Present
Linda Peterson, Missy Gillis, Adriana Moreno-Nevarez, Derrick Smith, Michael Stang, Donna Prain, Michael Spires, Leslie Hecht, Michelle Pickett, Phyllis Zerull, Todd Latham, Kay Chapman, Bobby Wilkerson, Elizabeth Leake, Al Mueller, Sabrina Hammond, Mark McGowan, Deborah Haliczer, Jon Ostenburg, Norden Gilbert, Abby Chemers, Nancy Apperson, Matt Volk, Cliff Bottiglieri, Monique Bernoudy, Bobbie Cesarek, Steve Lux

Absent
Lynn Richards, Dan House, Andrew Haring

Guests
Donna Smith, Tim Griffin

I. Cesarek, Council President, called the meeting to order at 10:04 AM.

Ken Zehnder, Associate Director, NIU External Affairs was our guest. He explained the current Illinois legislative culture, and why our budget has suffered. He suggests that if change is to occur—i.e. taxes are to be raised—this might be the year. This may help, but not completely resolve, deficiencies in higher education as well the rest of the under-funded programs in the state.

Zehnder explained that there has been a general misconception among many legislators that the costs of higher education are funded by tuition dollars. In reality, there is a funding gap. Our costs are on par with inflation, but our state support has been declining. When our costs go up and support goes down, something has to give.

Zehnder explained where we are in the current legislative cycle. Knowledge of this culture is important if we want to lobby for positive future outcomes. He explained how the General Assembly (GA) transitions, and that the field will soon start fresh.

Governor Blagojevich’s inaugural address included a plea to increase funding for education but that reference has generally meant K-12, not higher education. This has been a constant for Blagojevich. The main policy issue he has addressed has been healthcare. His Kids Care program has a huge price tag. He has also been committed to not raising taxes. His funding proposals have included leasing the Illinois State Lottery and closing some loopholes in big business tax breaks. These measures aren’t enough to fund the deficiencies that exist in our state healthcare, pension, and education programs.

The president of the Illinois Senate proposed a way to improve funding for education with Senate Bill 750. He and the Speaker of the House would both consider raising taxes but even with an increase, they don’t see how the state can still afford new services. It is quite possible that legislation similar to SB750 will pass if the Democrats can all agree that it needs to be done. For “Extraordinary Majority” to occur, the Senate need only have 36 votes. They have 37 and are therefore veto proof. The House, on
the other hand, has 64 votes, and only requires 60 in order to pass a popular bill. Therefore, the House of Representatives is where the Republicans and Democrats will have to negotiate. The presidential race may distract everyone on this issue, however.

The other issue on the table is associated with capital improvement needs that have been without support in the form of a bill for three years. There are many of pent-up requests for infrastructure needs such as road repair, etc. This is everywhere, not only in Higher Education. Everyone in the legislature is feeling the pressure to push their constituents’ projects through.

There are several other items vying for attention this cycle:

1. The Income Tax Swap: would raise income taxes in exchange for property tax relief.
2. A proposal to allow community colleges to offer four-year degrees.
3. The ISAC portfolio sale: funds scholarships such as MAP, MAP PLUS and other first-year scholarships. This was never completely funded in the past. The Attorney General has some serious doubt that this can be funded without legislative action.
4. Textbook rental programs. Both costly and unfunded.
5. Ethics testing.
6. Pensions-6% balloon issue. They most likely won’t open this bill again.
7. Healthcare-Fund with sale of the toll way or Lottery?

A higher education coalition, comprised of representatives from IBHE, ICCB, universities and unions such as the IEA, have been meeting to plan strategy.

Lobby day is April 25, but our united presence there is not enough. We need to develop a fulltime public relations campaign. There is a University of Illinois graduate student who has volunteered to establish a campaign with a uniform message. Our united profile needs to be as high as possible. The governor has clearly not heard the message from Illinois Higher Education. He has been focused on K-12. We need to somehow elevate the value of higher education in his eyes.

The Education Caucus, led by Representative Bob Pritchard is the first of its kind. Both Pritchard and Senator Burzynski are focusing on education funding issues, including Higher Education, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, reform and accountability.

President Peters has met with the head of the Governor’s Office of Budget and Management advocating a base increase of our budget, with salaries as the highest priority. He has presented our case in consideration of capital needs for renovation, new classrooms and general maintenance. He has highlighted NIU’s ability to promote economic development in the state. The Northern Illinois economy is directly impacted by the health and wellness of NIU.

SPSC discussion ensued. A question was raised: “If previous measures didn’t help (such as pension holiday) what is different now? How can we expect things to be different?” According to Zehnder, the Speaker and Senate President co-chaired the Governor’s reelection campaign but now that the campaign is over, differences may surface. According to a new federal mandate, previously undisclosed issues of public sector
How can we help? Zehnder urges everyone to watch the GA web site: www.ilga.gov to track action on higher education related legislation. A summary of bills which will be posted on NIU's External Affairs web site at http://www.niu.edu/govtrelt/. Last session there were more than 6,000 bills introduced. When the education bills are due, we can work with an organized effort to lobby in advance in order to affect positive change. We should focus on contacting those in legislative leadership, or those with whom we have other connections. Representative Pritchard and Senator Burzynski are sympathetic to our needs. There are also ten NIU alumni who have been elected to the General Assembly. NIU constituents are encouraged to make these contacts (on their own time, using their own resources-not state resources) to express their concerns. Higher Education needs to be included whenever education funding gaps are addressed-not just K-12.

Upon thanking Zehnder for sharing his insights with Council, SPSC resumed their regular meeting.

II. Announcements

a.) Cesarek reminded the council of meeting date changes in March and June.

b.) Cesarek reported that she recommended Francine St. Clair to serve on the Affirmative Action and Diversity Resources Advisory Committee. St. Clair, director of Student Athlete Support Services, is a “great candidate” with “great ideas.”

III. Committees of the Council

a. Awards: Haliczer asked Latham and Lux, who are among the 11 nominees for SPS Presidential Awards, to leave the room. Haliczer then announced the names of the nominees, all of whom are “wonderful employees” and “excellent people,” and the four top vote-getters. However, a complication has entered the awards process: One of the 11 chosen for one of the four awards is retiring and will be gone by the April 10 ceremony. There is no university precedent for giving a service award to a retired employee. Haliczer asked whether the award should go to the nominee with the fifth-highest number of votes, or whether the retired employee should receive the award. That question also has been put to President Peters, who responded that he is uncomfortable with starting new precedent. Another complication: The monetary reward counts as compensation, which could affect this potential winner’s pension. The SPS solicitation for nominees does not contain specific language about employment status, something clearly spelled out in the Operating Staff Council’s solicitation for its awards. After discussion and an inconclusive voice vote, the council voted 9-7 in favor of continuing the nomination of the soon-to-retire employee to President Peters for his consideration. Per Haliczer, the process must still remain confidential.
b. Communications: No report, although Cesarek asked for a February report on the committee’s Web site review.

c. Constitution and Elections: No report.

d. Finance: No report.

e. Legislative: No report, although Cesarek reported that Jack King is hoping to have Ken Zehnder meet with the committee.

f. Technology Resources: Ostenburg distributed instructions on the SPS address books. He reported that a couple members declined sharing rights for the address books; if those members accidentally clicked “decline” rather than “accept,” they can ask Ostenburg to share them again. Hammond reported that employees confused by the new appearance of the GroupWise window still can find all the functional buttons atop the screen.

g. Workplace Issues: Haliczer reported that work is ongoing regarding the policy regarding service to NIU.

h. Vice President: No report.

IV. Old Business

a.) SPS survey update – Spires reported that a few minor corrections will be made to the survey stemming from comments offered about the draft version sent Jan. 3 to council members for review. The survey should go out by the end of the month. As in 2002, it is a confidential survey that no one but the council sees. No personally identifying information is shared. For those with concerns about the question of sexual orientation, that wording was lifted directly from the Harris Poll. The committee believes it’s a worthwhile question because there have reports of discrimination on that basis, and because of the issue of benefits to same-sex couples. As in 2002, the survey will be available electronically and via paper. Per Spires, the committee was encouraged to offer an incentive to boost participation. The council does have funds to buy some rewards, such as gift certificates. Bernoudy said the promise of confidentiality should come sooner than the end of the survey; per Spires, that didn’t create a problem in 2002. The confidentiality guarantee can move easily to the top in the e-mail survey, but not in the paper survey. There was a response rate around 25 percent in 2002, considered high for an electronic survey. About 200 people completed the survey electronically while about 20 opted for paper. Ostenburg reported that he’s been told the Public Opinion Lab is better equipped to handle confidentiality concerns. There is no way to control people from responding electronically and via paper. Per Lux, incentives work best when people understand what their odds of winning are; also, Lux said the HSC Bookstore sometimes will share the costs of gift certificates. Latham suggested eliminating the option to respond by paper; Spires said the survey’s purpose is to encourage response and not to discourage people who otherwise might respond because paper is an option.

b.) Ethics Training Update – Per Haliczer, some NIU employees have had their certificates revoked because they completed their training in a time the state considers too quick. Letters are being sent. Those employees who come in compliance will be forgiven. Paperwork generated from this will reside in an Ethics Training file and not in employees’ personnel files.


V. New Business
a.) Employee Wellness Fair – Bernoudy, Bottiglieri, Latham, Lux and Donna Smith volunteered to serve on an ad-hoc committee.

b.) Spring After Hours – Chemers, Gillis, Hammond and Volk volunteered to serve on an ad-hoc committee.

c.) 2007-2008 Proposed Meetings Schedule – Cesarek put out a proposed schedule for next year in order to begin booking the Blackhawk meeting rooms. The Fireside Room is no longer available, and the general noise of the Pheasant Room does not lend itself to discussions. Because the SPS constitution does not force meetings the first Thursday of the month, some meetings are moved to the second Thursday of the month to accommodate holidays and various BOT meetings.

d.) Presidential Terms of Office – Per Cesarek, the three-year job of SPS president is an enormous obligation, including other meetings than just SPS and much of it taking away time from her job. A two-year commitment might attract more people to the table. Per Spires, a vote on an amendment to the constitution must wait a month unless it appears on that month’s distributed agenda. Spires said he has reservations about reducing the term: Most presidents spend the first year “learning the ropes” of this complex position and start to get good at it during the second year. Gillis, who has served leadership positions with her professional organization at the expense of her work and personal lives, said she likes the idea: Good people might hesitate to take on a three-year term. Others suggested a three-year system of president-elect/president/past-president. Hammond said the vice president could serve as president-elect, but Prain pointed out that the president is elected by the entire constituency and the vice president is elected by the council.

VI. University Committee Reports

No reports.

VII. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:01 p.m.