Northern Illinois University
University Benefits Committee

Annual Report 2014-2015

The University Benefits Committee (UBC) met six times during the 2014-2015 academic year (September 4, October 16, November 20, 2014; January 29, March 5, and April 23, 2015). The 2014-2015 committee membership included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty (2)</th>
<th>Brian May</th>
<th>George Slotsve</th>
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<tr>
<td>Committee on the Economic Status of the Profession representative (from Faculty Senate)</td>
<td>Brian Mackie</td>
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<td>Operating Staff (2)</td>
<td>John Hulseberg</td>
<td>Pamela Rosenberg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive Professional Staff (2)</td>
<td>*Terry Borg</td>
<td>**Samantha McCarron</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive Vice President &amp; Provost representative</td>
<td>Murali Krishnamurthi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior administrator responsible for Human Resource Services or designee</td>
<td>Celeste Latham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annuitants Association representative</td>
<td>Sherilyn Spear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Manager of Insurance and Employee Benefits</td>
<td>Liz Guess</td>
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* chair
**secretary
@ ex officio

Major Reoccurring Discussion Topics

In 2014-2015, the UBC conducted significant discussions on topics including (1) Faculty/Staff Morale and Workloads, (2) Pension Issues, and (3) the impact of the Affordable Care Act.

Morale and Workloads: Committee members noted that departments reported that employee morale was down due to increased workloads and the lack of increments (salary increases). Some faculty felt forced to retire due to the economic situation. Compounding the impact of low morale, has been employees’ challenges in dealing with increased change. Although some internal reassignments (promotions) have helped morale in select cases, overall morale is down in the university. The UBC approved the action of requesting that the Faculty Senate, SPS Council and Operating Staff Council, survey their members regarding morale to potentially make recommendations to President Baker on this topic. The SPS Council and the Operating Staff Councils surveyed their members and made recommendations to President Baker. One specific action by the Operating Staff Council was the creation of a virtual suggestion box for faculty and staff that is located at http://niu.edu/faculty_staff.shtml. It was suggested to Faculty Senate that it uses the Operating Staff survey as a starting place in assessing faculty morale.
**Pension Issues:** While the future of the SURS pension system was being adjudicated, discussion in the UBC focused on “volunteer status” and the ability to work as a re-hire after a 30 (termination) or 60 (retirement) day waiting period. Additional discussion focused on the availability/use of “release time” to travel to the SURS Naperville Office for counseling appointments, given that SURS appointment availability in DeKalb is inadequate to meet demand. Human Resources is working with Provost Freeman to draft a policy proposal regarding the ability to not use paid time off to attend a SURS counseling session off-campus. Finally, with the announcement that the new Money Purchase Formula will commence on January 4, 2016, it is anticipated that the university may experience another round of significant numbers of employees retiring at the close of 2015.

**Affordable Care Act:** The UBC kept apprized of the potential impact of the Affordable Care Act on employees working 30 hours per week who are ineligible for state benefits, as well as, student employees and graduate assistants. Human Resource representatives shared their consultations with other Illinois four-year universities, their progress on an impact analysis, and the status of a RFP for non-state coverage. Faculty Senate representatives requested as much notice as possible be given to graduate students regarding the cost of insurance.

**NIU Annuitants Issues**

The NIU Annuitant Association (NIUAA) representative is a critical member to the UBC. In addition to the NIUAA providing leadership, lobbying and information to members, and collaborating with NIU Human Resource Services to keep the NIU community informed on pension activity, the representative keeps the UBC informed of issues impacting retired NIU employees. The 2014-2015 annuitant experience focused on continued access to NIU technology, library benefits, and the Benefit Choice Period (10/15/15 - 12/1/15) for Medicare eligible individuals.

**Access to Email, NIU Address Book, and Library:** The transition from Groupwise to Outlook for annuitants raised question, as it appeared to be a work in progress, requiring ongoing communication between DoIT and the NIUAA. Most critical was continued access to the NIU address book (directory). Annuitants remained on Groupwise through March 2015 with an anticipated transition to Outlook later in spring. Library benefit access proved more complicated. A manual re-enter solution was established for employees who stop employment with NIU after retirement, in order to retain library privileges.

**Benefits Choice Period:** Medicare eligible annuitants participated in a benefits choice period from October 15th through December 1st, 2014. While the medical insurance options were offered in this period, the dental benefits choice period continued to start in July of each year. There is an issue with deductibles if joining before July of a given year. This gap exists because of the Medicare and regular insurance cycles. Deductibles are an issue during the first year of enrollment. Many annuitants or those making decisions are not aware of this issue.

**Other UBC Discussion Topics**

The 2014 – 2015 UBC meeting agendas included discussion on many other topics. The topics included:

- CMS Dependent Audit: scheduled to begin 9/15/15
- Cell Phone Stipend: rollout and impact of this policy
• Metra Pre-Tax Transit Benefits Proposal: level of interest proved low to implement efficiently
• CMS Wellness Weight Loss Benefit: reviewed terms of rebate towards the cost of an approved program
• Smoking Cessation Options: reviewed in the context of the smoke-free campus legislation
• Disability Resource Center/HR Accommodations: approval process is being established for departments to access funds to accommodate employees

2015 – 2016 UBC Topics

As the end of the academic year approached, additional topics arose that will require discussion in 2015 – 2016. These topics include:
• Tuition waivers for eligible employees: What is the financial impact on the employee in differential tuition programs? Is an employee subject to a financial charge when taking an off-campus course?
• How can we influence CMS with the selection of vendors and benefit terms?
• In the case of an university closure, is there guidance on expected work being done at home?
• FMLA Tenure Clock; referred from Faculty Senate

Conclusions:

The 2014 – 2015 academic year posed many challenges for NIU employees seeking secure employment with reasonable remuneration and benefits. Continued attention on quality benefits and workplace conditions is essential in retaining faculty and staff, to make Northern Illinois University a welcoming and desired place for students to learn. Furthermore, our focus on employee benefits is critical in keeping NIU competitive in hiring the faculty and staff needed to compete nationally and internationally. The University Benefits Committee will continue to maintain a pulse on the NIU employees concerns and interests as it fulfills the duties of the University Council’s Bylaws Article 17.2.2 in advising the “president on any and all employee benefits…”, reviewing “present benefit plans and proposals…”, and making “recommendations to the president concerning employee benefits.”

Respectfully submitted,

Terry E. Borg, Ph.D.
Chair, University Benefits Committee