Adjunct Faculty Unionization Update

Monday, June 5, 2017

Dear Adjunct Faculty,

In our effort to keep all of you fully informed regarding the upcoming adjunct union election and how it may impact your work life at St. Kate’s, I offer the following update:

We are aware that a colleague from outside the St. Kate’s community and two incoming graduate students have shared their perspectives on unionization in an academic environment via a series of emails. I thought this would be a good opportunity to share some of what we have learned over the past few weeks about collective bargaining, which is the process of coming to a contract agreement should our adjunct faculty choose to unionize. I would also like to reiterate the positive benefits and opportunities our adjunct faculty already enjoy here at St. Catherine.

First, I think it is vitally important for all of us to understand what it would mean if adjunct unionization becomes a reality for the University. Basically, it results in two things: (1) the end of a direct working relationship between affected faculty members and the University; a relationship that’s been strong and growing even stronger in recent years, and (2) the right to have an outside union negotiate your wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of your employment. We’ve openly communicated the University’s concerns about the first item, so today we’d like to focus on collective bargaining and shed some light on the ‘benefits’ you may have seen in the communications referenced above.

Collective bargaining is a process that brings no guarantee of anything. Choosing to have a union become your representative means trading your individual relationship with the University to a relationship with a single bargaining group that works to cover widely diverse needs and interests and is managed by a union that knows little about the challenges of higher education and knows even less about St. Kate’s. It’s also important to note that the most critical word in the phrase “collective bargaining agreement” is agreement. That means both sides come to an understanding as to the terms and conditions of your employment with the University. Nothing ends up in a collective bargaining agreement unless the University agrees to it. What I need to stress here is that there would be no reason for St. Kate’s to accept changes to our faculty’s work experience that would interfere with our educational mission, autonomy, or faculty governance. Moreover, this University, like all other institutions of higher learning, already faces significant economic pressure to control tuition dollars and we would never agree to a contract that contains unsustainable financial provisions.

The collective bargaining process can be extremely time consuming. While negotiations for faculty subject to union representation would be ongoing, the University would be restricted in its ability to make pay adjustments or implement other positive changes because those matters would fall under the purview of collective bargaining. That takes a considerable amount of time. And the end result is typically just a package of trade-offs whereby wages, hours, and terms and conditions of employment improve in some areas, decline in others, or remain stagnant.

Facts matter at St. Kate’s. We believe that in order to make a fully-informed decision, you must have access to fully-vetted facts, not campaign tactics. In reviewing the emails you’ve all received from the external colleague and the incoming students, we see a number of statements and statistics regarding the supposed “improvements” reflected at one or more institutions where adjunct faculty is represented by SEIU. However,
fairness demands we examine those assertions against the reality of our environment and the benefits our adjunct faculty already enjoy here. Below are just a few:

- Claims of significant pay increases under union representation are made in comparison to certain institutions that have not made any salary adjustments for at least a decade. At St. Catherine, we implemented a 25% pay raise (from $4,000 to $5,000 per four credit course) within the last year. We also initiated free parking for adjunct faculty on our St. Paul campus and designated shared office spaces. Further, our adjuncts enjoy full access to our faculty study and lounge areas.

- Claims that more than half of our total faculty are adjuncts are made in the context of the number of full-time faculty. That’s misleading. At St. Kate’s, in each of our three colleges, only 25%-28% of total course offerings are taught by adjunct faculty, a statistic easily comparable to that of our peers. More importantly, we believe this infusion of adjunct faculty – as the incoming students writing in favor of unionization wrote – “...bring real-world experiences that enrich our professional development (while) others bring specialty and expertise that would not otherwise be accessible to us.” We place high-value on the unique perspective and wisdom you bring to the educational environment, which is why we want to continue working directly with all of you to further cultivate this important relationship.

- In the area of faculty engagement, our Faculty Senate already established an adjunct committee in January to provide an official platform for adjunct faculty to have a direct voice in academic matters to include professional development, academic direction and freedom, and employment terms. Eight adjuncts initially volunteered to form the committee. This group has met with the faculty speaker and the Provost, and together, they’ve moved forward developing a survey/questionnaire to identify questions and concerns among the adjunct faculty. These are real world engagements that happened organically and with direct input of individual faculty members, not a third party union.

In the weeks since the upcoming vote was announced, I’ve received a fair amount of feedback from you. And the overwhelming message I’m hearing is that adjuncts oppose the union and are generally satisfied with their work and compensation. That tells me we’ve got a good foundation to continue working – directly with one another – to grow and improve our relationship, not to insert a third party into the process.

I hope you can attend one of the discussion forums tomorrow. In the meantime, I do think it bears repeating that I believe our adjunct faculty are absolutely essential to our ability to fulfill our mission to educate women to lead and influence. I came home to St. Kate’s because I am dedicated to this mission and believe it is more important now than ever before. I ask for the time needed to adequately shape our strategic plan and vision for the future and allow me to work directly with you to help bring it to life. To accomplish that, I further ask that you give full consideration to the University’s position against unionization and whichever way you decide, please be sure to vote. Remember, not voting essentially gives the power of your choice to those that do.

Sincerely,

Becky Roloff

**Important note regarding tomorrow’s discussions:** If you received an email invitation to the information sessions, you are subject to the SEIU vote. These sessions were scheduled so you have the opportunity to gather information, ask questions and have an open, respectful conversation about this very important issue. These sessions will not be open to individuals or groups outside the St. Catherine University community.

If you require ASL interpreting accommodations, please notify ssjacobson@stkate.edu.