

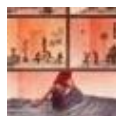
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# Lawmakers urge BU to remain neutral on adjunct unionization

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 13, 2014



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As part-time faculty at Boston University consider unionizing, two state lawmakers are urging the college's administrators to remain neutral.

One of the legislators has called on BU to take down a new section of its website launched late last month that suggests how unionizing might affect adjunct faculty and the rest of the university.

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In a [letter](#) sent last week to BU president Robert A. Brown, Representative Denise Provost described the website as “anti-union.”

“It represents an unnecessary pressure tactic against an already vulnerable workforce,” wrote Provost, a Democrat from Somerville who graduated from BU Law School in 1982 and sits on the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Higher Education. “They don’t need the provost’s office, in whose hands their job security ultimately rests, to maintain a website telling them they don’t need a union.”

BU officials declined to comment Wednesday.

The carefully worded website page, at [bu.edu/parttime\\_faculty](http://bu.edu/parttime_faculty), does not advise faculty against joining a union nor does it overtly say the university opposes unionization. But some sections seem to argue against the move.

The site, which BU announced to faculty and staff in an e-mail July 21, says a union may want to form a citywide “hiring hall,” which would pool local unionized faculty into a single group, matching them with colleges looking to hire.

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The BU website calls that prospect “possibly one of the more serious threats to excellence and high quality in higher education.”

“While unions certainly have their place for a number of reasons, organized labor’s focus has been rooted, historically, in areas other than the merit-based systems found at institutions of higher learning,” the site says. “Can the two cultures successfully co-exist? That remains an open question.”

The site also contains information about teaching at BU, part-timers’ benefits, and about a working group that aims to address part-timers’ issues, including compensation, job security, and professional development.

Experts said it is not uncommon for employers, especially large institutions, to send such communications to employees if union sentiment is stirring. For example, before adjuncts at Northeastern University recently voted to unionize, the school created an informational [website](#).

“The employer can give their views, and they can be partisan about it. They can give a one-sided view of the issue,” said Professor Samuel Estreicher, director of New York University’s Center for Labor and Employment Law. “It’s up to the employees to separate the wheat from the chaff.”

“But the employer can’t threaten employees” because of federal labor laws, nor can employers offer incentives not to unionize, he said.

The other lawmaker who has called on BU to take a neutral stance, Representative Thomas P. Conroy, a Wayland Democrat, urged the college to “continue to foster an environment in which your adjunct faculty are free to make an informed decision about forming a union — free from intimidation or interference from members of the administration, or from the outside ‘union avoidance’ consultants often hired in these situations.”

Conroy, who holds a master’s degree from BU and chairs the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development, said the [letter](#) he sent to Brown last week was prompted by concerns relayed to his office. But he said he had not seen the university’s website until the Globe contacted him Wednesday.

Maureen Sullivan, a part-time sociology professor at BU and a member of the adjunct organizing committee there, praised the legislators’ support and chastised the university’s website.

“I felt like it was willfully deceptive,” she said. “This is an attempt on their part to try to persuade people away from their right to explore joining a collective bargaining unit.”

Sullivan said she expects adjuncts at BU will hold a formal vote this fall over whether to unionize.

Since last fall, about 2,000 adjunct faculty from three area universities — Tufts, Lesley, and Northeastern — have unionized and are in various stages of contract negotiations.

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