

## Faculty Unions: Prevailing Attitudes Among Low and High Membership Disciplines

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## Faculty Unions: Prevailing Attitudes Among Low and High Membership Disciplines

Kelley Rowan, Sarah J. Hammill, Rebecca Bakker

### Abstract

This article explores the perceived benefits of union membership for academic librarians at a Florida public university and contrasts attitudes with the comparatively low union membership faculty at the business school. A survey conducted by librarians at Florida International University (FIU) focused on understanding why librarians joined their union at a higher rate (83% membership) than other disciplines and analyzed their feelings toward union effectiveness and relevance. Faculty in the business school were questioned about their reasons for abstaining from union membership in order to compare and contrast union attitudes. The aim of this study is twofold: to understand the differences in sentiments between the disciplines on either end of the membership spectrum and to help faculty unions understand and address these differences so as to increase their visibility and effectiveness through higher membership.

Keywords: Union membership, Library faculty union membership, Business faculty union membership

## Introduction

There have been several studies addressing union effectiveness and activism in higher education. This study narrows the focus in an effort to understand disparate union perceptions and membership within one university. The purpose of this research was to gain insight into why some departments or schools may be more inclined to support their union while others in the same university do not share the same sentiments or needs. The hope is that this information will not only benefit the faculty union, but also provide vital information for other university unions trying to understand their faculty attitudes and participation in order to increase membership rates.

The need for this study arose out of a recurring piece of union-busting legislation in the Florida state legislature that has been introduced yearly. In February of 2018, HB 7055 passed the Florida House and stated that teacher unions without fifty percent membership will automatically become decertified as collective bargaining units. This particular bill was aimed at primary and secondary schools, not the university system. However, concern remains that the successful passage of this bill, 66-43 in the Florida House, may embolden the legislature to expand this to universities. Florida unions are conscious of the changing landscape, and remain diligent in trying to determine the most effective ways to increase and maintain membership.

This study explores the attitudes and reasoning behind choosing to join or not join the faculty union by contrasting the business school's faculty attitudes with those of the librarians. While it has been previously noted that union membership generally has more to do with politics and culture, these two disciplines at Florida International University remain on either end of the membership spectrum irrespective of the political climate. For this reason, the authors believe

important insights can be gained by exploring the prevailing attitudes within the university, and specifically these two disciplines.

### University and State Background

Florida was the first state in the nation to adopt right-to-work laws, meaning employees are not obligated to join a union, even if they work in a unionized workplace. The state's union membership has declined in recent years, and with 5.6 percent of Florida workers being members of unions, the state remains a little below average compared to the other 27 right-to-work states (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statics). Union membership in all right-to-work states continues to decline (Berlin & Bentle, 2018).

Florida International University is a public university located in Miami, Florida. It is classified by Carnegie as a R1: Doctoral Universities - Highest Research Activity and is an emerging preeminent state research university. At the time of this research, FIU had a student population of 56,886 with 2,369 faculty and 51 librarians, with a student/faculty ratio of 25:1, compared to the national average of 16.5 students to every one faculty. There are 1,115 students for every librarian at FIU, in comparison to the national average of 1,000 students for every 8.36 librarians at other higher education institutions (Open Education Database, 2019).

At FIU, librarians are considered non-tenured faculty with opportunities for promotion. Library faculty are on a 12-month contract, whereas most other faculty have a 9-month contract in keeping with the academic calendar. Currently, the library faculty constitute the highest percentage of UFF-FIU membership from a single unit with 70 percent of eligible librarians belonging to the union. This compares with business faculty having the smallest percentage of membership at 20 percent. Since librarians are some of the lowest paid faculty members on campus, the researchers were interested in gaining insight into why they are willing to join the

union at such high rates despite the union dues, which could be more easily afforded by those in other disciplines.

### Context

Union membership in the education profession and librarianship generally is the highest among professional occupations, with 26.2 percent of librarians being union members in 2017 (Hirsch, 2018). It has been established that unionized librarians fare better than non-unionized counterparts when it comes to salary and working conditions. However, the specific statistics related to the union membership of academic librarians is difficult to parse out. The status of academic librarians as non-tenured faculty, tenured faculty, or professional staff varies among institutions and states. As a result, academic librarians are represented by different types of unions and bargaining units with disparate college and university staff members, so current comprehensive statistics regarding the rate of union membership among academic librarians is not readily available (McCook, 2009).

The study of academic librarians and their relation to unions has in most cases been localized to individual institutions or particular regions, and this paper contributes to that corpus. Various studies have been undertaken to determine both the perceptions librarians have toward unions, as well the impact unions have on the salary, working conditions, and attitudes of librarians. Much of the literature surrounding higher education union membership centers on the attitudes and support that faculty have towards unions as a whole. Union support has been shown to be positively related to union participation (Liao-Troth, 2008) though the decision to participate in unions has been shown to be partially based on social relationships (Goeddeke & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2009), while also dependent on the perceived efficacy of the specific union (Goldey, Swank, Hardesty & Swain, 2008). Many studies show that union membership is a

highly-individualized decision: non-members may not join because they believe they can negotiate and advocate for themselves better than in a collective.

Very little literature is available investigating the specific rates of union membership amongst business school faculty. However, the literature shows that business professors at unionized universities are paid more than the average and are generally responsible for fewer credit hours per semester than other faculty units (McKinzie, Griffin, & Weber, 2016). In fact, business school faculty are often amongst the highest-paid in higher education.

The common thread of the literature infers that the perceptions of unions undoubtedly impact membership among faculty at academic institutions, though the attitudes and opinions may differ by discipline or academic unit. This study gives examples of business school faculty responses and seeks to examine how they compare with library faculty.

### Survey Methodology

A survey with an in-depth questionnaire was administered to library faculty. The survey (see Appendix A) was designed to gain insight into why librarians at FIU joined or did not join the UFF-FIU. The survey, administered through Qualtrics, was sent via email to all library faculty at FIU. A reminder email was sent two weeks later.

Thirty-six of the 40 librarians employed at FIU at the time filled out the survey. Of the 36, five percent were in their first professional library position, 16 percent were new librarians at FIU but had professional experience at another library and 78 percent were librarians with two or more years of experience at FIU (see figure 1). The majority (58%) had been in their current position for one to five years (see figure 2\*). Eighty-four percent of the participants were members of UFF-FIU.

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\* The total responses received for the question in Figure 2 was 36.

### What best describes your current position?

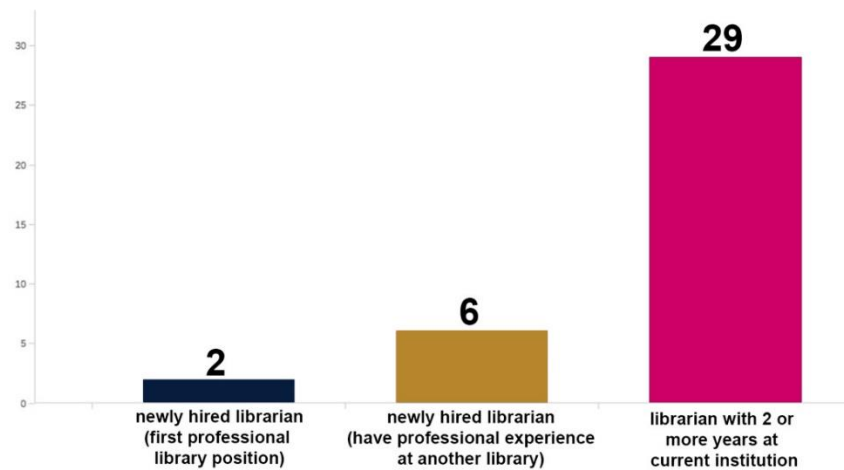


Figure 1

### How long have you been in your current position?

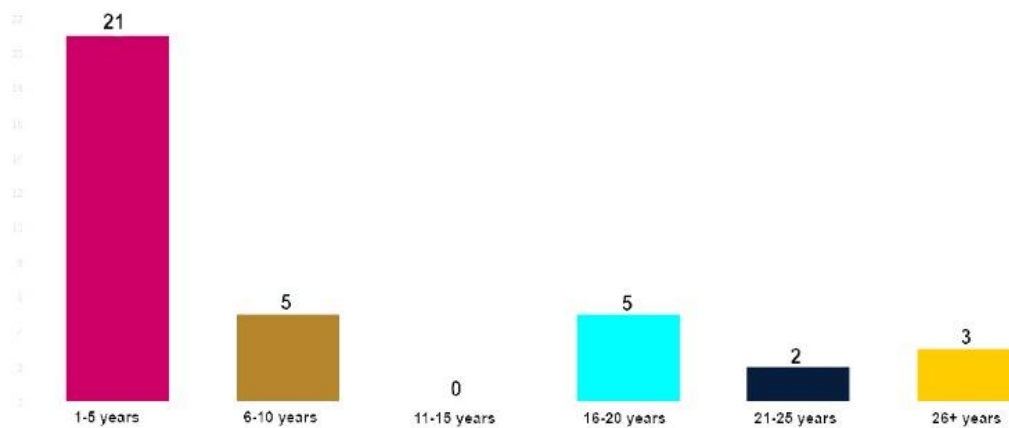


Figure 2

To get a sense of contrasting sentiments outside of the library, the College of Business faculty, with the lowest membership, were emailed a condensed questionnaire at a later date and asked to elaborate on their UFF-FIU membership status and the reasoning behind it. Thirty-five out of 163 College of Business faculty responded to the questionnaire about their union membership and 34 percent stated they were members of UFF-FIU.

## Survey Discussion

The results from the Library survey and College of Business questionnaire indicate a disparity in union membership between business faculty and librarians, which reflects national trends. Overall, union membership tends to be higher among library faculty when compared to business faculty. However, there were similar themes among librarians and business faculty in their responses and reasoning. For example, when asked why they were not members, participants from both groups stated that the cost of membership was an impediment to joining. They do not feel the cost of membership was warranted due to the small raises received.

To give historical context, membership dues for the UFF-FIU are one percent of a faculty member's pre-tax salary. From 2013 through 2017, FIU negotiated union raises averaged \$2,641, which was less than the cost of living increases during the same period. In 2013-2014, faculty salary growth rate was stagnant. In 2014-2015, the salary growth rate was -.8 percent; in 2015-2016, there was a 2.9 percent growth rate followed by a .8 percent growth in 2016-2017 (Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, 2017). The average faculty salary in 2017 was \$88,010 compared to average administration salaries of \$139,403 (Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, 2017).

There were some interesting differences in perceived attitude toward unions and workers. One business faculty specifically mentioned that they do not see themselves as "labor," as in "labor versus management." Conversely, a number of library faculty mentioned unions as the strongest advocate for worker rights because they provide a collective voice in communicating with management.



*Non-union Library Faculty*

The six non-union library faculty were asked why they were not union members. Responses varied from lack of interest, to the cost not worth the benefits, and that the union does not address the specific needs of librarians. One library faculty had dropped their union membership. When asked why, they stated, “Whenever we did have an issue in the FIU libraries, the CBA [collective bargaining agreement] did not address those issues. Most of the benefits are for teaching faculty and that is what bargaining focuses on. We have very different work environments than the majority of the faculty and our concerns are not specifically address [sic]. For example, dismal 12 month salaries in comparison to other faculty of the same academic rank, work day flexibility, time for research. While the last two issues are no longer a problem in my direct unit, they are among other library departments.”

There are differences between library faculty and teaching faculty. One of the biggest differences is that librarians have a 12-month contract compared to teaching faculty who have a 9-month contract. Additionally, the majority of librarians are required or need to come to campus for regular workday shifts during normal business hours. Faculty are only required to be on campus for teaching, office hours, and service commitments. While faculty are supposed to submit vacation and sick time leave, many admit not doing so because of their flexible schedule. Librarians are required to fill out leave time. Furthermore, the difference in wages between faculty and librarians when dividing by 9 months versus 12 months amplifies the difference in salaries between faculty and librarians.

According to the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, the growth in faculty salaries was skewed among gains for eminent scholars, instructional specialists, and associate and assistant professors (2017). Each of these ranks has an average of 20 faculty. During this

time period, salaries increased by an average of \$4,238 for professors; \$2,333 for associate professors; \$3,957 for assistant professors; \$2,019 for distinguished service professors; \$2,923 for scholar/scientist/engineers; \$2,360 for senior instructors; \$4,453 for instructors; \$3,783 for research associates; \$3,201 for university librarians; \$591 for associate librarians; and \$2,772 for assistant librarians. The average salaries for senior lecturers, lecturers, and instructor-librarians declined: \$2,195, \$974, and \$337 respectively (Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, 2017).

On the surface, these salary increases may seem sufficient for librarians. However, the highest increase of \$3,201 for librarians is for a 12-month contract. Over a 4-year period, this averages out to just over \$755 per year. Divided by 12, it is \$62.94 a month. When compared with the same amount to a 9-month contract, the raise per month is \$83.89. The UFF-FIU is cognizant of this differential in pay. In recent years, when negotiating salaries with the administration, the union has implemented flat pay raises instead of percentages to help raise the bottom salaries.

Furthermore, faculty who teach in the summer receive overload pay that adds to the discrepancy between the two groups. The current contract compensates summer teaching at 12.5 percent of an employee's 9-month base salary for each 3-credit course assigned.

When asked what would make them join the union, librarian answers varied from losing the right to join and salary equity between librarians and teaching faculty. One part-time librarian expressed, "If I was able to participate fully in the same benefits as the full-time employees--as a part time employee, I do not get tuition reimbursement, promotions in rank, access to affordable health insurance, bonus or merit raises, protection during litigation, etc. etc." Unfortunately, this

part-time librarian is ill-informed because they are entitled to raises. It also shows that the union needs to do a better job of communicating the benefits of being a member.

#### *Non-union Business Faculty*

When asked why they were not a member of the union, the responses from the business faculty included some similarities and differences from the library faculty survey comments. Both groups mentioned the cost of membership and the perceived lack of benefits.

Unique and thought-provoking comments from business faculty included that they do not have a reason for not being a member except for inertia. One was not sure whether they were a member or not. A few noted that they were not interested or that they were concerned with the perceptions of administration if they did join. Along with this, one business faculty was concerned with the sharing of membership information among faculty. They were a union member in another state where union membership was treated confidentially.

Interestingly, another faculty member mentioned that they felt the one percent fee is better spent on scholarships and other fundraising options in the College of Business. FIU has a giving campaign where employees are encouraged to make donations to FIU through a number of funding choices. Some of the funding choices include student scholarships, endowments, and program specific projects through FIU Ignite (FIU Ignite, 2018).

#### *Union Library Faculty*

Library faculty union members were asked a series of questions about membership. When asked why they were a member of the union, answers ranged from having protection during perilous times, having a collective voice and unbiased representation, negotiating powers for salary and merit increases, having a strong advocate because the union serves as a check and balance for administration, being raised by a family of union members, and believing in the

principles of what a union stands for. Similar themes came up with questions about the benefits of union membership, the strengths and weaknesses of union membership, and specifically the benefits of UFF-FIU. Of note is the recurring theme that the “solidarity and the power of many can accomplish great things.” Another theme among the responses included the notion that the union offers fair representation in disputes and bargaining power in raises, specifically: “There are many, but the most important one for me is the protection the union offers us from unfair practices by administrators.”

One library faculty member noted that they had no idea what the benefits of union membership include. This is in contrast to another response, “The union advocates for fair compensation. This compensation includes pay, health benefits, leave (vacation, sick, parental, professional, etc.) and other benefits as part of the collective bargaining agreement. A united body serves as a clear voice at the bargaining table, enumerating our needs.”

When asked how being a member of the union at FIU has had an impact, many of the answers were similar to why join the union. One member mentioned the 2002 attempt at union busting, “It has been helpful when attempts at ‘union busting’ have occurred [sic] at the local and state levels. The union helped us in not being categorized [sic] as At Will employees.” In 2002, when Jeb Bush was governor of Florida, the state Board of Regents, the governing body of Florida’s state colleges and universities, transferred power to a local authority, a Board of Trustees, for each university. Prior to that time, the United Faculty of Florida collectively bargained for all of Florida’s state universities. This changed and each university bargained independently. Many saw this as an attempt to weaken and in effect bust faculty unions.

Another response was “The union helped us here in the library when we were hamstrung by an incompetent library director and those unfortunate hires under her watch. We suffered

[sic] resignations, premature retirements and a severe loss of morale. When this contract was up for renewal, the union helped us make the case that this was a disastrous [sic] administration and a change was mandatory.” In 2012, the UFF-FIU helped the library faculty deal with a dean who overstepped bounds in violation of the union contract and ignored library faculty governance. There were many issues including micromanagement and the ignoring of Search & Screen Committee recommendations. The dean hired a librarian who hadn’t applied or interviewed for a specific position. The library faculty governing board (executive committee) met with the dean to try and address the issues; they tried to make the dean understand the advantage of considering library faculty in decision-making and that the executive committee was an ally. When it became clear things were not going to change, the library faculty reached out to the UFF-FIU and asked for help. There were two meetings with the dean and UFF-FIU representation. The first meeting involved library faculty, the library administration, and the UFF-FIU grievance chair. The meeting did not change the situation and some argued, it went from bad to worse. The next meeting included all of the people from the first meeting plus a mediator and the provost. The library faculty was able to effect change as a result of this meeting and through the annual assessment of the dean. The library had the highest number of people who completed the online assessment of deans and as a result, the dean’s contract was not renewed.

“The ideal union organization would be able to give voice to the needs and concerns of all employees. It would start with those agenda items that appeal to everyone. But it would also be versatile enough to also argue for each type of employee's special needs with the same clarity and conviction as the more general items.” We believe the union has done a great job negotiating

certain benefits for all faculty. One of these benefits is maternal/paternal leave; faculty are allowed two six-month leaves.

Others noted more tangential reasons to belong to the union such as the weekly UFF-FIU newsletter where pertinent information to faculty is provided about the impact of state legislation on education and benefits. Additionally, smaller less-focused benefits were noted including UFF-FIU representation in arbitration, free legal consultations, and discounts for Costco membership.

One library faculty noted that at their previous institution, “the librarians represented less than five percent of the total bargaining unit. So when something relvant [sic] only to librarians came up, the union said nothing.” It was their opinion that it is a cyclical door; low membership causes less representation or concern for specific issues that leads to fewer people joining.

Interestingly, academic freedom was only noted once by respondents, with one indicating that a benefit of union membership included “Academic freedom, a say in university policy, wages and benefits, freedom from arbitrary administration.” This could be due to the fact that most library faculty do not teach semester-long classes, so many of the tenets of academic freedom such as faculty and students’ ability to challenge each other’s opinion without fear of penalty do not apply. However, as library faculty also engage in academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in their areas of specialty, it was noteworthy that only one respondent brought up the issue of freedom in this context.

#### UFF-FIU Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, Florida educational unions remain susceptible to legislative interference. The Florida State House Bill 7055 requiring teacher unions to be decertified if they fell under a 50 percent membership threshold has captured the attention of union members throughout Florida as they take stock in their own membership density.

Generally, the highest union membership rate for most Florida university unions caps out at 40 percent, making the 50 percent union membership requirement a difficult threshold for most schools. However, Florida Atlantic University and Florida A&M University have both managed to reach over 50 percent union membership this year. At the time of this writing, Florida is awaiting the results of a lawsuit filed by Leon County, Florida claiming HB 7055 to be unconstitutional. Over the past year, there has been little to no traction on this lawsuit.

*The Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council* ruling by the Supreme Court on June 27, 2018 struck down state laws that allow public sector unions to charge non-union members for collective bargaining costs. Post-Janus, the position of public-sector unions has potentially been weakened. Operating in a right-to-work state, Florida unions already face the perception of reduced bargaining strength. Since Florida is not a “fair share” state, it is not directly impacted by the *Janus* ruling, but it is not immune from the existential threat facing unions.

#### *Benefits of UFF-FIU*

It is worth noting that the executive committee of the faculty union at FIU does in fact consider, discuss, and bargain for both nine- and twelve-month contracts equally. Regrettably, these discussions and actions go largely unnoticed, to the detriment of the union itself in its attempt to appeal to all faculty and broaden its membership. The National Education Association and the Florida Education Association offer a host of benefits that many faculty, including members, are unaware of, such as:

- \$1 million in professional liability protection
- Free UFF representation in arbitration
- Two free 30 minute legal consultations (not related to work)

- Attorney referral program
- Job-rights protection program
- Credit counseling
- Housing protection services
- Competitive loan rates (mortgages, cars, student loans, etc.)
- Competitively priced insurance rates
- Low interest credit cards
- Auto buying program
- Discounts on shopping and memberships
- Travel discounts (cars, hotels, packages, etc.)
- Money management tools

The survey revealed that the disproportionately low salaries of librarians was often attributed to perceived union ineffectiveness, whether that was true or not. It also revealed that positive union feelings were often associated with direct union intervention on behalf of the faculty, whereas other activities with less visibility were not considered by faculty. Other responses showed mixed feelings, such as in this quote, “All in all, I feel that the union has done what it could, during very difficult financial times and hostile times in terms of employer/employee relationships. I don't believe this institution really has our best interests at heart but on the other hand, I know there are many worse places of employment! Academia may not pay as much but at least you can sleep at night! I value highly the opportunity to work for a place like this, even if our employee's rights are being eroded with time.” This may sum up the ambivalent feelings many library faculty have towards the union.



*Recommendations for UFF-FIU*

Many comments from the College of Business and Library faculty revealed that both groups felt the union was either ineffective or did not represent their needs and therefore, they did not see the benefit in being a member. Librarians particularly, despite having the highest union membership, felt that the union did not represent 12-month faculty or help them achieve a higher, more appropriate salary.

One way in which unions, and specifically the UFF-FIU, can address the dissatisfaction issues are with more transparency and better distribution of information, especially from the executive committee meetings. This would make it clear that discussions and negotiations regarding 12-month faculty are addressed regularly. Overall, the executive committee of the union would benefit from reaching their members with news and updates regarding their bargaining activities and accomplishments. Successful dissemination of the work of the union and its effectiveness may help increase interest and recruit more union members. This information should come from the union to its members first, before hearing from the administration. In this way, the union can take the credit due for its hard work in negotiations.

The union has introduced measures to help librarians, as well as other faculty, obtain a fairer salary. The UFF-FIU advocated for a yearly salary increase that would make sure the lowest paid faculty, those making less than \$50,000 (usually librarians) would get the largest share of the raise. While this was, as expected, rejected by FIU administration, the union did negotiate a one percent salary raise that included a minimum amount received by those on the low end of the salary scale. In this case, \$800.00 was the minimum faculty received even if one percent of their current salary was less.

Despite everything, including the executive committee discussions about salary inequities, intense negotiations, and progress made by the union in regards to faculty benefits, the survey results show that many faculty are unaware of the benefits they receive as a result of the UFF-FIU.

#### Limitations and Future Studies

Further studies would benefit from including several colleges and disciplines within a university to obtain a fuller picture of union attitudes throughout the university community, especially the low performing departments as they may have distinct reasons for not joining their union. Having identical questionnaires between the units would be beneficial in solidifying interpretations of results. Future research that is able to acquire statistics on faculty union membership nationwide would be extremely helpful to the body of literature on unions and faculty. This information has been notoriously difficult to obtain due to a lack of cohesiveness in record keeping among various faculty unions. An additional comparative study exploring right to work states versus non-right to work states and their union participation, membership, and attitudes toward their unions would greatly enhance this body of literature as well.

In the state of Florida, there has been significant growth in faculty unions over the last two to three years. Several faculty unions currently have over 50% membership as of this writing. This is in keeping with previous research that documents the expected growth in union membership during republican political leadership when stress and uncertainty are felt by employees. A longitudinal study over time, looking at conservative versus progressive states and/or administrations, would be an interesting addition to this body of research and may help inform union leadership about expected membership interest at various points in time.

Additionally, an expansion of faculty union research may want to explore the growth in adjunct faculty unions. Adjuncts at Miami-Dade College in Florida recently won the right to unionize in 2019 and many of their northern state colleagues have had unions for years. Future studies may also want to consider faculty that fall into various categories, such as research associate or clinical faculty, and whether or not they tend to join their unions where eligible.

Finally, union attitudes in the state of Florida deserve a broader examination. FIU is a minority serving institution with 85% of its student body identifying as a minority. As of the 2010 census, Miami-Dade County was 65% Hispanic, 17% Black, and 2.4% two or more races. This amalgamation of Central and South Americans, Caribbean cultures, and other ethnic groups changes the demographic of union membership from overarchingly white and male to a more diverse membership that now includes a majority of women and other minorities. There is a trend of increased minority membership in unions, not only in Florida, but in major cities across the country as well. In South Florida, this change in union membership helps in closing the wage gap and shapes attitudes about union membership while diversifying the variety of concerns they address. However, north and central Florida have very different demographics and their union participation and attitudes should be explored as they impact the state university system as well. A comparative study of union membership and attitudes between Florida and other states would be useful and possibly the first step in regional examination of the state of faculty unions.

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## Appendix A

### Library Union Membership

1. What best describes your current position?

- library staff (1)
- newly hired librarian (first professional library position) (2)
- newly hired librarian (have professional experience at another library) (3)
- librarian with 2 or more years at current institution (4)
- Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_ (5)

2. How long have you been in your current position?

- 1-5 years (1)
- 6-10 years (2)
- 11-15 years (3)
- 16-20 years (4)
- 21-25 years (5)
- 26+ years (6)

3. Are you a member of your union?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Skip To: Q11 If Are you a member of your union? = Yes

Skip To: Q9 If Are you a member of your union? = No

Skip To: Q13 If Are you a member of your union? = Not sure

4. Why not?

---

Display This Question:

If Are you a member of your union? != Yes

5. Have you been a member of the union previously?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Skip To: Q14 If Have you been a member of the union previously? = Yes

Skip To: Q10 If Have you been a member of the union previously? = No

Skip To: Q12 If Have you been a member of the union previously? = Not sure

Display This Question:

If Have you been a member of the union previously? = Yes

6. Why did you drop your union membership?

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Display This Question:

If Are you a member of your union? = No

7. If you are not a member of your union, what would make you join?

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Display This Question:

If Are you a member of your union? = Yes

8. Why are you a member of the union?

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9. What do you think are the benefits of union membership?

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10. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of having union representation?

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11. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of your union organization?

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12. As an FIU employee, please describe how your union has impacted you.

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13. In your opinion, what would the ideal union organization for FIU employees encompass?

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14. Please provide any additional comments you may have.

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## Appendix B

### Union Membership Question

- I am a member of the FIU Faculty Union (UFF).
- I am not a member of FIU Faculty Union (UFF).

What has prevented you from joining the union?

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