
POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLARS AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATES UNIONIZATION BRIEF

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The purpose of this Brief is to help faculty and staff supervisors understand their rights and responsibilities when discussing union-related issues with Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates.

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. The University remains steadfast in its commitment to support and prepare Postdocs and Research Associates for future success.

In 2025, 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 postdocs and researchers employed by the University. The election to determine whether eligible Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates wished to be represented by UE took place on August 25 and August 26, 2025 in Chicago and Evanston. A majority of the eligible population that chose to vote voted in favor of unionization, which means that, subject to limited exceptions, Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates are represented by the union when they are employed by Northwestern University on the Chicago and Evanston campuses.

The University and the Union have agreed that the appropriate bargaining unit includes all 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 included in the bargaining unit, provided they meet all other eligibility requirements. Whether NRSA Postdoctoral Fellows will be part of the bargaining unit remains an open question, which has not yet been decided.

During the interim period between the union election and the ratification of a collective bargaining agreement, Northwestern must maintain the status quo with respect to the “terms and conditions of employment” for Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates. Generally speaking, this means the University cannot unilaterally change aspects of these appointments (including pay and benefits) without prior discussion with the union.

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Discussing Unionization

Everyone, faculty included, has the right to discuss their personal opinions regarding and experiences with unionization, as well as to state objective facts. However, faculty and staff supervisors of Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates 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 with a union can rise to the level of an impermissible threat, particularly when the statement reflects a belief that there will be negative consequences to union representation. For example, predicting that union representation will lead to higher salaries/costs, which will result in fewer postdoc and research associate 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. Northwestern will bargain in good faith with the union. As a result of that bargaining, the terms and conditions of Postdoctoral Scholars' and Research Associates' employment could change 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 Postdoctoral Scholars or Research Associates want to talk to you about the union or union negotiations, you are free to listen, correct misinformation, and express your opinions and personal experiences (subject to these TIPS rules). But you may not question individuals to determine whether they or their peers are for or against the union or specific bargaining positions. And if you become aware of an employee's view on union representation, that opinion should not impact how you engage with them, either favorably or negatively.
- **NO PROMISES** – Do not make explicit or implied promises of things to come with union representation. Again, any predictions with certainty of what will happen as a result of unionization are inherently risky.
- **NO SURVEILLANCE** – When Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates are discussing the union or union representation, 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 the union or union representation (either implicitly or explicitly), you are free to participate, subject to these rules. Any participation is on your own behalf and should not be implied (either implicitly or explicitly) to be representing the University

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.

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Potential Impact

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

- Compensation and benefits for Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates could increase, decrease, or stay the same.
- 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 or change facets of a postdoc's or research associate's duties and responsibilities after hire.

Key Points to Remember

- Having Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates represented by a union presents knowns and unknowns.
- Those included in the bargaining unit do not have the opportunity to opt out from representation. These postdocs and research associates will be represented by the union even if they choose not to join the union or pay dues. Employees represented by a union may have to pay something for that representation, even if the employees do not join the union as members.
- During the interim period between the union election and the ratification of a collective bargaining agreement, Northwestern must maintain the status quo with respect to the "terms and conditions of employment" for Postdoctoral Scholars and Research Associates.
- Faculty and staff 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](#).