Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you about a topic that is critically important to the University and our work on the Twin Cities campus. As you may know, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 284 has launched a campaign to become the bargaining agent for the tenured, tenure-track, and term faculty on the Twin Cities campus.

The University of Minnesota supports the right of all employees to determine whether they want union representation. At the University, ten labor unions represent nearly 25 percent of the employees across our institution’s five campuses. The question before you, however, is whether or not the University of Minnesota Twin Cities faculty should unionize.

The decision about whether or not to unionize the faculty certainly deserves thoughtful consideration by all faculty. All faculty will be affected by this decision, one way or another, although those in the AHC Schools (Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Health, and Veterinary Medicine) and the Law School have opted out of this process, will not vote on the matter, and would not be part of the collective bargaining process, should the remainder of the faculty unionize. All other faculty will be affected in a great variety of ways by the outcome of the vote, so it is important to familiarize yourself with the issues and the implications of the choice whether to unionize.

One issue currently in dispute is the set of job categories SEIU is seeking to represent. You received information about this on March 29 from Patti Dion, Director of Employee Relations. (See http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/er/facultyelection/facultyinfo/index.html.) SEIU is seeking to add some but not all of the PELRA (Public Employment Labor Relations Act) Unit 11 employees to the tenured and tenure-track faculty (Unit 8, in the PELRA definition). In particular, SEIU seeks to represent those with teaching responsibilities among Unit 11 employees, but not, for example, other university employees with research or outreach responsibilities. I understand how the promise of closer alignment among all University of Minnesota personnel with teaching responsibilities is attractive and may seem to some a
reason to unionize. But it is not clear why this alignment is more salient than an alignment with those who do critical work in other areas of our mission, such as research and public outreach.

Nor is it clear that SEIU’s interests and concerns will align well with those of our university’s tenured and tenure-track faculty and P&A employees. SEIU has nearly two million members, very few of whom are tenured or tenure-track faculty, and the vast majority of whom do not work in higher education. The union has its own regional, national, and organizational objectives, and it is by no means obvious that the distinctive priorities and concerns of university faculty—who would be a tiny fraction of the total SEIU membership—would be particularly high priorities in that mix.

We do know that the relationships between faculty, department heads and chairs, and college and central administrators are different in institutions where the faculty are represented by a union. Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs Rebecca Ropers-Huilman and I are seeking information from other institutions, in particular Rutgers, the only CIC institution with a unionized faculty, in order to understand more fully the nature of those changed relationships and how they affect university life. (At Rutgers, the union is AAUP-AFT, however, not SEIU, and that may be a relevant difference. Of the 62 universities in the AAU, 5 have unionized faculty--though, again, none has been unionized by SEIU.) We will be in touch with more information as we learn more.

For now, I am asking only that you be attentive to this process. The University is developing a website dedicated to this issue, and, as always, you can direct questions, concerns, or suggestions to either Vice Provost Ropers-Huilman or me. The ultimate decision about whether or not you will be represented by SEIU depends on the outcome of a ballot, and it is not the case that a majority of the entire faculty must vote affirmatively for the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities faculty to be represented by the union. What is required is a simple majority of those who actually vote in the election, no matter how few those may be. That is why it is important for you to engage in this process. You cannot opt out of the result of the election. If a
union is voted in, you will be covered by the contract that would result from collective bargaining and you will pay union dues or fair share fees.

You also need to be careful about treating this election as an experiment. There is no requirement in law to periodically review the faculty choice. There is a process for decertification, but it sets a very high bar and the use of such a process is rare. (The process of decertification requires 30 percent of all covered employees--not 30 percent of those who choose to comment--to support a vote for decertification and then an affirmative vote to decertify.) Thus, every faculty member should consider now the long-range implications of this important vote.

Needless to say, the decision about unionization is yours. In the months ahead, you can expect to hear a great deal about the pertinent issues. The University--its students, and its faculty and staff--will be well-served by your thoughtful participation in this process, regardless of how you vote. Please visit the U’s website dedicated to this issue, email questions to facorg@umn.edu, or contact my office. Most importantly, please discuss the issue with your colleagues and promote informed participation in this decision. This is a critical decision for the future of the University. It will be a decision better made if we all stay informed and engaged.

Sincerely,

Karen Hanson
Executive Vice President and Provost

This email was sent to Unit 8 Faculty, Twin Cities Deans, Vice Presidents, selected HR Leads, and Human Resource Consultants by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost, 234 Morrill Hall, 100 Church St. S.E., Minneapolis, MN, 55455, USA. Read our privacy statement.