FIL) in the COB for which I was responsible,

I collected authorization cards from 47.1% of the eligible faculty. A number of veterans from the union organizing drive in the late 1980s were astounded by this figure because there had been very little support among COB faculty members during the first organizing drive.

To what do I attribute this success in collecting cards? In the first place, I believe that my generally good relations and positive reputation among the vast majority of COB faculty members enabled me to get an initial hearing among my colleagues. Being viewed as a competent scholar and teacher, and not a dissident or a malcontent, provided me with the opportunity to comfortably approach most faculty members in these three departments. Another advantage that I had with respect to authorization card collection was my academic knowledge and expertise in the fields of labor relations and union organizing. Since I was interviewed widely for almost a decade by the local and national media on labor relations issues, most COB faculty members believed that this type of external service enhanced my credibility as a labor relations expert.

I also learned that the "hard sell" approach to promoting the union and in collecting authorization cards among COB faculty members was an ineffective tactic. Much better was the "soft sell" approach, which involved answering faculty members' questions and addressing their concerns about unionization and collective bargaining. By addressing these concerns, I demonstrated to faculty members how the union could benefit them personally, thus successfully using the rational calculation approach outlined in the Wheeler and McClendon model [14].

I also found that it was important to keep in touch with faculty members on a regular and informal basis to see whether they had developed any new concerns or questions about unionization. When given the opportunity, I would communicate to them how faculty unionization could address their concerns, improve their personal situation, and provide benefits about which they cared. However, I did not try to change faculty members' minds or to argue with faculty members who were, or had become, bitterly opposed to unionization.

One thing that I learned through talking with COB faculty members during the unionization drive was that appealing to faculty members on a class basis was not a particularly effective strategy. This approach lacked credibility because most COB faculty members do not necessarily view themselves as part of a broader collective group or as members of the working class. Some, however, see a divergence of interests between faculty members and administrators on a number of major issues and view unionization as a way to protect their interests vis-à-vis administrators. Thus, because of these views, very few COB faculty members actually possessed an ideological commitment to unionism, which indicated that the political/ideological beliefs path outlined in the Wheeler and McClendon

model [14] was not a particularly effective route for building or generating union support.

Faculty members not viewing themselves as part of a broader collective group reinforces an ideological orientation that exists in university faculty. Referred to as professionalism, this orientation, according to Meisenhelder, "is grounded in an individualistic consciousness," which requires that faculty respond to their work situation "through competition within themselves, other faculty, and, particularly, with other workers in order to secure the rewards of professional status" [19, p. 382]. This professionalism reinforces both the professional culture and political beliefs of faculty members, encouraging them to oppose unionization. Because of this, the political/ideological beliefs path outlined in the Wheeler and McClendon model [14] will generally act as a negative influence in faculty union organizing drives, which was the situation that had occurred during the ISU organizing campaign.

Unfortunately, professionalism fails to address the problems confronting the professoriate as a collective entity. Faculty members continue to compete against one another for continually shrinking resources because they see themselves "as a self-governing community of independent intellectuals," which means that they do not view it as a necessity that they organize as *employees* on the job. Refusing to recognize themselves as employees has other significant consequences as well. Faculty members are generally reluctant to establish alliances with other university employees (nontenure track faculty members, clerical/administrative workers, maintenance workers, food service workers, etc.) or with other intellectual workers in the teaching profession, such as primary and secondary school teachers. Such disunity makes it more difficult to obtain more resources for the educational industry as a whole from state governments.

Finally, the union was ineffective in successfully using Wheeler and McClendon's emotional path [14] throughout the organizing campaign. There were no specific issues among COB faculty members (or even among ISU faculty members as a whole) that were viewed as specific threats or caused major frustrations for the faculty as a whole on the job. However, as outlined above, the union opposition was very effective in appealing emotionally to the anti-union sentiments of the faculty members.

Based on a formal survey conducted by the NEA approximately six months after the election, it appears that the two issues the FSG emphasized in its campaign resonated with many ISU faculty members. They came to believe that collective bargaining would adversely affect either their departmental or individual situations (or both) and would contribute to the development of more adversarial relations between faculty members and university administrators. According to the NEA postelection survey, 67% of union opponents expressed the belief that it was either extremely likely or very likely that if the ISUFA had

won the election, faculty members would forfeit their autonomy in negotiating salary and/or course loads. With respect to the loss of departmental autonomy, 63% of union opponents stated that such an outcome was either extremely likely or very likely to occur if the union had achieved victory. Finally, with regard to the creation of an adversarial climate on campus, the survey indicated that 81% of union opponents believed that if the ISUFA had been certified, it would have led to an increase in polarization between the professoriate and the university administration [20].

This concern that unionization will lead to the development of an adversarial relationship between employees and managers has been found in other white collar settings as well. Research has indicated that a primary concern of white-collar workers during unionization campaigns is the fear that unions will generate conflict-ridden workplaces [21]. Such workers are less likely to vote in favor of unionization if they believe that union representation will lead to strikes [22, 23]. In addition, this fear extends beyond the occurrence of walkouts to the belief that the workplace will be in "a state of perpetual conflict if the organizing campaign succeeds" [21, p. 182].

Organizing college and university faculty members in the early years of the 21st century is a difficult task. However, the probability of achieving success is definitely enhanced if the union can effectively utilize the rational calculation path and the emotional path of the Wheeler and McClendon model [14]. As outlined in this article, the rational calculation path can successfully be utilized in the early stages of the organizing drive to educate faculty members and to collect authorization cards. However, to achieve success in the certification election, the union must solidify its support by emotionally appealing to a majority of faculty members on at least one or two issues that cut across disciplinary boundaries. If these heterogeneous faculty members are not united around such issues, it will be difficult to translate the initial support for the union into a victory in the representation election vote.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Victor G. Devinatz
Department of Management and Quantitative Methods
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790-5580
e-mail: vgdevin@ilstu.edu