Northern Illinois University

COMMITTEE ON THE UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT
119th Meeting
Tuesday, October 14, 2008
Altgeld Hall 225

MINUTES

Approved

Present: K. Adelmann (Representative for T. Bough/VPA), J. Brunson (Ex Officio, Student Affairs), D. Cesarotti (EET), M. Chowdhury (Student Association), A. Dreessen (Ex Officio, Student Involvement and Leadership Development), J. Isabel (UCC/HHS), W. Johnson (LIB), M. Koren (HHS), D. Pender (EDUC), E. Seaver (Ex Officio, Vice Provost), M. Stang (Ex Officio, Student Housing Services)

Absent: T. Bough (VPA), M. Lenczewski (LAS)

Guests: T. Griffin (Ombudsman)
Mickey Sharma, Director, Counseling and Student Development Center
Scott Peska, Director, Office of Support and Advocacy

I. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

D. Pender suggested changing the order of the agenda to move New Business immediately after announcements in order to accommodate guest speakers presenting at the meeting.

A motion was made by W. Johnson, seconded by D. Cesarotti, to approve the revised order of the agenda. The motion passed.

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

A. Electronic Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the September 9, 2008, CUAE meeting were electronically approved.

III. OLD BUSINESS
A. **CUAE Representative to AADR Committee**

D. Pender asked for a volunteer to serve as the CUAE representative to the Affirmative Action and Diversity Resources Committee. Wendell Johnson volunteered and, with no objections heard, was approved as the CUAE representative for this academic year.

B. **USOAR Proposal Submissions – Statistics Report**

E. Seaver distributed statistics on USOAR proposal submissions over the past several years. He pointed out that from 2005-2008 the largest numbers of participants have been from the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. He said that many of the funded proposals in the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology are joint proposals in which teams are working together on projects. There has been very limited participation by the Colleges of Business and Health and Human Sciences.

E. Seaver explained that originally the USOAR proposals were supported by the Pepsi funds of up to $50,000 to award to students. More recently, with no guarantee of renewal of the Pepsi pouring rights funds, the funding support for USOAR projects was taken over by the Office of the Vice Provost. During this past year under the Strategic Planning process, funds have been earmarked from the strategic planning funds to once again bring fund support to a $50,000 allocation for USOAR.

E. Seaver said that stronger efforts need to be made to increase participation of the colleges not submitting proposals over the past few years. He pointed out that the maximum amount is not always funded as the number of proposals submitted varies and not all projects are deemed to be worthy of funding in the eyes of the selection committee, which is comprised of faculty representatives from each of the colleges. He added that open meeting workshops for students interested in submitting USOAR proposals are being held October 15 and 16, 2008.

IV. **NEW BUSINESS**

A. **Counseling and Student Development Center**

Dr. Mickey Sharma, Director, Counseling and Student Development Center, gave an overview of the center. He said that the Counseling and Student Development Center provides personal, confidential counseling for any NIU student at no charge. The majority of the services that the center provides is individual counseling wherein individuals meet one-on-one with an assigned therapist. A number of different group counseling sessions are also offered for specified groups, explicit student groups, or a group focused around a particular issue. A
new group, Healing Huskies, has recently been added and is for any student who is continuing to deal with the impact of February 14th. He explained that this group is not just for students who were on campus last February but is also open to any student who is new to NIU this semester. He added that the center is also trying to work with both students and the community to encourage more coming together as one community.

Dr. Sharma outlined other services that the Counseling Center provides. The center conducts specified assessments for substance use, alcohol and other drugs, as well as eating disorders and anger intervention. The center also provides consultations and outreach upon referrals by faculty members and other NIU staff. The center’s Coaching for Academic Success program is an academic program that focuses on time-management, test preparation skills, and homework skills. He explained that the center operates on a walk-in system in which students do not need a scheduled appointment for their first visit. He emphasized that the center is very respectful of all forms of diversity and multi-culturalism; services being provided are tailored to the unique background of each student.

Dr. Sharma gave an overview of the center’s mental health response to the February 14th crisis. He described that the Counseling Center staff immediately began working extended hours and extended days, and the center was opened on the weekends. He said that on the evening of February 14th, the center provided counselors in the residence halls and in the Holmes Student Center where a family resource room was set up, following a Virginia Tech’s model. Volunteers from UIC and the Ben Gordon Health Center also assisted on that evening. On February 15th, an orientation was held for approximately 35-40 volunteer counselors that came to the NIU campus that day. A mental health counselor was placed in every residence hall, including Northern View, in addition to a member of the Association for Campus Religious Organizations. He went on to say that during the week following February 14th, the center provided training sessions geared toward returning to the classroom for all faculty, support staff, student affairs, and athletics. During that week, the Counseling Center saw approximately 80 students. He pointed out that 30-40 students in one week was normally considered a busy week.

On February 24th, through the efforts of Student Affairs, 509 volunteer counselors arrived on campus. The counselors attended an orientation on the Sunday before classes resumed. The counselors also were present at the memorial service and at the feeder sites for the memorial service. He noted that, following Virginia Tech’s model, a counselor was placed in every class for the first two days of classes, on campus and off campus, with the message to students being that there was help available. He pointed out that the peak utilization of mental health services occurs between twelve to eighteen months after the event. He said that during the first week of classes, 180 students were seen in the Counseling Center. The increased utilization of the center persisted over the remainder of the spring semester, with 112% increase being seen over the previous spring semester. The increase
continued through the summer months, as well, with a 60% increase in student visits above the previous summer.

Dr. Sharma said that utilization of the center continues to be above the past year, but what has been more striking is the severity of the student situations that are being seen. The number of students being transported to the hospital has already this fall exceeded the total number from the entire past year. He said that the visibility of the Counseling Center is higher than it has been in the past, and more people, not only students, are aware of the services on campus. He also pointed out that the stigma of going to the Counseling Center is not as strong as it has been in the past as counseling is now regarded as a part of recovery and the healing process. The fact that more people are becoming aware of the center’s services has helped get students to the center.

Dr. Sharma emphasized that the messages that came from the counselors in the classrooms on February 25th are the same messages that need to be given throughout this entire academic year – the message that help is available as recovery emotions surface and resurface.

E. Seaver commented that the campus community will continue to see compounding effects. Not only are students feeling anxiety because of February 14th, but the current financial situation is causing stress within families and anxiety for students as they worry about whether they will be able to continue at NIU. He said he hopes that students will continue to use the resources at the center to cope with this anxiety as well as for healing and recovery. Dr. Sharma noted that very few students are coming in stating that February 14th is the key reason; they are coming in initially for numerous other reasons, such as financial stress. He added that the trend across the country is that more centers are seeing higher utilization of their counseling centers.

D. Pender asked if Dr. Sharma would speak to the issue of concern about students who may be considered a risk and the movement toward a threat assessment model. She explained that threat assessment is a model where it is attempted to identify students that are at risk for harm to themselves or to others early enough in the process to have effective intervention or to make a decision about whether or not they are appropriate to remain on campus. Dr. Sharma said, in terms of threat assessment, one grant that NIU has received from the Department of Education, is providing for a team of five individuals from NIU to meet with a Virginia Tech team at the end of October. One purpose of the grant is to connect with Virginia Tech and learn about what they are doing and implementing and what NIU can learn from them that could be implemented here. Both formal and informal work with Virginia Tech will be continued to look at how NIU can continue to utilize information that Virginia Tech has compiled.

D. Pender and the committee thanked Dr. Sharma for all that the Counseling Center had done and continues to do surrounding the February 14th crisis. Dr.
B. **Ombudsman Report**

Tim Griffin, Ombudsman, presented data regarding issues brought to the Office of the Ombudsman during the past academic year. He emphasized that the data he presented to the committee should be treated as confidential and should not be forwarded to others as the data could easily be misinterpreted by individuals who were not in attendance at the meeting. He reported that the office of the Ombudsman recorded approximately 1100 contacts, some of which may have been duplicates, during the past academic year. He pointed out that statistics on contacts to the Ombudsman which were made related to the February 14th crisis are not included in that figure. He also called attention to the fact that all contacts were made by undergraduate students of their own volition with requests for assistance regarding allegations related to various kinds of issues. He stressed that the Office of the Ombudsman only makes referrals to other appropriate NIU offices or individuals and does not conduct investigations or hearings. He commented that the university has made huge strides in some areas as is reflected in statistics he has compiled over the past eighteen years. He also encouraged committee members to contact him if he could be of any help in providing any information that may be of assistance to them.

C. **Crisis Response to February 14th**

Scott Peska, Director of the Office of Support and Advocacy (OSA), presented an overview of the newly created office. He explained that the Office of Support and Advocacy was established in March/April 2008 to provide those who were directly impacted by the tragedy of February 14th with centralized services on campus. The office was created to help with the students that were directly injured, to help the families of the deceased and injured students, and to help the students that were present in Cole Hall on February 14th. He said that Virginia Tech provided valuable guidance in setting up this office as an office that is very similar was established on their campus, and the office has proved to be a critical support network. He noted that our university saw it in the best interest of the university community to establish this type of centralized service. The office will be partially supported by grant funding in order to maintain its operation for the next three to five years. The determination was to keep the office on campus as long as there were students on campus that had been in the Cole Hall classroom on February 14th.

He went on to explain the organizational structure of the office, noting that the office is a two-fold facility. One facet is providing onsite counseling for students and families, both direct and indirect counseling. Therapeutic sessions with licensed clinicians are available for students in addition to indirect counseling in
the form of therapy groups and social support groups. A social support group is also offered for parents.

He said the second facet of the office offers programs and support to provide many different opportunities for these students to get together and keep connected. Concern of the students was that, even though they didn’t know each other, they needed to have the ability to share with each other and keep connected. He said that students are experiencing different emotions at different times and on different levels, and the Office of Support and Advocacy has become a place for them to share and receive support when those emotions arise.

S. Peska said the OSA puts together a monthly newsletter as well as a weekly electronic newsletter that goes out to a specific population. The communications have become very successful in keeping the students informed, as well as the parents. He said that social programs, such as monthly dinners, are being hosted by the OSA for students that were injured as well as Cole Hall students. Other social programs, such as a nature hike and apple picking, have also been planned. A Student Programming Board has been created to help plan these events. It was felt that important events were those that would be and have healing aspects, such as getting outside in nature.

He went on to say that the office had thirteen students who graduated, and the office is still in contact with most of those students, letting them know that they can come back and access the services of the office even though they are not on campus. The office looks at providing service and advice in many different aspects. Professors of students who transferred to another institution have been contacted and offered the OSA as a resource if they want to know what to do to help a particular student. Faculty on the NIU campus are also contacting the office for assistance.

The OSA is also working with the Academic Advising Center to provide academic counseling to these students and assist with class scheduling issues. In addition, the office has partnered with the Department of Public Safety to provide help for injured students who are filling out paperwork for crime victims compensation. In addition, the office has been assisting students in helping to explain medical benefits and helping with finding funding sources to help them pay for medical bills.

S. Peska and the OSA office will be representing the families of the deceased students on various university committees, such as the Memorial Planning Committee and the one year marker, Day of Reflection, that is being planned. A liaison program initially started immediately after the first week of the February 14th crisis. He stated that this liaison program has transitioned to the Office of Support and Advocacy, so the office is now serving in that capacity.

He also noted that the OSA has an advisory board which meets four or five times per year. The board is a fifteen member, widespread group comprised of
individuals from all different functional areas. The Board was established to help with concerns or issues that the OSA can not itself provide. The board will also help make recommendations to President Peters on what types of things need to be done as an institution to resolve some of the issues and concerns in the best interests of our students for campus programs.

In summary, S. Peska commented that the families that he has had a lot of conversations with have thanked, and asked him to continue to thank, everyone at the NIU institution. Overwhelmingly, people have said that the institution has been doing the right thing, and they appreciate so much what has been done in going above and beyond to answer questions even before they were asked or to be there to offer support in ways they hadn’t thought about. S. Peska expressed and shared his thanks to members of the committee for being of help, both directly and indirectly, on behalf of the students and their families.

D. Pender commented on the science of post-trauma intervention, noting that there five things that have to appear: 1) element of safety; 2) calmness; 3) advocacy; 4) connection; 5) creating hope. She stated that those are all of the major things that have to happen to help people get better, and, clearly, the OSA is doing all of these things. E. Seaver added that now the university community has to continue to be vigilant in providing support and advocacy as many of these students are here and will continue to be at the university for several years yet to come.

S. Peska informed the group of events being planned in conjunction with the one year anniversary of the February 14th tragedy. A Day of Reflection will include a large commemorative ceremony will be the significant part of the day, and a candlelight vigil is planned for that evening. In between these two events, a variety of activities are being planned in which individuals will be able to participate to reflect and remember as they choose, such as an art exhibit, a musical performance, or a video montage. Also, space will be offered in the form of hospitality rooms for individuals to break out and get away if a more private reflection is preferred. The final schedule will be widely distributed when details have been set. He also shared that a permanent campus memorial is being created in the form of a garden. Proposals for designs are being sought, and a committee has been formed to review the proposals and make sure the final design meets with what has been recommended. A recommendation will then be made to President Peters to establish the garden. The unveiling of the design of the memorial garden will take place on February 14th.

S. Peska closed by encouraging others to refer students, faculty or staff to the Office of Support and Advocacy, noting that if the OSA is not the proper office to help someone, the staff will make sure the individual is connected to the most appropriate resource.

V. ADJOURNMENT
The meeting was adjourned at 3:55 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, November 11, 2008, at 2:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Mollie Montgomery