

FORMING A UNION

UNION | from cover

Many students do not know the differences between the titles and address most faculty as “professor.” But at the university level, there are ranks based on a position’s level of commitment to teaching, research and service to the institution.

Some faculty members are hired at the “assistant professor” rank, indicating a tenure-track appointment where the faculty member will apply for the tenured rank of “associate professor” within four to six years. Tenure is an indefinite academic appointment that can only be terminated under extraordinary circumstances. It is meant to provide an institution with invested faculty members who have increased academic freedom.

Adjuncts, instructors, lecturers and visiting faculty, whose appointments generally de-emphasize research, are not eligible for tenure or other benefits outlined in Elon’s Faculty Handbook.

A unionized Elon

To achieve the goal of creating a union, Elon faculty requested outside help from Faculty Forward, a project of the Service Employees International Union.

SEIU has more than 2 million members in industries such as child care, home care, custodian services, security and airport support, as well as 120,000 members in public and private higher education as part of Faculty Forward. The project has helped certify more than 50 unions on public and private campuses around the country.

In January 2018, the first Faculty Forward representatives visited Elon and have been advising Bush and her colleagues ever since.

“They give us the best practices, and they allowed us to organize,” Bush said. “I am a biologist. I know nothing of labor relations laws. The reason we are where we are right now, as quickly as we have come, is because of Faculty Forward and the expertise they bring.”

This expertise is brought by individuals such as Jacob Stanley, an SEIU organizer-in-training, who has been working with Bush over the last few months to garner support for the union.

The first step in certifying a union requires the filing of a representation petition to the NLRB, which was done on Nov. 29. In order for the vote to be approved, Elon Faculty Forward must compile a list of all the non-tenure-track faculty members eligible for this union and collect the signatures of 30 percent of those eligible faculty members.

The filing was announced during a demonstration by Elon Faculty Forward that began on Phi Beta Kappa Commons and ended in front of the President’s Office in Powell Building. It included speeches from non-tenure-track faculty members and other supporters of the movement.

Now that the petition has been filed, Elon administration will have the opportunity to debate the list of non-tenure-track faculty members.

Elon Faculty Forward and Elon administration are prioritizing different statistics when referring to this category of faculty members. Elon Faculty Forward in its public statements has said 46 percent of Elon faculty are non-tenure-track employees — including both part-time and

full-time faculty. In contrast, Provost Steven House, in an email to all faculty and staff, referenced only full-time faculty, stating that 25 percent are non-tenure-track.

If this is agreed upon by the university and Elon Faculty Forward, the NLRB will conduct a vote by sending a ballot to all those eligible to join the union. In order for the union to be approved, half of those casting a ballot must vote yes.

If approved, the union would take on the task of collective bargaining with Elon administrators to develop comprehensive contracts for non-tenure-track faculty members.

By law, any contract signed by the university and the union would affect all non-tenure-track faculty, whether they supported the union or not. As one of 28 right-to-work states, union membership is not compulsory in North Carolina, so contracts would not require affected faculty members to be union members.

To encourage support for the union, Bush, Stanley and other pro-union faculty have been meeting with as many non-tenure-track faculty members as possible.

They have been conducting door-to-door meetings with non-tenure-track faculty — both in their offices and at their homes — since October. Stanley, approached by Elon News Network on Nov. 8 while recruiting on campus, declined to comment.

After meeting with each prospective union faculty member, organizers ask the individual to sign a “vote yes” commitment or sign up for a membership card.

Bush was unable to provide the exact numbers of how many faculty members had been approached, but she said it has surpassed 100. She declined to provide the number of how many non-tenure-track faculty members had signed the “vote yes” commitment.

“I think of this as a democratic event. My job here is to have conversations about the union and their experiences,” Bush said. “We answer their questions about the union and tell them what we are doing. Either the faculty will want this, or they won’t, but it appears they want this.”

But this apparent desire for the union has sometimes been met by the fear of how the faculty members’ support for the union may affect their employment.

“We hear fears of retaliation, and that is not what Elon is about. That

UNION GOALS

1. Job security with the potential for longer-term appointments and transparent hiring/promotional processes.
2. Equal compensation with regard to pay and benefits as compared to tenured faculty.
3. Access to educational resources such as private offices that are afforded to tenure-track faculty members.
4. Provisions for research grants, increased student mentoring opportunities and professional development funds.

is not how it should be,” Bush said. “We are professionals. We should not live in fear that we can be replaced, and I reject the notion that we can be replaced.”

On Nov. 26, a “Dear Colleague Letter” was sent to all non-tenure-track faculty members explaining the purpose of the union and encouraging them to join.

The letter was signed by 50 faculty members who have gone public with their support for this union. These faculty members represent 20 undergraduate departments in three of Elon’s schools.

Despite making several public statements to faculty and staff, administrators have refused interview requests by Elon News Network. An email sent by the Office of the Provost to ENN noted that House “has nothing to say regarding this topic.” Senior Associate Provost Tim Peoples also refused multiple interview requests.

But on Nov. 30, House sent a facultywide email addressing the event and its organizers, stating that the university “had no advance notice of a campus demonstration or their intention to file a union election petition.” Less than a week later on Dec. 4, House sent another facultywide email condemning the idea of formation of a union.

“As a person with many years of investment in Elon, I want to say clearly and without hesitation that I believe a union is not in the best interest of faculty, our students or the future of the university,” House wrote in the email.

A broader discussion regarding the topic is planned to occur during the regularly scheduled faculty meeting on Dec. 7.

Raghu Tadepalli, dean of the Martha and Spencer Love School of Business, said he believes the necessity of the union depends on the problems it is trying to solve.

“Typically, unions are formed because a group of people feel they are not being taken care of properly, their working conditions are not good or that people are not paying attention to their grievances,” Tadepalli said. “But Elon is not such a place.”

According to Tadepalli, who cited the Fall 2018 Self-Evaluation Report, the business school employs 12 full-time adjunct faculty members. After three of those faculty were approached by Elon Faculty Forward members, Tadepalli said he received

FACULTY BY THE NUMBERS

201

tenured faculty members, according to the Elon University 2017–2018 Fact Book created by the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment.

108

tenured faculty members are on the tenure track, according to the Elon University Fact Book.

124

non-tenured full-time faculty members at Elon, according to the Fact Book.

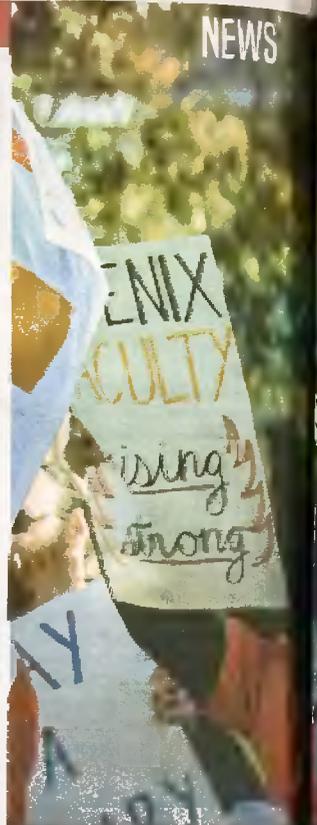
50

faculty members have gone public in support of the union.

FACULTY SUPPORT

270

student signatures, representing all four classes, fifth-year seniors and alumni, are on the petition that was delivered to Connie Book on Nov. 30.



emails expressing the individual faculty members’ intentions not to join the union.

One of those faculty members was Patrick Bell, a lecturer in the management department, who is against the formation of the union.

“Unions create a permanent adversarial relationship between faculty and administration,” Bell said. “It is in a union’s best interest to keep this adversarial relationship because without conflict, they aren’t needed.”

Opinions in the business school are split.

Five faculty members have gone public with their support for the union by having their names published in the “Dear Colleague Letter.” Three of those faculty members are in the management department — the same department as Bell.

Senior Lecturer Amy Allen is the chair of the department of management and entrepreneurship and was approached by both Bush and Stanley regarding the union.

After several conversations, Allen signed her “vote yes” commitment.

“I couldn’t think of a single good reason not to do it,” Allen said. “It will promote fairness and be in the best interest of the students and the university to move forward with this particular organization.”

The extent of the impact a union would have on campus remains uncertain. But comparisons can be made between Elon and the most recent private institution in North Carolina to form such a union: Duke University.

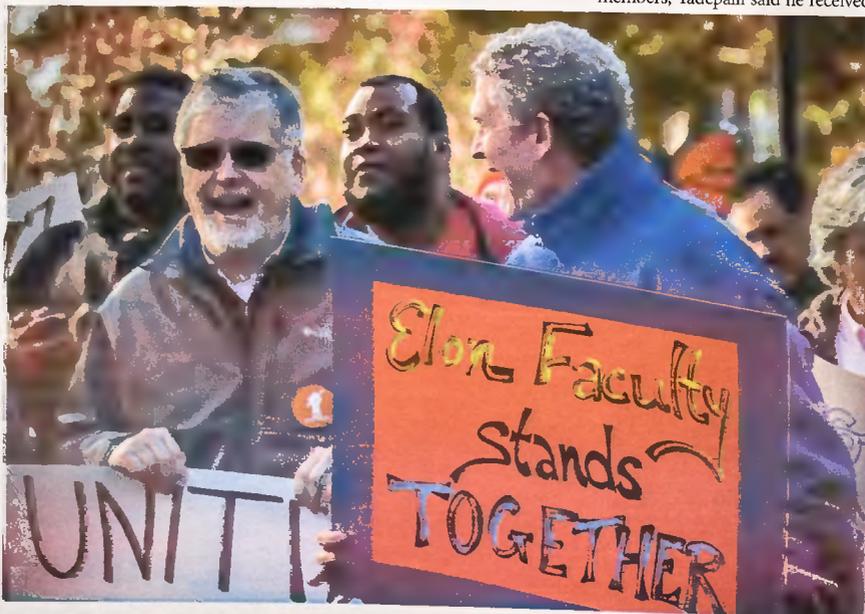
A union at Duke

Rumors of a union forming at Duke, about 40 miles east of Elon, began spreading during the summer of 2015.

Those rumors were confirmed when Duke faculty requested the help of Faculty Forward. By working closely with representatives such as Stanley, Duke’s Faculty Union was formed by March 2016.

Of the 203 ballots cast by non-tenure-track faculty members at Duke, 174-29 voted in favor of the union in the election overseen by the NLRB. In July 2017, members of the union voted unanimously to ratify the DPU’s first contract. The contract was then negotiated and agreed upon by Duke’s administration. It runs from July 1, 2017, to June 20, 2020.

The DPU contract addresses job security, access to more university resources, regular performance reviews and the formal orientation of new non-tenure-track faculty mem-



ABBY GIBBS | PHOTO EDITOR