

Bargaining Thoughts

Thomas Kessler¹

¹Social Sciences Biographer and Associate Professor

2009 Chair, UF Bargaining Team,

Bargaining Team Member since 1992

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Barring some unforeseen event, as you read this article another biennial cycle of contract negotiations has been completed, and a *2009-2011 Master Agreement* has been ratified by both United Faculty and the Board of Regents. Within the context of the national and state economies, I have to say that this cycle was the most challenging in my experience, as since preparing and presenting our initial contract proposal, bad financial news became an almost daily occurrence. In the end, we were able to reach a voluntary settlement which is summarized in the accompanying table.

My relief and satisfaction after finally reaching an agreement acceptable to both sides was somewhat tempered the day after the final negotiation session when a faculty friend (who didn't know I was a member of the negotiating team) told me about having heard that negotiations had run quite late the previous evening. And, given the dire financial climate, could I believe that the faculty negotiating team would keep the members of the Board team up so late trying to "wring" pay raises out of them?

I don't know exactly what my friend heard that resulted in such a dim view of UF's efforts on your behalf. Given the confidentiality of the negotiation process at that point in time, I was only able to say that as a member of the UF negotiating team, I would not describe events of the previous evening in that manner, and that I hoped we would have the opportunity to continue the discussion once details of the settlement were public information. The experience did give me pause, as it confirmed one of my concerns about possible ramifications of negotiating in such a difficult economic climate.

After many years of service at UNI I am no longer surprised when I hear the faculty union being “framed” as the villain in one way or another. I’ve heard it time and again over the years. At best, any particular account represents a misunderstanding of the facts, and at worst, a deliberate attempt to discredit the union. Unfortunately, being portrayed in a negative manner is part and parcel of union membership in the United States. For a broader discussion in that regard, I refer you to the book, [Framed: Labor and the Corporate Media](#) by our UNI colleague Christopher Martin.

Now that the contract settlement is public, I hope you will allow me to share my perspectives about some of the important considerations during negotiations this year. After hearing more of the story, I anticipate you will understand that your representatives on the bargaining team served both of the members of the faculty and the larger university as well.

Contract negotiations take place every two years, and legal guidelines establish when negotiations have to be completed. Although I would have preferred not to bargain during an economic meltdown, negotiations had to go on. It is also important to remember that negotiations entail far more issues of importance to the faculty than just salaries. As a final settlement package is crafted, all of these issues come into play, and in the case of a voluntary settlement, each issue finally falls into place as one piece of a larger puzzle.

Salaries are certainly an important piece of that larger puzzle, and some years may even be the most important piece. However, in my mind, negotiations this year had very little to do with salaries. To the contrary, given the financial hardships facing so many of our friends and neighbors, and the severe budget problems in the state and at UNI in particular, salary increases really were not high on my personal list of priorities.

Speaking for myself, and not presuming to speak for others, my priorities were shaped by two primary factors. The first was input from colleagues. Before and during negotiations, the concern I heard expressed most often related to protecting health insurance coverage. And as negotiations proceeded amid growing budget woes, concerns about faculty

teaching loads, assignments, and evaluation standards became increasingly important. Numerous faculty members expressed concern to me about the importance of directly and openly addressing the inherent tension between teaching loads and research expectations for tenure and promotion. No one, not one single faculty member, indicated to me during negotiations this year that salary was their primary concern.

The second factor that served to shape my approach to negotiations was organizational priorities. After many years of experience in a variety of organizational settings, I have come to understand that budgets and expenditures often more accurately reflect organizational priorities and values than do formal vision and mission statements. I have also learned that despite the most sincere individual commitments to a stated mission, the complexity of organizational processes are such that formal mission statements can lose their power as a driving organizational force.

Zero. No, I'm not referring to wage proposals or settlements. Just keep that number in mind for the moment.

You may be aware of recent discussions in the University Faculty Senate and elsewhere on campus about the increasing amounts of General Education Funds that have been devoted to spending on athletics. Over the ten-year period from 1997 to 2007, those expenditures have increased by an average of 8.755% per year. On learning this, I was immediately struck by how that number compared with other financial trends in the university. I'll simply use an example I am familiar with; I'm sure you can provide others; perhaps your Supplies and Services budget. As a member of the library faculty, the library materials budget is near and dear to my heart. That "zero" I mentioned above is both the average annual percentage increase and the total increase for the allocated library materials budget over the last six years.

My point here is not about being against athletics. I certainly am not. Nor is it to naively suggest that those figures should or could simply be switched around. My point is that there is something seriously wrong with this picture, and something very troubling with what it implies about our institutional priorities and values. I completely understand that allocation

of university funds is, so to speak, “above my pay grade.” However, the collective bargaining process offers one opportunity for faculty members to provide input into the systematic processes that inform those allocation decisions. This year, I believe it was very important to use that opportunity to provide a vigorous message about how our institutional priorities, as reflected in financial trends, have become both skewed and out of alignment with our stated institutional mission and values.

UNI faculty members are dedicated public servants willing to make shared sacrifices for the common good, and they want to cooperate and assist in meeting the financial challenges ahead. That said, I believe there is widespread belief among the faculty that academics and educational quality should be at the top of the organizational priority list as decisions are made, and that individual faculty members should not be penalized as workloads and/or assignments change in response to budget problems.

Were your representatives on the negotiating committee unduly focused on salaries during negotiations? As you consider your response, please review the entire settlement package, and keep in mind that one aspect of the negotiating process is to use whatever legitimate leverage one has to achieve the best overall settlement possible.

No contract settlement is ever perfect from the perspective of the other side of the negotiation table. As always, neither side got all it wanted or hoped for. But both achieved one of its highest priorities. UF was able to protect current health insurance coverage and the Board avoided negotiated pay raises next year. UF also successfully negotiated for significant enhancements to contract language, including more transparency of a sick leave bank. And yes, the settlement does provide for a modest salary increase during the second year of the contract. The final agreement also provides for ongoing cooperative efforts to study an important UF priority [overload compensation] and a Board priority [possible insurance savings].

Although difficult at times, the process worked and we ended up with a balanced and fair settlement. I hope that we can set aside bargaining rhetoric for now, acknowledge the goodwill and deep

commitment to UNI of all from both sides of the table, and work together in every way possible to take UNI successfully through the coming challenges.