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Does a Prolonged Faculty Strike in Higher Education Affect Student Achievement in First-Year General Education Courses?

Stephen J. Jacquemin,¹ Christine R. Junker,² Mark S. Cubberley³

Introduction

On January 3, 2019, after two years of failed contract negotiations, the Wright State University (WSU) Board of Trustees approved final terms of employment, or a “last, best offer” for bargaining unit faculty represented by the WSU Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). On January 5, the AAUP-WSU Executive Committee recommended members vote to reject the imposed contract by authorizing a strike. Roughly 95% of the 465 faculty union members voted on the contract with approximately 85% of these votes rejecting the imposed contract and authorizing the strike. Principle areas of dispute included the right to bargain over health care, continuing contract term lengths for non-tenure-eligible faculty, teaching workload, summer teaching policies, annual evaluation standards, and furlough policies. The faculty strike began January 22, one week into Spring Semester 2019, and ended on February 10, 2019. University-wide, 333 of 560 Bargaining Unit Faculty struck for 14 business days resulting in 4,437 combined faculty strike days. Of those 38 total full time faculty at the regional campus of Wright State University, 19 struck. Although classes were reported to have continued throughout the work stoppage, many courses were combined with other sections or offerings, moved to online formats, taught by replacement staff, or failed to meet at all (Filby a, 2019).

Faculty strikes in higher education are less common than faculty strikes in primary or secondary education and tend to be brief (many lasting less than one week). Moreover, the history of work stoppages in higher education is fragmented in that a comprehensive record is not maintained by a single source. The Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) provide some historical information. The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions (Hunter College, CUNY) provides more comprehensive records, but only for the periods of 1966-1994

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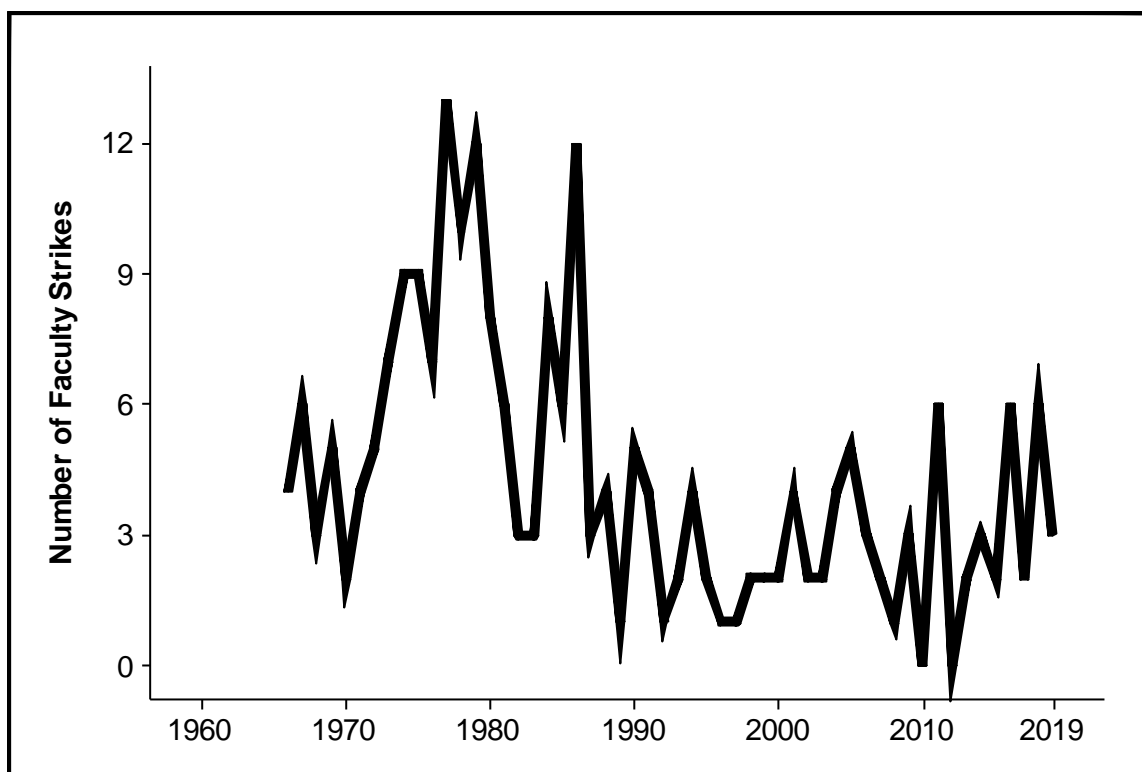
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(Annunziato, 1994) and 2013-2017 (Herbert & Apkarian, 2017). Combined, these datasets detail 174 faculty strikes between 1966 and 2017. Reports in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and public news sources fill in some of the gaps in these datasets and provide information on 63 additional strikes involving faculty or graduate assistants from 1966 to the present. Altogether, the comparatively large number of strikes in the 1970s and 1980s has given way to a smaller number of strikes over time (Figure 1 and [Appendix](#)). While not yet near the numbers from 30 to 40 years ago, it should also be noted that the number of strikes in higher education appears to have risen over the past decade.

Figure 1

Number of faculty strikes at colleges and universities across the United States 1966-2019.



Note: Data are from published literature in Annunziato (1994) and Herbert and Apkarian (2017) as well as inclusive searches of media databases from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<https://www.chronicle.com>), *Inside Higher Ed* (<https://www.insidehighered.com>), and Bureau of Labor Statistics, using fixed search terms (i.e. faculty, strike, lockout).

One of the central questions surrounding collective bargaining and work stoppages in higher education is the extent to which strikes may affect aspects of student achievement such as end-of-course grades. End-of-course grades may or may not be commensurate with student learning and/or achievement, but summative grades are highly relevant in academia for administrative purposes. Course grades underlie scholarships, financial aid, and grade point

averages, satisfy course and program prerequisites, predict matriculation and degree completion, and serve as benchmark learning outcomes. Existing educational research does not provide much insight as the vast majority of research on teachers' unions, including work stoppages, in the United States and their impact on students is relegated to K-12 elementary and secondary education settings (Zwerling, 2007; Thornicroft, 1994; Baker, 2013; Cowen & Strunk, 2015). Research that has been done in higher education settings focuses primarily on the effects of collective bargaining on faculty and the broader organizational implications for institutions (Ashraf & Williams, 2008; Wickens, 2008; Hedrick et al., 2010; Porter, 2013). Some of the more comprehensive and recent studies on the effects of faculty unions, for example Cain's *ASHE* report (2017), emphasize how the effects of unions are not as extreme as either proponents or opponents of unionization have anticipated. Moreover, there have been substantial shifts since most of the research on unionization has been completed. Although some research has focused on how students react emotionally in the event of a strike (Decew, 2008; Amos et al., 1993; Grayson, 1999; Greenglass et al., 2002), to our knowledge, there have been no studies addressing the effects of faculty strikes and/or extended teaching disruptions on student achievement in higher education in the United States. Consequently, the objective of this study was to assess the impact of the 20-day faculty strike at Wright State University's regional campus on student end-of-course grades in introductory general education courses.

Methods

Numerical course grades were compiled from select first year courses at the regional campus of Wright State University offered from 2016 to 2019. The dataset included only numerical course grades for courses offered during semesters preceding and including that which encompassed the work stoppage. All courses had the same instructor of record who participated in the 20-day work stoppage in the spring of 2019 where course instruction was similar across all semesters (i.e. face-to-face, similar assignments and assessments, etc.). Except in the case of the chemistry and history classes, this included data from spring semesters spanning 2016 to 2019. Specific to chemistry, fall and spring semesters of the course offering spanning 2017 to 2019 were used, while for history, spring semesters from 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 were used since this class was not taught by the same instructor in spring of 2017. Multiple semesters preceding the strike were used to ensure a representative reference point for which to compare Spring 2019 samples. All identifying and descriptive attributes associated with numerical course grades were redacted prior to amending data into the dataset.

End-of-course grades were used as a metric to assess the impact on student achievement whereby both mean and standard error were compared course by course between striking and non-striking semesters. Course grades were used and reported herein rather than individual assignments within courses to better assess overall course differences by semester, instead of

exploring potential effects on any single individual assignment (although preliminary analyses found similar variation in individual assignments compared with overall scores). Descriptive statistics as well as individual t-tests were used to assess possible differences among course grades that could be attributable to the strike.

Results

The dataset included 935 students distributed across six courses taught primarily from 2016 to 2018 (no-strike) and Spring 2019 (strike) (Table 1). Mean differences in end-of-course grades between semesters attributable to the university strike were not significant (*students t-test*; $p > 0.05$) for any class assessed. Similarly, no consistent patterns or differences in standard error of semester scores attributable to semester differences were identified. Additionally, *post hoc* survey of the number of student course withdrawals between the most recent non-striking semester (Spring 2018) and Spring 2019 (strike) did not reveal any differences that could skew the dataset in a particular way. Institutional data indicates that a total of 15 versus 6 students withdrew from these courses during Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters, respectively, with the majority of both semesters withdrawals occurring prior to the university 14 day drop period expiring.

Table 1

Course Grade Mean Percent Difference by Discipline for Strike and Non-strike Semesters

Discipline	Semester Strike	N	M	SE	MD	df	t-value
Science/Math							
Biology	No	93	76.8	1.4	1.9	52	-0.65
	Yes	31	78.7	2.4			(NS)
Chemistry	No	124	76.4	1.6	2	49	-0.70
	Yes	25	78.4	2.3			(NS)
Statistics	No	186	77.8	1.5	-1.6	106	0.57
	Yes	57	76.2	2.3			(NS)
Humanities							
History	No	114	75.4	1.6	-1.9	48	0.46
	Yes	35	73.5	3.7			(NS)
Psychology	No	117	74.2	1.9	1	56	-0.28
	Yes	28	75.2	2.7			(NS)
Cultural Studies	No	99	78.3	2.2	6.1	75	-1.92
	Yes	26	84.4	2.3			(NS)

Note: Non-strike data are from 2016-2018 spring semesters except for chemistry which is from fall and spring semesters from 2017 to 2018 and history which is from spring semesters of 2015-2016 and 2018. No statistical differences (NS) between groups were identified.

Discussion

Overall, our analysis indicates student end-of-course grades were not significantly impacted by the faculty strike. While some courses did exhibit small variations in mean between semesters with and without a faculty strike, none of these differences were found to be statistically significant as the overall levels of variation between striking and non-striking semesters overlap, appearing to be driven by a few outlier scores, rather than reflecting a larger trend in the general population. Similarly, variation in mean score standard error of any individual year prior to or including the semester strike was not consistent across courses or disciplines, indicating that while mean scores did fluctuate in standard error, no larger pattern emerged. Subsequent observation of the number of course withdrawals or drops indicated no real differences in withdraw rates between semesters for any of the courses despite multiple extensions of the withdrawal dates during Spring 2019. These results are extremely positive as they indicate that student achievement was not impacted by the faculty strike. Consequently, this is evidence that students' GPAs, eligibility for scholarships and financial aid, admission into subsequent courses, and future academic and professional goals, including application to graduate level programs, were not compromised by the work stoppage.

However, the confusion during the nearly three-week faculty work stoppage should not go unmentioned as its potential long-term effects have not yet been realized. This confusion set in almost immediately when the "Emergency Alert" system, designed to "post timely information about real or potential life threatening situations" on campus, was used to notify students that a faculty strike was imminent but classes would meet as usual. A public statement by the University confirmed that most courses were indeed covered by replacement instructors (Filby a, b, 2019) who were expected to continue the courses to which they were assigned, generating new content to meet established course objectives and learning outcomes. However, the *Dayton Daily News* reported these claims were not completely accurate as many students stated that they had classes with no instructor at all or that the University was giving alternative assignments for classes (e.g., touring the library's archives) (Filby a, b, 2019).

Although no hard numbers are available for the percentage of courses covered or by what means during the opening days of the work stoppage, some details can be gleaned from the legal testimony which occurred at the end of the first week of the strike when the University attempted to end the work stoppage by filing an unfair labor practice complaint against the faculty union with the Ohio State Employment Relations Board (SERB). In this proceeding, the University's attorney stated that only "40 percent of classes taught by a union member actually had a teacher in them," in part, he claimed, because striking faculty had largely removed their developed course content (and intellectual) materials from the Learning Management System (Filby c, 2019). However, the public employee strike was ruled lawful by the board and continued.

Consequently, as the strike went on, a series of running advertisements for “long term adjuncts” in such outlets as *The Chronicle* and *Higher Ed Jobs* were used to solicit replacement faculty for over 80 disciplines (Pettit, 2019).

The changes in classes, personnel, and institutional environment resulted in an understandable amount of student frustration (Inskip, 2019; Laissle, 2019) regarding the sustainability of the work stoppage. This frustration was on display in social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter where students posted concerns, thoughts, and feelings about the environment, even documenting campus protests, including sit-ins and marches, and speaking out on the situation in real time. To assuage student concerns regarding courses during this time, the University extended the course drop deadline twice to help encourage continued enrollment. As the strike continued, the University advanced plans to shift some courses to a future abbreviated seven-week schedule or outright canceling classes, even hosting special advising sessions for students with classes that had not met since the strike had begun (Filby d, 2019).

At the regional campus, since over half of the total full-time faculty were on strike and where many departments have only one or two faculty members, the stress and confusion was arguably even higher, and the attempts to provide course coverage even more challenging. Entire departments were often missing, leading to staff (e.g., academic advisors, administrative assistants, etc.) or non-striking faculty members often outside of course disciplines to teach class offerings. During this time, striking faculty members at the regional campus also faced considerable challenges. Most notably, the geographical isolation from the University and rest of the union negatively affected lines of direct communication as well as engagement with other faculty in the sense of community that is essential for morale of workers during a work stoppage (Dixon et al., 2004).

On February 10, 2019, after three weeks of faculty picketing and negotiations, the work stoppage ended with classes resuming. Overall, there were no formal recommendations given by administration or the faculty union as to how best to reenter and continue on with the remainder of the semester. Due to the inconsistency of course coverage and to alleviate the stress for students who were concerned that they had not learned the course content during the three weeks of the strike, many returning faculty at the regional campus reported picking up where their courses had left off before the strike. This was also partly due to a lack of communication as most returning faculty reported no communication from the faculty and the staff assigned to cover courses during the strike. Some faculty expressed interest in scheduling additional instructional time; however, University administration specifically prohibited faculty from requiring students to attend. Consequently, faculty adjusted for the lost time in a number of different ways. In some cases, course work was condensed or combined to compensate for lost time. In other cases, scheduled in-class review sessions and writing workshops were made

optional out-of-class sessions. Some instructors also reported omitting materials and/or activities not necessarily essential to meeting the learning outcomes for their courses. It is interesting to note, however, that returning faculty (including all the faculty involved in this study), almost universally implemented and emphasized extended open office hours so that students could review material and be better prepared to understand course content and be successful.

Our findings that final grades were not affected are consistent with other research showing strikes have little to no impact on student achievement. And while there has been very little research regarding the effects of strikes on student achievement in higher education, teacher strikes at the primary and secondary level have also been found to have limited impact on student academic performance (Thorncroft, 1994; Zwerling, 2007). Similarly, Zirkel's research (1992) extends this research on achievement, documenting little impact on student attitude or student attendance. However, Baker (2013) suggests that prolonged teacher strikes (longer than 10 days) in Ontario did have a negative effect on students between grade 3 and grade 6, particularly in math test scores. Whether these results are transferable to the higher education setting is uncertain as the education levels and logistics surrounding time missed due to work stoppages are quite different. Both students and teachers at the primary and secondary level have less autonomy to regulate course content and coverage and so may be less able to adjust to interruptions of instructional time. Moreover, in the case of public primary and secondary schools, many states mandate a certain number of hours. Consequently, time missed due to work stoppages must be "made up" by adding extra days to the school year, just as too many days missed due to inclement weather conditions must be made up.

One of the limitations of research on the effects of work stoppages is that much of the research has focused on one or two institutions, rather than a large sample of colleges and universities (Cain 2017). Similarly, our study is limited in this way: we focused on one strike at one regional campus in a selection of general education courses. To test whether the results we found are generalizable, more research is needed across all instruction levels (undergraduate and graduate), different institutions, and different strike durations. And while end-of-course grades were not significantly affected by the faculty strike, it remains to be seen if this particular strike affected students or the institution in other ways. The implications of this study are relevant for not only understanding classroom dynamics but also understanding how policy and environment of higher education may or may not affect the classroom. However, and perhaps most importantly, these results help to inform the narratives that often surround work stoppages in education as we recognize a need for others in higher education to review institutional data to assess potential variation as a result of similar events.

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Appendix*Faculty Work Stoppages in Higher Education*

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
2019	3	Wright State University University of Illinois, Chicago University of Chicago
2018	6	University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Loyola University, Chicago Columbia University Ferris State University University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill Yosemite Community College District
2017	2	University of Illinois, Springfield Columbia College, Chicago
2016	6	Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education Long Island University, Brooklyn Green River College University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign City College of San Francisco Cincinnati State Technical & Community College
2015	2	Rock Valley College National Adjunct Walkout Day
2014	3	University of Illinois, Chicago University of Oregon General Theological Seminary
2013	2	Bellingham Technical College Nassau Community College
2012	0	
2011	7	Central Michigan University Long Island University, Brooklyn Long Island University, C.W. Post Cincinnati State Technical & Community College

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
		Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
		Cal State University, East Bay
		Cal State University, Dominguez Hills
2010	0	
2009	3	Oakland University
		University of California System
		University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
2008	1	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
2007	2	Community College of Philadelphia
		University of Massachusetts, Amherst
2006	3	New York University
		Eastern Michigan University
		Hartnell College
2005	5	New York University
		Columbia University
		Yale University
		University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
		Youngtown State University
2004	4	City Colleges of Chicago
		Columbia University
		Northeastern Illinois University
		University of Pennsylvania
2003	3	Long Island University, Brooklyn
		Long Island University, C.W. Post
		Yale University
2002	2	University of California System
		William Rainey Harper College
2001	5	University of Hawaii System
		University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
		University of Washington
		Elgin Community College
		Long Island University, C.W. Post

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
2000	2	Gogebic Community College Eastern Michigan University
1999	2	Wayne State University University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
1998	2	University of California System Community College of Philadelphia
1997	1	Ferris State University
1996	2	Yale University Kaskaskia College District
1995	2	Yale University University of California, Los Angeles
1994	4	Wayne State University Oakland University Long Island University, Brooklyn Long Island University, C.W. Post
1993	2	University of Cincinnati Delaware County Community College
1992	1	Yale University
1991	4	Carl Sandburg College University of Bridgeport University of Massachusetts, Amherst Yale University
1990	5	Temple University Shawnee State University Union County College University of Bridgeport Wayne State University
1989	1	Youngstown State University
1988	4	Hofstra University Lower Columbia College Middlesex County College Wayne State University

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
1987	3	Ferris State College University of Bridgeport Shawnee State College
1986	12	Bellevue Community College Fairleigh Dickinson Lakeland College Mercer Community College Mott Community College Roger Williams College Temple University Thornton Community College Wayne State University Berklee College of Music Berklee College of Music (ADJ) Jefferson Technical College
1985	6	Hofstra University Lakeland Community College Long Island University, Brooklyn Long Island University, C.W. Post Oakland University Triton Community College
1984	9	Burlington Community College Morton College Kellogg Community College Thorton Community College Western Michigan University Henry Ford Community College Lincoln University Taylor Business Carl Sandburg College
1983	3	Compton Community College St. Clair County Community College

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
		University of Hawaii
1982	3	Prairie State College Highland Park Community College Montgomery County Community College
1981	6	Delaware County Community College Dowling College Montgomery County Community College University of Dubuque Wagner College Community College of Philadelphia
1980	8	Bellville Area College University of Dubuque Theological Seminary Long Island University, Brooklyn McHenry County College Nassau Community College Schoolcraft College Union College Wayne State University
1979	12	Delaware County Community College Farleigh Dickinson University Hofstra University Long Island University, Brooklyn Monmouth College Rhode Island Junior College Union College University of Cincinnati University of Rhode Island Washtenaw Community College Prairie State College Boston University
1978	10	City Colleges of Chicago University of Bridgeport

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
		Ferris State College
		Wayne State University
		Eastern Michigan University
		Kellogg Community College
		Henry Ford Community College
		Lansing Community College
		Schoolcraft College
		University of District of Columbia, Van Ness
1977	13	Western Michigan University
		Wentworth Institute
		Highland Park Community College
		Thornton Community College
		Joliet Junior College
		Dowling College
		Wagner College
		Long Island University, C.W. Post
		University of Alaska Community Colleges
		Connecticut State Technical College
		Stevens Institute of Technology
		Bucks County Community College
		Prairie State College
1976	7	Community College of Philadelphia
		Pepperdine University, Seaver College
		Oakland University
		Adelphi University
		Wayne State University
		Community College of Beaver County
		Seattle Community Colleges
1975	9	Buck County Community College
		City Colleges of Chicago
		Rhode Island Junior College
		Thornton Community College
		University of Bridgeport

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
		College of Marin
		Robert Morris College
		Prairie State College
		Gloucester County College
1974	9	University of Alaska Community College
		Long Island University, Post
		Green River Community College
		Lehigh County Community College
		Lincoln Technical Institute
		Moraine Valley Community College
		Rider College
		New Jersey State College System
		Wayne State Community College
1973	7	Lake Michigan College
		Tacoma Community College
		City Colleges of Chicago
		Antioch University
		Highland Park Community College
		Westmoreland Community College
		Somerset County College
1972	5	Community College of Allegheny City
		Community College of Philadelphia
		Macomb County Community College
		Middlesex County College
		Prairie State College
1971	4	Oakland University
		Nassau Community College
		City Colleges of Chicago
		Alpena Community College
1970	2	Schoolcraft Community College
		Prairie State College
1969	5	San Francisco State College

Year	Total # Strikes	Institutions
		Prairie State College
		San Jose City College District
		Charles Stewart Mott College
		City Colleges of Chicago
1968	3	Northern Illinois University
		Chicago State University
		Lake Michigan Community College
1967	6	Henry Ford Community College
		Macomb County Community College
		Lake Michigan Community College
		Highland Park Community College
		Catholic University of America
		City Colleges of Chicago
1966	4	Henry Ford Community College
		Charles Stewart Mott College
		St. John's University
		City Colleges of Chicago

Note: Data gathered from Herbert and Apkarian (2017), Annunziato (1994), *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, Bureau of Labor Statistics - Detailed Monthly Listing (1993-Present), Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service - Work Stoppage Data, and Internet news searches for faculty strikes and/or work stoppages.