Present: T. Bough (VPA), J. Brunson (Ex Officio, Student Affairs), C. Downing (BUS), A. Dreessen (Ex Officio, Student Involvement and Leadership Development), B. Henry (HHS/UCC Rep), K. Johnson (Student/CAB), W. Johnson (LIB), M. Koren (HHS), M. Koss (EDU), G. Matushek (Student/VPA), M. Stang (Ex Officio, Student Housing Services)

Absent: J. Barakat (Student/LAS), M. Lenczewski (LAS), S. Schweitzer (Student/EDU), E. Seaver (Ex Officio, Vice Provost)

Guest: T. Griffin, Ombudsman
Timothy McGrath, Principal, BLDD Architects
Patricia Perkins, Assistant to the Vice President, Finance and Facilities

I. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by W. Johnson, seconded by M. Koren, to adopt the agenda. The motion passed.

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

A. Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by B. Henry, seconded by C. Downing, to approve the February 9, 2010, minutes of the Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment meeting. The motion passed.

III. OLD BUSINESS

There was no old business.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. Tour of Residence Halls
Mike Stang, Executive Director of Housing and Dining, led the committee on a tour of three residence and dining halls, Grant South towers, Douglas, and Stevenson. He provided information and answered questions pertaining to room sizes, room amenities, current occupancy numbers, residence hall labs, tutoring centers, dining options, and residence halls designated for specific areas, such as honors or international students.

B. Residence Hall Renovation Plan Presentation

M. Stang introduced guest speakers, Tim McGrath, Principal, BLDD Architects, and Patti Perkins, Assistant to the Vice President, Division of Finance and Facilities, and asked committee members to introduce themselves. He explained that this committee is interested in issues relating to the undergraduate academic environment and is taking a look at the residence hall system and what options are available for students.

P. Perkins described that the Grant North residence hall renovation project has been in the planning for about one year, and bids have been accepted for the project. She said that, once the final funding items and legal components are in place, it is expected that the major demolition and construction process will begin within the next few weeks. In a separate project from the internal renovation project, the process of replacing windows on the outside of the building has already begun.

T. McGrath said that the Grant North residence hall, which is thirteen stories and approximately 94,000 gross square feet, will be almost entirely gutted from the first floor through the thirteenth floor with the exception of the two apartment floors (second and thirteenth floors). He explained that the two apartment floors will not be gutted, but the finishes will be redone, appliances replaced, etc. Floors three through twelve will be gutted down to the building structure and redesigned to make the rooms larger. On average, the room size will be increased from the current 150-190 square foot double to approximately 200-250 square feet with all new finishes throughout. The first floor will also be demolished and reconfigured to include lounge and office space.

McGrath added that some work, primarily mechanical, will also be done in the two-story central building. He said that an old air handling unit/fan will be replaced with a much more energy efficient fan system with heat recovery which will help lower the overall ongoing operational costs of the building. He pointed out that the new windows being installed will have a higher R value of glass to make them better insulating.

McGrath drew attention to several displays of new furniture provided by vendors. P. Perkins explained that the options for furniture are not limited to these display samples; she encouraged committee members to provide feedback. She added that there will be sixteen double occupancy rooms and two singles on each floor.

McGrath went on to say that other updates to the towers will include the addition of sprinkler, fire alarm, and public address systems. Other re-planning and updating will be done in order to meet the requirements of the Illinois Accessibility Code and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Also to be included are the addition of areas known as “Areas for Rescue Assistant” where wheelchair bound students can go to be safe until fire department personnel can reach them. These areas will be somewhat sheltered and will
be equipped with two-way communication panels so that disabled students can communicate with the main desk.

McGrath added that all restrooms will stay in the same location and the floor plan will remain basically the same, but all will be gutted down to the floor and rebuilt with accessibility features, new finishes, new fixtures, and new trim.

New security measures being incorporated will include such features as security cameras and card swipes on all student room doors. The former hard key entry system is being replaced with a proxy card and PIN system, a two-step process with both steps having to be done in order to enter both the building and a residence hall room. Security cameras will be located in the elevators, and swipe cards will have to be used in the elevator. K. Johnson asked if a student would be able to get a replacement card if a card is lost or stolen. McGrath said the student may request a replacement card, and the process to replace a card is fairly quick.

C. Downing asked if there were plans for exterior beautification near the residence hall. McGrath explained that the curtain wall on the ground floor of the building is being placed with a new curtain wall similar in pattern to the current wall. The black slate presently in place there will stay. Budget restrictions are not allowing for the replacement of the façade, so, not many changes to the outside of the building are planned.

McGrath went on to say that there will be numerous changes, however, to the inside of the building in terms of color, type of carpet and patterns, which will help make the building more energetic and lively. He also said that the entrance area to the building will be made more welcoming by widening the corridor, adding alcove areas to the corridor for a more pleasing visual effect, and replacing current room doors with new cherry wood laminate doors. New, more contemporary, signage will also be added. He added that, in the corridors, the core central areas on each floor near the elevators will be updated and made more welcoming with the addition of glass-like walls and doors to the study lounge and kitchenette areas.

T. Griffin asked what the change in resident capacity will be once the renovation is complete. McGrath answered that there will some reduction in bed capacity with the renovation. He said that there will be sixteen doubles and two singles on each of ten floors, totaling 340 beds, not including the two apartments, after renovation. M. Stang said that currently there are 510 beds. Stang added that, although some occupancy has been lost, a lot has been gained in attractiveness and functionality. It is the hope that students will like the improvements enough that they will stay more than one year in the residence hall.

M. Stang explained that, due to the fact that residence hall occupancy was reduced enough this year, no students were displaced or had to be moved from Grant North in order to close the tower and carry on with the renovation project. B. Henry asked if the lower occupancy was due to lower enrollment or the fact that students were choosing to move off campus because of their dislike for the residence hall. M. Stang responded that students are choosing to move. He pointed out that the building is 45 years old and
outdated. K. Johnson said that many students, like herself, are have to pay their own way through college, so, renting is a less expensive option. She added that she, like many other students, holds a down job in order to keep up with her expenses now rather than having a large debt after graduation.

P. Perkins said that the hope is to have the Grant North residence hall ready to open in August of 2011, which will mean completing construction in April or May in order to have the building ready for August. M. Stang said that one of the challenges of residence hall renovation is that the time factor is a very tight cycle; if the building is not open for students in August, then a delay of a year is almost unavoidable. With current occupancy reduced, it made good sense to move ahead with the project at this time.

T. Griffin asked if the same renovation configuration would be used in all four of the Grant towers. M. Stang responded that the decision had not been made yet, but the hope is that, once the first tower is completed, the others can be renovated one at a time with a turn-around time of one year for each. He pointed out that this turnaround time will be more likely if there is not much deviation from the configuration of the first tower. He said that, for the most part, the configuration will remain the same; however, as has happened with previous residence hall renovations, it might be necessary to make some minor modifications because unforeseen issues sometimes arise that would not necessarily be replicated.

T. Bough observed that it appears the renovation plan will be making the most of very limited resources while pursuing the vision to make things better. On behalf of the committee, he thanked M. Stang and the Division of Finance and Facilities for arranging the very thorough tour and informative presentation.

C. Residence Hall Renovation Follow-up Discussion

T. Bough asked M. Stang for clarification on several points made during the presentation regarding issues that were being referred to as “pending.” Stang answered that most of the remaining phases of this renovation project have not yet been approved by the Board of Trustees, and plans for other residence hall renovations are much farther out in terms of long-range plans.

B. Henry asked what helps in moving a project such as this forward. Stang answered that tours such as the one the committee had today help with recognition of the need for the project and then researching ways of funding the project without driving the cost up so high that it’s affordable for students. K. Johnson asked if there is anything the student body can do to move this project forward, such as by voicing opinions. Stang answered that talking to students would be a good place to start. C. Downing asked if there was something that this committee could do also, such as making a statement. M. Stang said that committee support is always helpful and provides additional encouragement in the public eye.

T. Bough then suggested that the committee craft a statement in support of continuing with renovation plans and include the statement in minutes of the next meeting. He
invited comments and ideas from the group.

M. Koss commented that she found the present residence hall rooms depressing, small, and not very inviting. K. Johnson said many students have that same feeling. Johnson said that living in such a small space environment where it feels unclean affects students academically and mentally; it is not a “home away from home,” comfortable, welcoming, or healthy, feeling. C. Downing agreed those things are very important. He said the committee’s tour of the residence halls, both current state and renovated, showed him how the renovations have improved the residence hall environment and emphasized even more the strong need to move ahead with the renovation project. It was noted that a statement of support would also be a strong indication to the student body that the committee cares about the home environments and living situations of the students.

T. Bough reminded the group that the committee’s mission statement includes a charge to evaluate the impact of campus housing facilities upon the learning environment. He said that, while he is greatly encouraged by the plans for renovation and greatly encouraged by the renovations that have already been completed, there are still buildings, such as Neptune, needing renovations.

M. Stang responded that, although Neptune is older, the building is in better condition in many ways than Lincoln or Douglas. J. Brunson added that there is a need to move NIU’s campus into the 21st century, however, there is a culture associated with Neptune that can not be explained; it is a tradition. He said that, although the building looks older, it has an intimacy to it that helps craft what that culture is. He pointed out that Grant is a high-rise building, and it is not possible that the same kind of intimate culture can be realized. A. Dreessen agreed and added that, although Neptune is an older building, there is an intimate, home-like feeling about it that has managed to be maintained. The suggestion was made that a tour of Neptune be arranged, and M. Stang said a tour could be arranged if the committee so desires.

T. Griffin affirmed what Brunson and Dreessen said and asked if there were any plans to renovate Gilbert Hall for use as a residence hall. He pointed out that Gilbert Hall also had a distinct culture associated with it, particularly for fine arts and physical education students. He pointed out that the building is now sitting largely empty, and, although the building is older than any of the other buildings being discussed, it has the potential now to provide an on-campus living space for business and engineering majors. He suggested that the committee might want to consider mentioning this opportunity in its recommendation. M. Stang said he felt it certainly could be mentioned, although there are many different, long-term different options currently under discussion, funding is a significant issue right now with the university. He added that, at this point, the Grant C tower renovation is the only project that has been approved and whether there will be other options as the university moves forward will depend upon what funding will be available. B. Henry suggested that, rather than make recommendations relative to renovations of specific buildings, a better approach might be to recommend what the committee hopes the living conditions would be for students.

M. Stang answered questions relating to which residence halls were toured at open houses and how feedback from open houses was gathered. He explained that all of the
residence halls are included in tours, some via bus tours and others by way of walking tours. He said that Neptune Hall’s rooms are pretty standard and are most like those in Lincoln and Douglas.

J. Brunson said that the students in Neptune seem to be the more serious students. Having lived in both, G. Matushek offered comments about Neptune North and Neptune West, noting that those halls have more of a family/community atmosphere in which everyone was more connected to each other. A. Dreessen noted that the design of the building plays into the type of environment, depending on how and where the lounges are located and set up. J. Brunson added that the demand to get into the Neptune residence halls is great, and students selected to reside there gain value and an appreciation for that community.

Relative to a question about whether students have input on residence halls, and if so, how much, M. Stang said that a variety of means, including a satisfaction survey done every two years, are used to gather student opinions. K. Johnson commented that a large part of residence hall life is connected to the Residence Hall Association (RHA). She said that the RHA holds hall council meetings every week, and students are allowed to attend. Students learn about activities and programs at the meetings, and they have the opportunity to talk about any residence hall issues and ways to get involved. She suggested that it might be beneficial to have a RHA representative serving on CUAE.

Consensus of the group was that the present state of the residence halls is dismal, and a statement in support of moving forward with the renovation project should be made. T. Bough suggested that a draft of a recommendation statement be crafted and forwarded to committee members to review the language and provide feedback. He also encouraged everyone to submit suggestions or comments.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 3:55 p.m.

The last meeting of the 2009-2010 academic year will be held on Tuesday, April 13, 2010, at 2:00 p.m., in Altgeld Hall 225.

Respectfully submitted,
Mollie Montgomery
Recording Secretary