The Vitality of Connecting with our Broader Communities
by Scott Launier, UFF-UCF President

At the 2014 fall UFF state senate meeting, I attended a breakout session with Bruce Nissen (UFF-FIU chapter) about “Building a Power Organization.” We were invited to consider whether our chapter engaged only in bargaining and grievances, or whether we worked to build a power organization. We acknowledged that one problem in not building a power organization is creating an organization of dues-paying members with too few active members.

After the fall meeting, our chapter began to think about this session along with an important question posed to us by UFF staffer Josh Lenes: What is the identity and visibility of our union chapter? That is, what is it that our chapter does and what do we want it to do? Our chapter then committed to three new initiatives: building community among faculty, giving back to faculty and connecting with the broader UCF and Central Florida communities.

To connect with the community, we began attending the monthly meetings of the Central Florida Labor Council, and we attended the annual meeting of our local Jobs with Justice organization. From this meeting, we were invited to be a part of the Jobs with Justice Steering Committee, and we readily accepted. We also now have a seat on the Racial Justice Committee of Organize Now. In addition, Jobs with Justice invited us to attend their 3-day leadership training—training I highly recommend.

While not all of the issues that concern labor groups in our community directly pertain to our chapter’s issues, many of them do. More importantly, we have been widely welcomed and are frequently asked what can be done to help us. Members of these groups are interested in UFF-UCF in solidarity, but also because their children attend our university, or they want their children to attend our university, or they themselves hope to one day attend our university.

Some might say, “But going beyond our own collective bargaining interests is not our issue.” In response, I say:

• If we care about social justice, this is our issue.
• If we want to know what is going on in the world immediately around us, this is our issue.
• If we want to build a power organization that includes a coalition of allies to call upon, as I argue will be fundamentally important for our survival in the 21st century, this is our issue.

• If we want to participate in union-building training, and experience real-time strategy-building sessions, this is our issue.

  • If we want to reinvigorate a presence of the academic as a public intellectual, and have social and political influence in our communities, this is our issue.

  • Quite simply, if we want to be a part of the community in which we live and work, teach and research, this is our issue.

As with most union activity, connecting with the community takes time and patience. It requires understanding and sensitivity. One does not impose oneself upon others’ causes, no matter how good the intentions. One must be invited, and earn respect and an expectation of trust and reliability. But our communities are welcoming, and they desire, and have experience in, building relationships and allies. By deepening our connections with our communities, we learn, we teach and we increase the likelihood of making our values real in the world.