

Labor Organizing in Higher Education: What Leaders Need to Know

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Higher education has become one of the most visible and volatile fronts in the resurgence of organized labor in the US. Once limited to traditional constituencies like service, trade and craft workers in urban areas, the [fastest-growing](#) areas for union growth now include faculty and students at public and private institutions.

Colleges and universities have long been considered great employers, with unusually resilient job security, good benefits and a mission-based orientation that attracted faculty and staff at all levels. But post-COVID trends like inflation and worse working conditions and job protections – combined with heightened awareness of racial and social justice issues, declining state budgets and [political interference](#) – have made higher education institutions a hotbed for labor organizing.

Sector leaders and those who advise them should pay close attention to emerging issues in this rapidly changing environment.

Business development

Higher education is a large and still under-tapped market for national unions, particularly in the post-pandemic environment of stressed workforces and financial uncertainty. Unions are increasingly targeting groups and professions that do not have high profiles in labor organizing, from undergraduate resident hall assistants and tour guides to academic presses and libraries.

National unions can recruit members from anywhere, and are not limited to the sector they originated from. The United Auto Workers (UAW) counts more than 100,000 members on campus, the fastest-growing and largest sector after the auto industry itself. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Communications Workers of America (CWA)/NewsGuild, United Electrical and UNITE have all been active on campuses as well.

Strike (work)force

Once considered the “nuclear option” on campus, strikes and other kinds of work stoppages are increasingly common at colleges and universities. According to the 2022 Cornell-ILR Labor Action Tracker Annual [Report](#), 60.4% of all workers who went on strike that year were part of the educational-services industry, including faculty, graduate students and staff.

Grad students on the march

At many universities, graduate students are critical members of the workforce, teaching classes and doing research that would otherwise have to be performed by employees. Graduate students at public universities have long had the ability to organize in the same way as public sector employees, and a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling in 2016 reversed what had been a longstanding restriction on graduate student unions at private universities. Since then, graduate students at several high-profile institutions have voted in large numbers to unionize and are in various stages of contract negotiations.

Medical residents unionizing

The long hours and low pay typically associated with being a young doctor have made medical residents, fellows and interns [turn to unions](#) in increasing numbers. This has been compounded by the impact of inflation as well as the experience of COVID-19, when even more was expected of already overwhelmed residents. The SEIU-affiliated Committee of Interns and Residents, the largest group representing doctors in training, added chapters at two teaching hospitals in 2021 and five in 2022, an increase from the pre-pandemic pace of one group a year. Unions often find a built-in support system for organizing at academic medical centers on campuses, where the student body and professors often champion the unionization efforts of hospital trainees using campus resources, like the student paper and student

government, to pressure the administration. Campus leadership can find themselves in a difficult situation with the institution's overall reputation on the line.

What comes next

Union organizing campaigns are blooming on campuses because of a number of factors that will not be going away, including digital student activism, college costs and demographic and economic trends. We can expect to see:

- An increasingly pro-union NLRB continue to reduce the barriers to organizing, particularly for students who have any kind of quasi-employment relationship.
- Greater student and faculty activism that will create disruptions on campus, both in person and on the internet.
- Several pending court cases that may clarify whether student-athletes can be considered employees, which will in turn lead to a rush of organizing activity.
- More legislative activity in the states and potentially at the federal level that will merge labor issues and the culture wars as the 2024 presidential election nears.

What leaders can do now

Higher education leaders need to closely follow these trends and developments to better understand where union activity may emerge on their own campuses.

Regular and constructive engagement with groups who could consider unionizing or striking can help head off potential issues before they reach crisis level. Tracking sentiment and demonstrating how leadership is listening and acting upon what they hear are baseline – but critical – actions. Consider adding new two-way communications channels as needed.

In anticipation of organizing efforts, leadership should develop a clear philosophy on unionization that would guide their response. Preapproved foundational messaging and scenario-planning can give leadership a crucial head start in the event of an emerging issue.

Brunswick's labor relations and higher education teams are uniquely well-situated to advise colleges, universities, research centers and companies that work with these sectors on a range of critical issues related to employee engagement.

To continue the conversation:

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