

**“THE ONLY THING THAT’S NEW IN THE WORLD
IS THE HISTORY THAT YOU DON’T KNOW”**

*David E. Krahl, Ph.D.
Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
The University of Tampa*

For purposes of full disclosure, I suppose I should begin this narrative with the following disclaimer: *the views expressed herein are my own, and do not necessarily reflect those of my department, my college, or the administration of the University of Tampa. I am solely responsible for the content of this material.* Having said all that, I’ll begin...

In our nation’s history, there was a time and a place for unions and unionization. As Harry Truman used to say, “The only thing that’s new in the world is the history that you don’t know.” Unionization was an appropriate course of action when working conditions and wages were so bad that collective action in the form of unionization as an agent of social change was both warranted *and* justifiable. There were a whole host of social, historical, intellectual and political considerations and conditions that actually gave rise to both unions and the process of unionization.

But time, like progress, marches on. That was then, and this is now.

I have looked at this issue from both sides, and through as an objective a lens as I possibly can. I am thus led to ask two separate yet interrelated questions: First, are working conditions so abominable and deplorable at the University of Tampa that we would even contemplate unionization? And second, are the institutional relations between the faculty and the administration so universally tenuous, fragmented and polarized that we have no other choice but to unionize?

In my opinion, the answer to *both* of these questions is a resounding “no”.

Here’s my rationale purely from my position as a faculty member here at UT, and after having spent a significant number of years in the workforce since the age of sixteen. First, as far as our compensation and working conditions are concerned here at UT, we actually get to pick and choose what courses we want to teach and when we want to teach them. Our salaries are reflective of prevailing labor market conditions and not on the basis of some arbitrarily defined and union-negotiated salary scale. There is actually a rationally-based merit system that drives our level of compensation.

We don’t have to “punch a clock” when we come to work. By contract, we get summers off and we are not required to work during the summer unless we want to. We get paid our salary even if we’re not teaching in the summer. If we teach during the summer, we get paid even more. What we get paid directly reflects our demonstrable level of effort and the outcome of our teaching. We get to set our own office hours, and we are given ample opportunities for career advancement and development. Most importantly, however, we as teachers get to impact the lives of our students, and live out the philosophy of “making a difference” on a daily basis when it comes to our students. Is there a better reward for our efforts? I think not. Call me crazy, but that sounds like a pretty “sweet deal” to me. So under these conditions, I ask this one simple question: why would we even want to unionize? And to what end? In the words of my granddaddy, “that dog won’t hunt.” There’s no upside. I think I’ll pass.

As to my second question, everything under unions and unionization – and I do mean *everything* – becomes a part of the negotiation process when establishing a union contract. The very things that we “take for granted” on a daily basis as far as our employment, compensation, salary, benefits, and workplace conditions are concerned would now be considered “negotiable” and “on the table” for

discussion under a union contract arrangement. This is the reality – as well as the futility and the uncertainty - of unionization.

I've been at UT for a while now, and by all actuarial accounts and statistical measures, I have more “yesterdays” behind me than I do “tomorrows” ahead of me. But in my years at the University of Tampa, *never* have I seen the administration unwilling to discuss a problem or an issue. There are those situations where I don't necessarily see eye to eye with the administration, but I certainly understand and respect the process, the rationale *and* the decision. Moreover, when it comes to problem-solving, there have been those occasions when the administration has come up with a better solution than the one originally proposed. And there certainly have been those occasions where the administration simply steps up to the plate and does the right thing because they understand that we're all in this together. Doesn't this exemplify what it means to be *#SpartanStrong*?

As members of the University faculty, we, and the administration, are supposed to be faithful stewards of the free exchange of thoughts and thinking in the marketplace of ideas and intellectual inquiry. Doesn't it make better sense to be working jointly *with* the administration in a non-adversarial posture when it comes to establishing a viable university culture in accordance with a common, collective vision? And doesn't it behoove the administration to work jointly *with us* as faculty? Isn't that, after all, why we have “shared governance”? Isn't that why we have a faculty senate? We simply don't need a union to determine or dictate how we resolve a problem within our UT family. The problem is that under unionization, that all changes. To think otherwise is folly. Even the Faculty Handbook could theoretically be impacted by the negotiation process and the resulting union contract.

In point of fact, I prefer an administration that is flexible, strategic, and nimble when it comes to responding to prevailing circumstances and unanticipated conditions. On a personal note, less than a year ago, I was confronted with a “life-or-death” medical condition that I did not see coming. But when I was in the hospital for nearly three weeks and on life support, it was the administration - my department chair, my dean, and the provost along with the Human Resources Department at UT- who rallied the necessary resources that contributed to my full and complete recovery and in supporting my wife and family during my illness. So when it comes to the administration not getting everything *exactly* right one hundred percent of the time, I'm willing, under the circumstances, to cut them a little slack!

My point in this revelation is quite simple – under the provisions of a union contract, the administration may not necessarily have the requisite flexibility to deal with unforeseen circumstances and conditions that, by definition, no one *ever* sees coming. Under those circumstances, much of what the administration can – and cannot do – is bound up in the terms and conditions of what is negotiated in a union contract. Again, this goes to the very issue of being both nimble *and* flexible which under a union arrangement would either be compromised or rendered problematic. After all, under unionization, it's hard to remember that your original objective was to drain the swamp when you're up to your backside in alligators.

When I was working my way through college as an undergraduate (just a few years back), I spent my summers and semester breaks working in the industrial and commercial electrical construction industry. Although I was considered “summer help”, I dug ditches (more than I care to remember), wore a hard hat and protective eyewear, strung heavy utility cable, laid conduit, installed lighting and transformers, set scaffolds, maintained inventory, and climbed electrical towers and utility poles while loaded with tools of every shape, fashion and form. While my summer employment and some scholarship dollars helped defray the costs of my college tuition, *everything* about my work activities and my employment was governed by the prevailing union contract. There were rules about this and rules about that, there were rules about the rules. There were rules that didn't make sense but because they were in the union contract, they were enforced. Sometimes, it was nearly impossible to figure out where some of the rules actually came from or why they existed in the first place. There didn't seem to be a rational basis for some of the rules. However, there wasn't a lot of discretion when it came to the union rules. There were a lot of times

when I wanted to work but couldn't do so because of the provisions of the union contract and my classification as "summer help." At the time, I just couldn't figure out why.

But over time, and as one academic year blended into another, it became apparent to me that the union was really watching out for one and only one thing – *itself*. My personal experience during my summertime employment taught me a valuable lesson - that unions and unionization go a considerable distance in stifling innovation, creativity, and strategic problem-solving. The "shoe" of unionization doesn't fit everyone's feet. It certainly didn't fit mine. It is not a "one-size-fits all" approach. But here's the thing when it comes to unionization - "if you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound." And one more thing on this – the Devil is indeed in the details.

When it comes to strategic problem solving and crafting solutions, I, for one, have always found that collaborative decision-making, consensus building, and "meeting in the middle" through compromise and conciliation leads to a healthier outcome and a preferred set of solutions in both the short term and in the long run. In the modern world, I don't think that we need a union or a union contract to accomplish this. To me, I don't want "the perfect to become the enemy of the good". As for me, I would prefer to appeal to the better angels of our nature when it comes to solving problems and resolving issues. But that's me. I don't need a union to tell me what the problem is, what the issues are, and what I need within the workplace. I don't need a union or a union delegate to tell me "what is in my best interest." I can determine what is in my best interest, all by myself.

So as far as unionization at UT is concerned? No thanks. I'll pass. I just can't get behind that idea. *Not even a little*. But again, that's me. Like my granddaddy said when applied to the current circumstance, "That dog just won't hunt."