

5-6-2011

## Our University: Layers of Advocacy

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### Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University: Layers of Advocacy" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 99.  
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## Our University: Layers of Advocacy

Unions have helped create positive working conditions in this country that would have been unimaginable 100 years ago. One needs look no further than the history of the development of the Fair Labor Standards Act for proof. Every major advance in working conditions in America has come about through unions advocating working conditions that were humane and just. These pioneers fought for a better life for all working people. Because they saw themselves as representatives of an otherwise unrepresented class, their personal advocacy was transformed into social advocacy.

*It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. Adam Smith.*

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A friend of mine shared an idea with me about how unions, when working correctly, provide layers of advocacy. The fullness of this concept is developing for me, but its general implications appear to be applicable to any institution with collective bargaining groups as constituent parts of it.

If a teachers union in a primary or secondary school makes specific demands for better working conditions: higher salaries, smaller class sizes, better pensions, etc. it simultaneously advocates for better teachers. A fundamental principle of free market economics is that when better conditions of work are present, more and better people will be attracted to the work.

In turn, teachers of the highest caliber compete for the chance to serve students. Through this layering of benefit, unions effectively advocate for students by advocating for opportunity for teachers. Since students are better served, the benefit cascades to the community and society at large. This is the concept of layered advocacy. Through advocating for fairness and opportunity for one group to pursue excellence in their craft, other's needs are met. There is general uplift in the social condition to be sure. History proves it.

When unionism is supported by force of law, as is frequently the case, management is left to advocate for the greater good through excellence in outcome, and simultaneously bargaining in good faith on behalf of all shareholders. These interests do not always coincide, and management must balance conflicting needs. I have searched relentlessly and can find no example of a union contract requiring excellent performance from worker or management.

Not one. It seems we fear excellence.

The greater good loses out to private interests on both sides.

In a coal mine or a sweat shop, where workers are as interested in making sure their co-workers families are fed as they are their own and that everyone makes it home at the end of the day, it creates a form of layered advocacy that our nation could not do without. Without unions, it is hard to imagine the Fair Labor Standards Act.

In an organization populated with PhD wielding workers, civil service protections, and tenure that increasingly has the force of sinecure, the potential for such generally positive fallout is greatly reduced. Communal burdens previously borne are now obviated by legislation. Early trade unionism always argued for the benefits of education for their children, and the opportunity for good jobs in the community; jobs in daylight with time off, the freedom to express ideas and think creatively.

When workers, faculty, argue for the best way for the university to meet its mission, layered advocacy occurs. In a university setting the primary employees, faculty, are cottage industries, rising or falling based on the results and reputation for productivity in teaching, research and service to the community. When reputation is increased, through peer review of intellectual artifacts, actions, ideas, and service, resources become available. Excellence creates resources. This consequence intended or not, benefits the entire university community.

If a union advocates for the advancement of its membership at the expense of other groups within the university community positive outcomes are made more difficult, or diminished completely as Peter is robbed to pay Paul.

In many universities, the power of layered advocacy is being burned on the altar of seniority, mediocrity, everyone-is-excellent, no-one-can-fail, or other quality-killing concepts, ultimately including the sacrifice of intellectual freedom, the loss of precision of thought and execution of insight. The core purpose of the organization and the essence of higher education are bartered away.

These challenging but necessary conditions are not utopian dreaming for a university aspiring to excellence, but the foundation for that excellence. Intellectual independence is more necessary than protection from adverse working conditions for almost all workers in a contemporary university environment.