

# The Minnesota Academe

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## A Letter from MNAAUP President Robert Cowgill



I sat down to write this letter about the de-professionalization of the professoriate and the corporatization of higher education. But these no longer seem like particularly

pressing concerns at this moment of national soul-searching following the announcement that a Staten Island grand jury has declined to indict any of the police officers involved in the homicide of Eric Garner. Instead of writing, I wished that I could be walking tonight with the protestors on the streets of New York City.

Nonetheless, as President of the Minnesota AAUP and an educator at Augsburg College, I feel I owe it to my colleagues and my students to try to imagine a future for higher education that defies without denying the recent events in Ferguson, MO and New York City. Indeed, what other choice do we have?

In times like these, to be an educator at an institution of higher learning is a privilege wrapped in a responsibility. We are preeminently the ones called to invite and inform our students' thinking and their discourse, no matter how disturbing or challenging. Tomorrow my cinema class coincidentally will be discussing Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Once again, I am offered an occasion to explore with students a work of literature or cinema that speaks to our understanding of a troubling contemporary American moment. And as in my own classroom, young men and women all across the country will be counting on their professors to deliver on the promise of an education that expands their social and critical awareness, cultivates their common humanity, and enriches their creativity and hope for the future—not just an education that makes them more “employable.”

This amounts to reframing the narrative about the nature of higher learning from one focused on education as an individual benefit measured in economic terms such as expanded “skill sets” and increased

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### Letter From MNAAUP President Robert Cowgill

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lifetime earnings to one focused more broadly on nuanced critical thinking and increased social and cultural awareness. Our students deserve the best education we can give them (using the most expansive definition of education); faculty members deserve to teach and do research under the most supportive conditions our institutions can create for them. Put bluntly, the students will only get that kind of education, and the faculty will only be able to deliver it, when our institutions understand why academic freedom—the complete, unfettered pursuit of learning and thinking and scholarship—is indispensable to the intellectual independence necessary to teach bravely in our democracy.

I've never heard administrators argue for cutting a tenure line because they want to undermine freedom in the classroom. Such moves are always explained as an unfortunate but necessary by-product of rising costs and shrinking budgets. But the net result does indeed compromise classroom freedom by converting tenure lines to contingent lines, which means a majority of a college's faculty becomes insecurely employed, thus eroding both the intellectual confidence of the professoriate and academic freedom itself. Without job security we lose our courage—and often our ability—to fight for the lasting promise of higher education.

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I believe contingent and adjunct faculty deserve the same protections that support the academic freedom of tenured professors. Since the AAUP is fortunate to stand for values and principles larger than the self-interest of its members, tenured members must align themselves with the contingent faculty on our campuses, and demonstrate that none of us in the professoriate stand alone in the fight to reframe the narrative about the nature of higher education. We need to make a confident proclamation of what's best for the students of this country—and that's a vibrant, academically free, professionally secure faculty.

It is in this spirit that the Minnesota AAUP will offer a free Mid-Winter Forum entitled “One Faculty?” which will be held in the new student center at Hamline University on Saturday, January 31, 2015.

We are asking our members to invite as many part-time, adjunct, and contingent colleagues to attend as possible to spur ideas on how the values we share can be advanced strategically and powerfully at our colleges. Are we truly “one faculty,” and, if so, how do we demonstrate this concretely and publicly?

Sincerely yours,

Robert Cowgill,  
Associate Professor of English, Augsburg College  
President, MNAAUP

# Organizing a Faculty Union at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

by Jason McGrath

Associate Professor, Asian Languages & Literatures  
University of Minnesota

A few months after I started as a tenure-track faculty member at the University of Minnesota in 2004, I heard the (then) Governor interviewed on a local public radio station's morning call-in talk show. When a listener called to complain about skyrocketing tuition at public universities, the Governor immediately went into elaborate gyrations of sympathy around the question and then proceeded to blame the problem on the greed of "these faculty unions." As a new faculty member in by far the largest college (Liberal Arts) at by far the largest campus (the Twin Cities) in the whole state public higher education system, my immediate impulse was to call in to the show to ask

the Governor how I could contact the union representative that I did not even know I had.

Of course, the truth was that the faculty at the flagship research university in the state system was not in fact unionized (though some faculty in other parts of the system were),

and the Governor knew full well why tuition was skyrocketing beyond the means of many middle-class families: between 2001 and 2011, the state legislature slashed funding for public higher education by 48 percent, and that same Governor signed off on virtually all of those funding bills. There was never a political race for governor or state legislature in which a candidate said, "I propose to cut funding for higher education nearly in half within a decade" and then had a public debate about that idea; the politicians just did it without the general public even necessarily being aware of what was going on. Then many of them, on both sides of the political spectrum, had the gall to blame not only unions but administrative bloat for being largely responsible for rising tuition rates.

That example shows that faculty and administration are both facing an ongoing crisis that threatens the very idea of public higher education. The current unionization effort at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities is therefore not primarily about the faculty rising up to battle the administration; it is about faculty increasing our ability to intervene directly in the decline in the conditions and quality of public higher education in the state and the nation as a whole. By the late twentieth century, higher education was one of the few areas in which one could still say with some confidence that the U.S. was

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## Organizing a Faculty Union at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

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leading the world, and yet many of our leaders have been prepared to chuck that advantage for the sake of short-term political goals (cutting taxes, etc.). Toward the end of his last term, the same Governor mentioned above spoke fondly about the potential for transforming higher education into an “iCollege” system in which classes are simply downloaded as podcasts, presumably negating any real need for a university to have a permanent faculty, or even a campus. It is shocking that such a globally respected public asset as our public higher education system could be so easily discarded.

There is no particular issue-of-the-moment against the university administration currently driving the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities faculty to unionize. Instead, speaking for myself at least, the motivation is much broader than any single grievance. The intention is to give the faculty a strong and unified

collective voice to fight for the maintenance of the highest possible standards for our students’ education and our own research in the face of an all-out, years-long assault on the very idea of a truly publicly funded education system. The effective privatization of that system by state legislatures leads to larger classes, lower standards, and a whole new system of incentives that results in the corporatization of the university and its incremental abandonment of the

ideals for which it once stood—the preservation and expansion of knowledge, the taking of intellectual risks in the pursuit of truth, and the in-depth engagement of bright young people with both the global cultural heritage of humanity and the most pressing social, artistic, scientific, and technical questions of our time. The faculty must have the strongest possible voice in fighting the trends that threaten those ideals.

If the current SEIU unionization effort at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities is successful, the concerns of both faculty and students will have a power-

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ful new voice, and the University and indeed the state of Minnesota itself will be stronger in the long run. The efforts to organize in Minnesota are part of a nationally coordinated effort by SEIU that has led to active metro organizing among faculty in ten cities. Over the past three semesters, SEIU has organized over 5,000 contingent faculty members at 14 Institutions and sparked a movement of professors and students uniting to make sure that

universities invest more in instruction and learning. This wave of organizing, combined with widespread student activism and protests against tuition hikes and rising student debt, signals that the university community is coming together to fight back against the trends that are fundamentally undermining the quality and availability of one of our most precious public resources—outstanding higher education.

# Hamline Adjuncts Unionize

by David Weiss,  
Adjunct Faculty in Religion, Hamline University  
Steward for Hamline Adjunct Union, Local 284

Last spring Hamline University undergraduate adjunct faculty became Minnesota's first private college adjunct faculty to unionize. We're still "mid-journey"—currently negotiating our first contract—but our goal is clear: we're not seeking a win-lose situation in which either we (or the University) come out "on top." *We aim to begin a positive transformation in higher education.*

Clearly, the increasing dependence of colleges and universities on adjunct faculty has *already* had a transformative effect in higher education. From weakening fulltime faculty governance to changing the classroom (and out-of-classroom) experience for students, from balancing ill-conceived budgets to altering the academic culture on campus communities, the rise of "migrant faculty" has—thus far—been primarily negative from any point of view other than the bottom line. This is true despite the overall high quality of adjunct faculty. As an adjunct faculty union at Hamline we are determined to become active agents in reclaiming teaching and learning as the premier values of higher education. In this regard we are making common cause with our full-time faculty colleagues as well as the students we teach.

Over the past decade a core group of part-time faculty emerged with a growing conviction that Ham-

line's mission and vision aspire to ideals largely absent in our own working conditions. In January and February of 2014, staff from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) began conversations with adjunct faculty at several Twin Cities colleges and universities to gauge interest in forming a union. These conversations brought together the circle of adjunct faculty who led the unionization drive. Adjunct faculty in Massachusetts, California, Washington, The District of Columbia and Maryland had already chosen SEIU to be their collective bargaining representative. By mid-April our efforts at Hamline met with strong interest and enthusiasm, so we asked SEIU to file a petition for a union election with the National Labor Relations Board, which they did on April 25.

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Ballots went out by mail in early June, and on June 20 several of us gathered in the NLRB office in Minneapolis to watch as they were counted. We had done our work, reaching out to every adjunct eligible to vote for a

union, and we were cautiously confident that we would win. Better than 80% of those eligible to vote did and we voted 45-17 to form a union.

During our spring organizing we were reminded of the extent to which isolation is built into adjunct teaching. Many of us—even longtime adjuncts—

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knew very few of our peers (and just as often had only tangential relationships with the full-time faculty in our own disciplines). Quite apart from presenting an organizing challenge, this isolation had hindered academic excellence, departmental collegiality and professional development. Having a union is already making a difference in combating this isolation. Over the summer, adjunct faculty at Hamline met in small groups to talk about their experience as educators. These conversations, along with a longer web survey our colleagues filled out, have highlighted the diversity in our unit and allowed us to hear a wide range of individual voices and hopes.

We have now begun bargaining and have jointly committed to a series of “exploratory dialogues” around issues in which we have the most at stake. So, rather than beginning with proposals and counter proposals, we are beginning with an opportunity to bring our personal stories, our professional aspirations, and Hamline’s realities—as well as its mission and vision—into the conversation. The goal is to actually *listen* across the table before we begin bargaining on certain points because we hope to discern common ground where it exists and to pur-

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sue win-win proposals when possible. I cannot stress this enough. While bargaining inevitably has its adversarial aspects, we see the administrators who sit across the table from us as our necessary partners in a future that we all share.

Without question, the economic (and ideological) pressures facing colleges and universities today are enormous. Evolving challenges to faculty governance put particular strains on full-time faculty that make it possible—but hardly inevitable—for full-time and part-time faculty to be framed as adversaries in a zero-sum game. We, however, believe it is possible to envision colleges and universities that are at once affordable to students and offer economic justice to faculty, both full-time and part-time. We further envision academic communities where classrooms, colleagues, and entire campuses reflect the real value of learning not only in refocused budget priorities but also in renewed academic cultures, where teaching is honored as a vocation, whether you carry a full load or a single class.

The strength of our shared vision allowed us to empower ourselves. We unionized to pursue that vision. We are not in this for ourselves, but to pursue changes that restore and preserve academic excellence for **all** members of the Hamline community. We seek nothing less than the beginning of a positive transformation in higher education. We believe that Hamline, so proud to be Minnesota’s first university, now has the opportunity to model a new direction for the contemporary institution of higher learning. We intend to be partners in that venture.