I. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

A motion was made by Schlabach, seconded by Mehrer, to adopt the agenda. The motion carried.

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

A. Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Bough, seconded by Mehrer, to approve the September 13, 2011, 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. Enrollment Management Update

Brian Hemphill, Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, distributed copies of the strategic plan for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. He highlighted several key points that are important as the university moves forward with the initiatives and goals in the vision that the president has established for the university and how that vision will be brought to life.
Hemphill emphasized that enrollment is critical as the president has set a potential enrollment target of 27,492 by 2020, and, beyond that, the goal of potentially being at 30,000 by that time. In order to get to that goal, he said it will be necessary to have a very clear and concise plan. The plan that is currently set goes out five years but does not go out to that ten-year mark. Part of what needs to be done is to determine how, in looking at some of the key initiatives that are in place, to move to that number over the first five years knowing that the most current numbers are already off track in terms of a recruitment and retention standpoint.

He went on to say that, when thinking about the overall students coming to NIU’s campus as first-year students and students who are living in the residence halls, it is significant to understand that 500 students equates very closely to about twenty million dollars for the institution.

Hemphill reported that the overall ten-day enrollment count for fall 2011 was 22,990 which is a deficit of 778 students under the projected target enrollment of 23,768. Of that 778 deficit number, approximately 270-280 were recruitment numbers that were down, and the remaining 500 were retention related. He said that, as the president stated in his 2011 state of the university address, approximately 16% of our undergraduate students every year leave the university with no degree; half of those, approximately 1400 students, leave despite being in good academic standing. He emphasized that our attention must be focused on both the recruitment and retention sides to make sure that all efforts are very intentional on hitting the target enrollment. He added that we are in a good position to do this, as the new target enrollment for fall 2012 has been set at 24,051, which will require a net gain of 1,061 students.

From a retention standpoint, Hemphill went on to say that last year’s first-year retention rate was 74.5%, and this year the first-year retention rate was 71.5% with a target of 75%. An increase of the retention rate of 1% per year has been set for fall 2012, 2013, and 2014, which results in a projected target of a 78% retention rate by fall 2014.

He described that several recruitment initiatives are currently in place. One of the key items addressed was the enhancing diversity initiative. He pointed out that the demographics of our student population are changing. The Caucasian student population has been dropping, while the Latino student population has been increasing and is the only student population group showing significant growth. For the most part, other ethnic populations have stayed fairly steady. Thus, in addition to continuing efforts for our traditional student populations, the focus of recruitment efforts must be on the growth populations. Areas being focused on are web content and online options, in terms of Spanish language, recruitment centers, positioning a Chicago-based recruiter, and ways of communicating with parents who may not speak English.

Other recruitment efforts include expanding NIU’s geographic recruitment base. A significant drop in the number of applications from Kane and DuPage counties has been seen in recent years. Intentional efforts are now being made by University Relations to
reach out to parents of prospective students in those areas to provide a consistent and targeted message from the university, both electronically and in printed material, to promote various things at NIU such as research, excellent faculty, program successes, etc., in order to change our image/brand within that segment of the population. In addition, while still focusing on Chicago and the eight or nine traditional counties, recruitment efforts are now also being expanded to include areas farther out in Illinois as well as into the nearest regions of the states of Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Some success is already being seen as a result of these efforts.

Another important piece involves the changes that are being made in the territory management aspect of recruitment. Some critical pieces have been put into place in terms of the way information is being tracked. Every contact and/or communication with a contact is logged so that a follow up can more easily be done.

Hemphill reported that some recruitment benefit has already been seen through merit based scholarships which were started last year. He explained that the process for awarding the merit based scholarships has been changed so that the awards are made earlier. It is also planned that increased funding will be generated around these scholarships in order for funding to be spread over a broader number of students.

Other recruitment initiatives include increased marketing efforts of the four-year degree path and establishing partnerships for programs with other institutions. In addition, a new initiative being established is the partnership between the University Honors Program and Housing and Dining in which honors students are going to have their own 200-bed wing in the new residence hall currently under construction.

Hemphill went on to describe several retention initiatives currently in place. Significant initiatives such as MAP-Works will help track students earlier in their academic career and be able to connect with them more quickly and easily. Student Success Specialists are now in place in each college and will be reaching out to students to assist them. The Early Alert program continues to ask faculty to identify students who may be struggling and/or may require assistance. All of these programs will play a significant role in retention over time.

Attendance at the October 10th Open House was good and was higher than the previous year. Hemphill noted that the director of admissions obtained a report from ACT that identified all of the students who had selected NIU as their first or second choice of where to have their ACT scores sent. The report showed 4,000 students had selected NIU as their number one choice, and 3,000 students had listed NIU as their second choice. From that report, those student populations can be identified, and intentional recruitment efforts can be focused on those populations.

Downing asked, with regard to shared governance, what expectation Hemphill had in speaking to the CUAE committee. Hemphill responded that, from a recruitment and retention standpoint, he would ask for the committee’s help in sending a strong message as to how important those things are tied to the success of the university. He added that the university needs to have faculty and staff that are actively involved in such things as open
houses, the honors program, etc. Bough commented that he felt that setting faculty expectations and holding faculty accountable through job performance were vital to retention. Downing commented that he feels the CUAE committee should develop a strategy to call attention to the importance of faculty engagement and involvement in recruitment and retention and the expectation of faculty accountability in student success. He feels that it is essential to bring this type of recommendation through the shared governance process in order to see increased productivity on these types of things.

Birberick added that this also is related to the notion of rewards and recognition for activities and service. She said that this committee could certainly craft a statement or recommendation and outline some specific concepts along these lines. She said that a recommendation from the committee will actually work its way up through departments and personnel committees who may possibly build into their system recognition and reward for doing such things as USOAR, URAP, themed learning communities, Research Rookies or possibly giving faculty credit for actually going to off-campus open houses. Speaking from personal experience, Bough pointed out that attending additional off-campus functions and events places an added burden, both in time commitment and financially, on faculty, and he feels that the “good citizen” model is not sustainable. Birberick suggested that this might be a good topic for future discussion by this committee at a later date.

Downing thanked Hemphill for providing an update to the committee. The committee will further discuss the role of CUAE and developing a recommendation to send forward supporting the importance of recruitment and retention and the role of faculty and staff in these initiatives.

B. Review of USOAR Guidelines/Timeline for 2011-2012

Julia Spears, Coordinator for Engaged Learning, provided the committee with an explanation of a proposal for adding an additional submission cycle for the Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research (USOAR) program. She reminded committee members that last spring the committee approved moving the fall deadlines ahead because so many students were finding out about the program too late to submit a proposal and because graduating seniors were virtually eliminated due to the sequencing of the deadline. In addition, students could now be awarded their funding before the end of the semester which allows them a broader window of time to begin work on their project.

Spears pointed out that the proposal for an additional submission cycle was tabled by CUAE last spring. She explained that, if all of the USOAR funding was not distributed in the fall, opening a second submission cycle would allow for additional students to participate and carry out projects throughout the summer. Some concern was expressed about the fact that adding a second cycle for these research proposals would put increased demand on faculty resources. Downing asked that this be duly noted and recognized by committee members. He added that he does believe, however, that the potential benefit to students is significant. Further discussion resulted in the following action.

Downing made a motion, seconded by Mehrer, to approve the dual submission
cycle, one cycle each for the fall and spring semesters, as presented in the Proposal for Multiple Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research Submissions, dated September 28, 2011. The motion carried.

In light of the concern expressed in the discussion above regarding the demand on faculty time and resources, Spears will provide the committee with a follow up report on the dual submission cycles either in the spring of 2012 or at the first meeting of the fall 2012 semester.

C. Engaged Learning/Themed Learning Communities Update

Julia Spears, Coordinator of Engaged Learning, provided an update and overview of the themed learning communities (TLC). Spears reported that there are twelve themed learning communities in place for this fall semester. The goal of the themed learning community is to tie the general education or core competency courses that students are required to take around a common theme that relates directly to their major or for a cohort of students related to something that ties them together. Some of the learning communities are tied together because the students have a commonality, such as undecided students taking Major Exploration in an effort to help them explore the major options available to them. A typical TLC consists of 25 students, and there are 248 students currently enrolled in TLC’s. Faculty teaching a TLC meet in May for a two-day institute to review the syllabus and develop outcomes and goals for the integrated learning assignments associated with each learning community. Themed learning communities for next fall are now starting to be developed.

Spears went on to say that there are several ways to link TLC’s with existing resources, mainly, through living/learning communities. Primarily, these have been only offered in the fall mostly for incoming freshmen; however, three learning communities are being piloted for spring 2012. These are important in order to get students connected to their majors early on and tied into the academic success initiatives, but the resources have to be there; and there are also policy implications because these need to be tied to the curriculum.

Birberick pointed out that there is a long-term impact, as these students are primarily incoming freshmen. If a student comes in and has a very positive first year in which the student is both intellectually and academically challenged, that is important as it is going to create the kind of atmosphere and press needed for NIU, mostly through word of mouth.

Spears explained that some fund support, formerly allocated as FIGS support, has been provided by the College of Liberal and Arts and Sciences. Every TLC instructional team has the opportunity to apply for funds to take their students to do an out of classroom excursion that ties directly back to their theme. A TLC peer leader has been added to each of the TLC’s, and the peer leader attends one of the classes and creates study groups for the students out of the classroom.

Chen commented that he thought that this is a great initiative, but he wondered if there was a plan in place for assessing and measuring outcomes for the TLC’s. Spears responded
that there is a plan in place, but last’s student numbers were small so data cannot really be based off those figures. This year, however, more students are enrolled, so, more tracking is being done. Tracking for each semester is being done for enrollment and retention data. After this year, tracking of GPA and standard numbers will begin. In addition, for the TLC’s, there is a mid-semester check that is more qualitative about the whole experience in assessing how students are seeing the ties among the classes and how they are understanding the integration in the assignments. At the end of the semester, students will take a national online survey which is tied to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). A lot of the questions follow the same rubric, so, that data will be used in that assessment as well.

Stang asked Spears to talk some about the logistics and the mechanics of when students may sign up for the TLC’s. Spears explained that there is a short window of time for students to enroll since students have to meet with an advisor and go through mandatory orientation. She said that right now these cannot be scheduled any sooner than the end of February. One option to help this might be to put students on a wait list, so that when they are admitted, they have a spot. She added that the admissions counselors and housing need to be utilized to cross promote the opportunities in the ways that the students will be supported once they come here. There has also been some conversation with the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management about utilizing admitted student days to capitalize on when students are on campus. Spears said that the TLC’s are not currently being used as a way to encourage students to commit to NIU.

Chen asked if there was any possibility that the TLC’s would be taken to the next level for sophomore and/or junior students. Spears answered that the goal was to start with freshmen because that makes the most sense in terms of developing good academic and study skills and a sense of community. However, the goal is to grow the program as the vision always was that learning communities happen at all stages in the student’s career. The objective would be to identify courses that often are gateway courses or that naturally sequence for particular majors; and, if faculty have the support of the department and the office of engaged learning to create some of the integrated assignments, powerful learning opportunities could be generated for upper level students, as well.

D. Committee Discussion: Role of CUAE

Downing asked committee members to review the document provided in the agenda packet entitled “The Role of CUAE.” In reference to the question in that document, “Does our (faculty/staff) participation in shared governance matter?” Downing reminded the committee that he voiced this same question to Brian Hemphill earlier in the meeting via the words “What can we do to help?” He emphasized that he doesn’t want to diminish the importance of staying informed. However, he does feel that committees should be able to do more than just receive updates; committees should be able to initiate action. He noted that he, as well as other CUAE members, will be interested in following any recommendations put forward by CUAE as they work through the shared governance system.
Downing also reminded the committee that Tim Griffin, Ombudsman, has been making long-term trend observations concerning the undergraduate academic environment for many years and has composed a list of six questions regarding possible improvements. Downing feels that these questions are a starting point for the committee to begin addressing these concerns, suggesting actions, and working within the shared governance process to promote suggested change and/or improvement. He added that, although he will only be attending one more meeting of the committee this year, he would continue to pay special attention, through his role on Faculty Senate and/or University Council, to make sure CUAE’s recommendations are taken through those bodies.

Downing went on to suggest that the committee choose one of the six concerns that the committee believes it could make a concrete recommendation on to push through the governance process. He said he considers the most compelling issues, based on prior CUAE work, to be items number 3 (spiritual development) and number 6 (“holding students to higher behavioral standards than we are willing to place on ourselves”) as potential action items. He pointed out that item number 3 was addressed by the committee previously, and a copy of the committee’s recommendation on spiritual development had been included in the agenda packet. He said he feels strongly that this recommendation is a good idea and a great opportunity to help the undergraduate academic environment because, beyond Tim Griffin’s long-term observations, there are official surveys that have supported this. This was mentioned in a longer report from Griffin seen previously by the committee.

Downing added that a second compelling issue, related to faculty accountability, ties into item number six. He said that he would like to see a statement from this committee or another body that states various things relative to this issue. Mehrer asked if there was data available related to this issue as he has not seen any data; he has only heard this concern voiced in this committee meeting. Downing replied that this data was included in Griffin’s report, which qualifies as anecdotal rather than statistical. Griffin noted that the data may be seen in the annual report on the Ombudsman’s website.

Due to limited time, Downing suggested continuing with an open discussion on the role of CUAE at the next meeting.

E. Revision of CUAE Discussion Topics and Schedule for 2011-2012

The agenda for the November 8, 2011, meeting of the Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment will be adjusted to accommodate one guest speaker and open time for committee discussion on the role of the CUAE.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 4:03 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, November 8, 2011, at 2:00 p.m., in Altgeld Hall 225.