
POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLARS AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATES UNIONIZATION BRIEF

Aug. 11, 2025

The purpose of this Brief is to help faculty and staff understand their rights and responsibilities when discussing unionization with Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates. Additional guidance and information will be developed and posted in the coming weeks.

As a starting point, we reiterate that Northwestern deeply values the contributions Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates make to its research and teaching missions. We are proud to provide firsthand experiences that serve as excellent preparation for a range of career outcomes. Regardless of the outcome of the upcoming union election, the University remains steadfast in its commitment to support and prepare Postdocs and Research Associates for future success.

A labor union — the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) — filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) seeking to represent certain postdoctoral researchers employed by the University. Since the petition was filed, the University and the Union have agreed that the appropriate unit includes those postdoctoral researchers employed by Northwestern University at the Evanston and Chicago campuses in the following positions: Postdoctoral Scholar and Research Associate. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellows are considered Postdoctoral Scholars and are eligible to vote, provided they meet all other eligibility requirements. NRSA Postdoctoral Fellows may cast ballots subject to challenge, and the question of their inclusion in the bargaining unit will be decided at a later time.

Eligible individuals will vote for or against union representation by secret ballot in an upcoming election scheduled to take place in person on the Evanston and Chicago campuses on August 25 and 26, 2025. Election details may be found [here](#).

DISCUSSING UNIONIZATION

Everyone, faculty included, has the right to discuss their personal opinions regarding and personal experiences with unionization, as well as to state objective facts. However, faculty and staff should keep in mind that Threats, Interrogation, Promises and Surveillance (TIPS) are prohibited.

- **NO THREATS** – Do not make explicit or implied threats of negative consequences or treat individuals differently because they support or oppose the union. Stating with certainty what *will* happen if the union wins the election, even if you are confident in your prediction, can rise to the level of an impermissible threat, particularly when the statement reflects a belief that there will be negative consequences to unionization. For example, predicting that unionization *will* lead to higher salaries/costs, which *will* result in fewer postdoc and research associate

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positions, while a possible outcome, is not a certainty and could be considered an impermissible threat. The reality is that there is no way to predict with 100% confidence what will happen when employees unionize. In the event the union wins the election, Northwestern will bargain in good faith with the union. And, as a result of that bargaining, the terms and conditions of postdocs' and research associates' employment could change (for better or for worse) or stay the same. When in doubt as to whether a statement might cross the line into an impermissible threat, it is advisable to err on the side of caution and not make the statement or, alternatively, seek additional guidance before making the statement. Regardless, it is always best to stick to objective facts.

- **NO INTERROGATION** – If postdocs or research associates want to talk to you about unionization, you are free to listen, correct misinformation, and express your opinions and personal experiences (**subject to the TIPS rules**). But you may not question individuals to determine whether they or their peers are for or against unionization. And if you become aware of an employee's view on unionization, that opinion should not impact how you engage with them, either favorably or negatively.
- **NO PROMISES** – Do not make explicit or implied promises of good things to come if postdocs or research associates vote for or against union representation. For example, do not promise or otherwise suggest that, if the union does not win, Northwestern will have more resources to allocate to postdoc and research associate positions. Again, any predictions with certainty of what *will* happen as a result of unionization are inherently risky.
- **NO SURVEILLANCE** – When postdocs or research associates are discussing unionization, you may not eavesdrop or otherwise surveil the discussion, nor are you permitted to attend union meetings. However, if you are invited into a conversation regarding unionization (either implicitly or explicitly), you are free to participate, subject to these rules.
- In addition to avoiding TIPS, it is important to note that it is unlawful for the University (including its supervisors and managers) to assist with the formation of a union.

POTENTIAL IMPACT

Below are some ways a postdoc and research associate union could impact their relationship with faculty and staff:

- Compensation and benefits for postdocs and research associates could increase, decrease, or stay the same.
 - Although we cannot make predictions with any certainty, it is possible that an increase in costs per postdoc or research associate position may result in fewer available positions; conversely, it is possible that a decrease in costs per position may result in more available positions.

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- The management of an underperforming employee may have to be more structured and follow a formal escalation process, including the involvement of a “union steward” at certain stages.
- Supervisors and managers may be limited in their ability to grant special requests, such as a change or accommodation to the schedule, hours, assignment or other facet of a postdoc or research associate’s duties and responsibilities.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Please encourage all eligible Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates to vote in the upcoming election.
 - The election outcome is determined by a simple majority of *those who go to the polls and vote*, not the majority of all eligible voters.
 - The election outcome will impact all individuals who fit the bargaining unit definition, regardless of whether or how they voted.
 - Each potential bargaining unit member is free to vote as they choose during the election, regardless of whether they previously signed an authorization card expressing support for union representation.
- If a majority of eligible voters cast ballots for union representation, those included in the bargaining unit will not have the opportunity to opt out from representation.
 - These postdocs and research associates would be *represented* by the union even if they choose not to *join* the union or pay dues.
 - Unions usually require “non-members” to pay a fee to the union called an “agency fee.” If employees are represented by a union, they likely will have to pay something for that representation, even if the employee does not join the union as a member.
- Having Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates represented by a union presents upsides and downsides, knowns and unknowns.
- Please encourage eligible individuals to read and think critically about the information included on the University’s [website](#) and other sources of information, such as nlrb.gov, and to independently research to reach sound conclusions and make well-informed decisions.
- Faculty members can discuss their opinions, but must avoid threats, interrogations, promises or surveillance.

QUESTIONS?

Frequently asked questions are posted on the University’s [postdoctoral unionization website](#).

Additional questions may be directed to the [Office of the Provost](#).