

**GRADUATE STUDENT EMPLOYEES AND  
THEIR PROPENSITY TO UNIONIZE:  
PART I, A HEURISTIC APPROACH**

**JOEL CHANVISANURUK**

**BARRY M. RUBIN**

**ANN KEARNS**

**RICHARD S. RUBIN**

**KELLEY McCOY**

*Indiana University, Bloomington*

**ABSTRACT**

At universities across America the number of successful union drives among graduate student employees has increased dramatically over the past 10 years. However, the failed organizing elections at Cornell and Yale have challenged the assumption that graduate students likely would support an organizing drive. The purpose of this research was to identify those perceptions that determine a graduate student employee's propensity to join a union. These perceptions were measured through the application of a model that separates the psychological determinants to unionize into three categories: work environment, influence, and beliefs about unions. The results of the statistical analysis indicate that beliefs about unions are the strongest determinant of graduate student employees' propensity to unionize.

A group of students in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) formed the first labor union of graduate student employees. Since 1969, 25 student organizing drives at universities across the country have resulted in union representation [1]. Of these, 12 were formed just in the past few years, tripling graduate student union representation to almost 40,000.

Increasing budgetary constraints have forced universities to depend on graduate student employees to teach larger sections and higher level courses. These increased demands are commonly linked to the rise in graduate student employee unionization [1]. Initially, rather than hiring more full-time faculty, universities increased their enrollments in lower-level courses and relied on graduate teaching assistants to teach larger sections [2]. This trend has led to graduate students being assigned as the sole instructors in higher-level courses [1]. Time demands—because of these increased responsibilities—coupled with insufficient compensation packages often top the list of complaints during organizing drives. In fact, these are the primary topics addressed in negotiations between graduate student employee unions and universities. While these traditional bread-and-butter issues of wages, hours, and working conditions appear to be the driving force underlying graduate student unionization, research suggests that the factors which influence the propensity to unionize represent a more complex phenomenon.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The organizing efforts of graduate student employees began with that group of students on the Madison campus at the University of Wisconsin. Spurred by legislation that would deny out-of-state students full tuition remission, students first banded together to form the Teaching Assistants Association in 1966 [2]. Though the precipitating legislation eventually was withdrawn, the students' fear of similar legislation fueled their drive toward a "structure agreement" between the Teaching Assistants Association and the university. Breaking new ground, the Teaching Assistants Association won a representation election and began bargaining in 1969. In 1974, in an effort to increase its leverage and influence, the University of Wisconsin's Teaching Assistants Association affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

Ensuing organizing drives have shared many characteristics of the original drive at Madison. Motivations for union drives among graduate students usually include demands for salary and benefits commensurate with their workload, as well as more rights-driven motivations concerning impingement of work demands on a graduate student's academic pursuits [2]. Graduate student employee union drives typically confront debates over classification of graduate students either as "employees" or "students," as well as battles for institutional or legal recognition. An assumption appears to have emerged that graduate students likely would support an organizing drive. Not until very recently has this assumption been challenged.

In October of 2002, graduate student employees at Cornell University elected not to unionize [3]. While the impetus for organizing was based on graduate students seeking a voice in their working conditions, the anti-union students based their campaign on their discomfort with the choice of the UAW as their union representative. In an open letter published in the Cornell student newspaper,

proponents of unionization stated—among other things—that the organizing campaign, “. . . failed to ground itself in the issues important to graduate student employees.” In the Cornell election, graduate student employees seemed to be more concerned about the union than about their working conditions. This concern also emerged shortly thereafter at Yale University.

In May of 2003, the highly publicized organizing drive at Yale University was narrowly defeated by a vote of 694-651 [4]. The motivating factors were not different from those present at other institutions that had experienced successful organizing drives: increased wages, improved working conditions, and impartial grievance procedures. The issues surrounding the source of tension between the student employees and the administration also were not different from those present on other campuses. As at Cornell, what differed in the Yale experience was the unexpected shift in its graduate students’ attitudes. Criticism of the traditional approach to union organizing also was cited for this narrowly failed attempt. Some blame a culture clash between traditional union organizing techniques and the nontraditional population of graduate student employees [5].

Perhaps graduate student employees are not as receptive to the organizing strategies regularly used with other groups of workers. Both the Cornell and Yale experiences heighten the level of uncertainty for both sides in an organizing campaign. Therefore, research on graduate student attitudes could lead to a better understanding of their propensity to join a union.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Just as unions are driven by a pragmatic business philosophy, noted expert Thomas Kochan wrote that potential union members also view unions pragmatically [6]. By analyzing several empirical studies of employee voting behavior, as well as data from the national Quality of Employment Survey, Kochan identified three distinct stages that employees go through when considering their willingness to join a union. Through further analysis of these indicators Kochan also noted threshold levels of dissatisfaction and experience that must be present to bring an employee to the next stage of willingness to join a union. Kochan’s analysis resulted in a model predicated on employee behaviors and beliefs that form “psychological determinants of the propensity to unionize” [6, p. 144]. These psychological determinants are divided into three main stages: perceptions of the work environment, perceptions of influence, and beliefs about unions (see Figure 1).

Perceptions of the work environment, the first stage identified by Kochan, addresses employees’ beliefs about traditional bread-and-butter work issues. As part of this stage, Kochan identifies the three variables: job dissatisfaction, problems with working conditions, and perceptions of inequity. He argues that employees will be more likely to unionize when they perceive inequities and are dissatisfied both with their jobs and their working conditions [6].

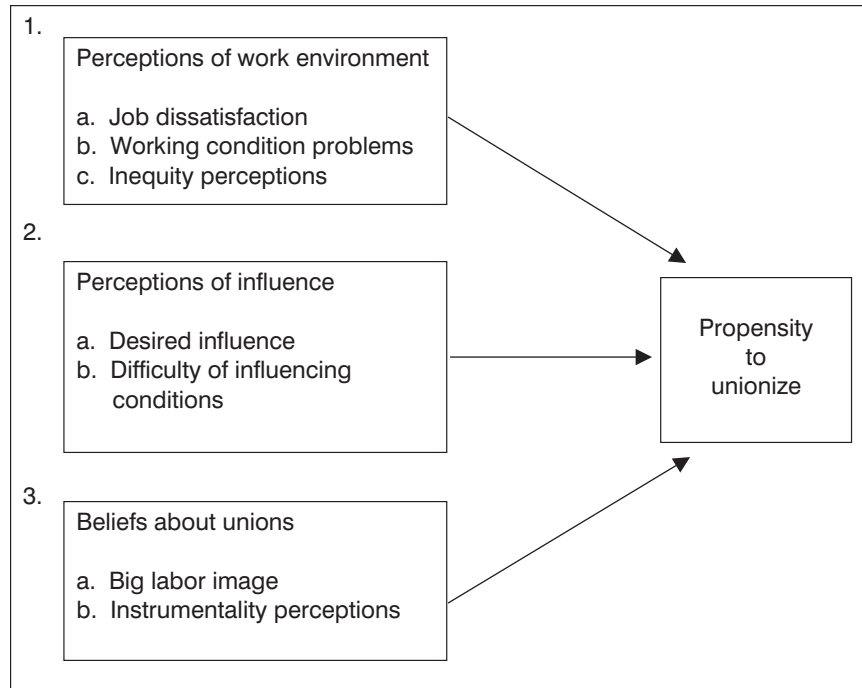


Figure 1. Psychological determinants of propensity to unionize.

Source: [6, p. 144.]

The second stage identified by Kochan is perceptions of influence and includes the two variables: desired influence and difficulty of influencing conditions. Kochan's model reflects his belief that employees first must plan on staying with their employer before they develop a desire to effect change in the workplace. After employees become aware of this desire, they can then gauge their level of influence in the workplace.

The third stage is identified by Kochan as beliefs about unions, and it consists of two variables: labor image and instrumentality perceptions. Employees will consider their perceptions of "big labor" within the context of their current circumstances, including their image of traditional employee groups that benefit from union affiliation. When considering perceptions of union instrumentality, employees will compare the leverage of a union with their individual ability to effect change.

Through his careful analysis of empirical data and employee behavior throughout the union election process, Kochan has constructed an explanatory model of the factors that shape an employee's propensity to unionize. Kochan's model is both comprehensive and flexible, which allows its application to both traditional and nontraditional work settings.

## METHODOLOGY

The Graduate and Professional Student Organization (GPSO) at Indiana University (IU) (Bloomington) is comprised of voluntary members who serve as representatives of the graduate and professional students at IU. The organization also serves as a “collective voice to inform the IU and Bloomington communities of graduate and professional student concerns” [7].

With the support of the GPSO Committee on Graduate Student Employees, a questionnaire was developed to test Kochan’s model with IU’s graduate student employees. Of the seven variables included in Kochan’s model, two were combined (employee’s desired influence in the workplace and difficulty influencing decisions) into a single variable labeled influence.<sup>1</sup> The six final variables were: job dissatisfaction, working conditions, inequity perceptions, influence, perceptions of big labor, and perceptions of union instrumentality. Each of the six variables then was operationalized with three to five Likert-scale questions. The questionnaire was constructed to measure the influence of the independent variables on the respondents’ propensity to unionize. A focus group consisting of 20 graduate students reviewed the questions to establish face validity of the scales.

The GPSO then sent to its approximately 3,000 constituents the following e-mail message with a URL connecting to the questionnaire. There were 492 responses for a 16.5 percent response rate.

As part of the GPSO’s continuing commitment to plan and implement programs that improve services to our members, we are attaching a short questionnaire. The intent of this questionnaire is to survey your opinions about work-related issues and your assigned duties as a graduate student employee at Indiana University.

The survey was developed by the GPSO with assistance from graduate students affiliated with Indiana University’s Center for Public Sector Labor Relations. It contains 22 short questions and takes no more than five minutes to complete. Each question easily and quickly can be answered simply by clicking your response to each question. Your individual responses will be anonymous, and all responses will be aggregated for data analysis. The questionnaire immediately can be accessed by clicking on the following link. If convenient, please take a few minutes now to complete it since we do need your responses by April 12th.

Thank you very much.

<http://www.spea.indiana.edu/gps/>

<sup>1</sup> This was done because the Kochan model addresses the differences between blue-collar and white-collar workers with these separate variables. This study, however, did not focus on this distinction. Therefore, this sorting did not need to be made.

With the exception of the demographic questions, the questionnaire items utilized a Likert scale to measure a respondent's propensity to unionize based on such measures as job dissatisfaction and perceptions of big labor. *Strongly agree* was given a value of 5 and *strongly disagree* was given a value of 1. Each of the independent variables—job dissatisfaction, problems with working conditions, perceptions of inequity, influence, big-labor image, and instrumentality perceptions—then was operationalized with a scale composed of the sum of three to five specific questionnaire items intended to measure the respective variable. In addition, the following demographic information was collected: respondent's sex, field of study, employment position, level of study, age, hours worked, hours contracted, and salary.

## ANALYSIS

### Factor Analysis Results

To validate the composition of the dependent and independent variables using the scales derived from the individual questionnaire items, principal components factor analysis with a Varimax rotation was done. The results of the factor analysis, specifically the rotated factor matrix, confirmed the construction of the scales for the independent variables: job dissatisfaction, influence, perceptions of big labor, and perceptions of union instrumentality. Two questionnaire items appeared to be unassociated with their intended independent variables. These items so overwhelmingly associated with other groupings and, in retrospect, intuitively fit within these groupings, that they were moved to be included where they statistically fit. This then completed the makeup of the remaining two independent variables: working conditions and inequity perceptions. Overall, the factor analysis results confirmed the final scales of the six independent variables as variables with high loadings of the appropriate questions adequately measuring their intended factors.

After performing the factor analysis, the variable of union instrumentality was chosen to serve as the dependent variable, propensity to unionize. The factor analysis did confirm the composition of the dependent variable as a composite of the four original questionnaire items intended to measure the respondent's perceptions of union instrumentality. Instrumentality was listed as one of the psychological determinants of a propensity to unionize in Kochan's model [6]. For this model, it represents a respondent's propensity to unionize, since it is the last stage a graduate employee must pass through before making the commitment to join a union. Even if all the other factors are in place for an employee to desire a union (e.g., job dissatisfaction, working condition problems, perceptions of inequity, perceived lack of influence, and favorable perceptions of big labor), but the graduate employee does not believe that unions are instrumental in addressing collective concerns, then the employee is not likely to push for unionization. The dependent variable also loaded heavily with the respondent's perception of big labor; therefore, no factor grouping was lost by moving this from an independent variable to the dependent variable.

The final analytic model for a graduate student's propensity to unionize, therefore, was comprised of union instrumentality as the dependent variable. Job dissatisfaction, working conditions, influence, and perceptions of big labor were included as the independent variables. The degree sought by the respondent (doctorate or master) was included as a control variable. Inequity perceptions eventually was dropped as an independent variable because of its lack of statistical significance.

### Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether a relationship exists, and what the nature of that relationship may be between the independent variables and the dependent variable of a graduate student employee's propensity to unionize. Although the dependent variable is not, as regression analysis assumes, an exact interval scale variable, it is structured so that an increase of one unit for this Likert-scale questionnaire item would represent a qualitatively equal jump in the respondent's propensity to unionize. Table 1 provides the results of this analysis.

The multiple regression model was estimated with the ordinary least squares (OLS) technique using the regression procedure in SAS version 8e. Of the 492 responses to the questionnaire, 38 had missing data on one or more of the questionnaire items. Thus, 454 completed surveys were used in the regression analysis. Table 1 provides the results from this analysis and shows that the overall model (with propensity to unionize as the dependent variable and job

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis of the Propensity of a Graduate Student to Unionize with Respect to Kochan's Psychological Determinants

| Independent variable      | Parameter estimate | Standardized estimate | t-Statistic | Prob >  t |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Job dissatisfaction       | 0.05283            | 0.03808               | 1.37        | .1713     |
| Working conditions*       | -0.16170           | -0.21908              | -7.05       | .0001     |
| Influence*                | -0.11753           | -0.14306              | -4.30       | .0001     |
| Perceptions of big labor* | 0.90809            | 0.69834               | 26.94       | .0001     |
| Degree                    | 0.37569            | 0.05902               | 2.35        | .0192     |
| Intercept*                | 7.70685            | —                     | 11.82       | .0001     |
| <i>F</i> -Value           |                    |                       | 238.26      |           |
| Probability > <i>F</i>    |                    |                       | 0.0001      |           |
| <i>R</i> -Square          |                    |                       | 0.7267      |           |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> -Square |                    |                       | 0.7237      |           |

\*Denotes statistical significance at the 0.001 level or better.

dissatisfaction, working conditions, influence, perceptions of big labor, and degree as the independent variables) had an  $F$ -statistic of 238.26 and a corresponding  $p$ -value of .0001. These results indicate that the overall model is statistically significant at the .0001 level, and that the hypothesis of no relationship between the dependent variable and the set of independent variables can be rejected. The adjusted  $R$ -square value of 0.7237 reveals that the overall model explains 72.37 percent of the variation in the dependent variable.

Tests were used to determine whether near-multicollinearity was obscuring the effects of the individual independent variables. These tests included the condition index for the overall regression and tolerance values for each independent variable. No evidence of significant near-multicollinearity was found among the independent variables, which allows for an unobstructed interpretation of their impacts on the dependent variable.

As Table 1 and the  $t$ -statistics associated with the parameter estimates indicate, working conditions, influence, and perceptions of big labor all have partial relationships with the dependent variable that are statistically significant at the .0001 level. Degree also has a partial relationship and is significant at the acceptable .05 level. Degree was measured as a dummy variable; Ph.D. received a value of 1, and master's a value of 0. The literature supports the theory that employees who have a longer horizon of time are more likely to invest their energies to change their job conditions, a circumstance that aptly describes Ph.D. candidates over short-term master's or professional degree-seeking students [6]. Several other demographic questions were included on the survey, such as department of study, hours contracted, hours worked, annual salary with tuition and stipend, gender, and age. None of these, however, proved to be significant.

Inequity perceptions, which is not included in Table 1, had an insignificant  $t$ -statistic and a very low standardized estimate and, therefore, was dropped completely from the regression. Job dissatisfaction proved to be statistically insignificant, but was included in the final model because the variable is still significant enough to have theoretical and statistical implications for the final model. Questions measuring job dissatisfaction assessed the respondents' attitudes toward the value of their work—such as “The work I do is valuable.” Because many of the respondents will be in their current positions for only a brief period of time, work value is not as important to them as typical bread-and-butter issues or general attitudes about unions. Furthermore, job dissatisfaction—being statistically insignificant—further supports the inclusion of academic degree as an explanatory variable. Ph.D. candidates who will be on campus longer have a stronger propensity to unionize than master's degree candidates. Nonetheless, as the magnitude of job dissatisfaction (as well as perceptions of big labor) increases, so does the level of the dependent variable, holding the effects of all other independent variables constant. In other words, the more dissatisfied graduate student employees are with their work and the more favorable impression they have of unions, the more likely they will be to unionize,



particularly if they are Ph.D. candidates. As positive perceptions of working conditions and influence increase, the propensity to unionize decreases.

The standardized regression parameter estimate of 0.69834 for the variable of respondents' perceptions of big labor also reveals that perceptions of big labor have the greatest impact on a respondent's propensity to unionize. This is a substantial finding, particularly when considering that it is followed in importance by working conditions, at a distant second, with a standardized regression parameter estimate of  $-0.21908$ , and then influence, with a standardized parameter estimate of  $-0.14306$ .

### CONCLUSIONS

Perceptions of unions play the strongest role in determining graduate student employees' propensity to unionize. This is quite different from traditional employee groups where considerations of inequity perceptions, in addition to wages, hours, and working conditions, are the most salient. In this research, the traditional bread-and-butter issues of wages, hours, and working conditions proved to be statistically insignificant, thus raising the import of perceptions of big labor as determinative. These results may help us understand the outcomes of the union organizing campaigns at Cornell and Yale.

Because of the overwhelming significance of perceptions of big labor, further research into the formation of these perceptions clearly is needed. Possible considerations of respondents' past personal experiences with unions or exposure to unions could produce information on how this image is formed. In addition, questions regarding the volatility of labor-management relations among other university employees could provide insight into graduate students' views of big labor.

In contrast to the strong correlation of perceptions of big labor inequity perceptions proved to be wholly insignificant in determining graduate student employees' propensity to unionize. This reinforces the difference between graduate student employees and the more traditional employee groups, who more likely would consider perceptions of inequities in the workplace to be a significant motivating factor for joining a union.

After the students' perceptions of big labor, the issues that appear to motivate graduate student employees to join a union are: working conditions, influence, and job dissatisfaction. When considering demographics, students pursuing a Ph.D., as opposed to master's degree candidates, are more likely to join a union. In fact, Thomas Kochan's research suggests that employees with a long-term time commitment (such as Ph.D. students) will be more likely to invest time and energy into trying to change their work conditions.

The policy implications of these results focus on the negative perception of big labor by graduate student employees. In the past, the perception of big labor may have been both an effective and successful mechanism for addressing the needs of unrepresented workers. However, this may no longer be true, especially with nontraditional workers. As this research shows, the paradox may well be that the

American labor movement, in order to attract new, nontraditional workers, must refine its image to overcome the growing negative perception of big labor. This perception appears to have manifested itself at Cornell University and Yale University. The analytical results of this research clearly demonstrate that this perception is pervasive among the graduate student employees at Indiana University.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Melissa Adams, Monica Boyd, Roberta Burns, and the Indiana University Graduate and Professional Student Organization.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Richard S. Rubin  
School of Public & Environmental Affairs  
Center for Public Sector Labor Relations  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405  
e-mail: [Rubin1@indiana.edu](mailto:Rubin1@indiana.edu)