Northern Illinois University

COMMITEE ON THE UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

149th Meeting
Tuesday, February 11, 2014

MINUTES

APPROVED

Present: T. Bough (VPA), K. Chung (HHS), K. Gasser (LAS), W. Johnson (LIB), M. Kolb (Acting Associate Vice Provost for Vice Provost Birberick), C. Lin (UCC), R. Moore (Campus Activities Board-student rep), V. Krishnan Palghat (BUS), W. Pitney (EDUC), M. Stang (Ex Officio, Student Housing Services), J. Stevens (Student-LAS), M. Tucker (Ex-Officio, Student Affairs &Enrollment Management), J. Zambito (Ex Officio, Student Involvement and Leadership Development)

Absent: n/a

Chair Chung welcomed everyone back from the long break. New individuals were present so introductions were made.

I. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

W. Pitney made a motion to accept the agenda seconded by K. Gasser. The motion passed unanimously.

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes were approved on a motion by W. Pitney, seconded by C. Lin. Motion passed unanimously.

III. OLD BUSINESS

None

IV. NEW BUSINESS

Kolb spoke briefly about the efforts on campus in regard to the academic environment and trying to make a number of reforms. The issues of retention and student success are among the most prevalent on campus. This committee has struggled in recent years with its mission and the relevancy of its existence. At the last meeting there was discussion about UNIV 101 as well as the work of the General Education Visioning Task force and ideas about curricular reform efforts currently being pursued. It was suggested that Denise and Kelly be invited to provide information to the committee about the current format as well as any ideas they may have for moving forward.
Rode thanked the committee for the invitation to speak. She indicated that not only were they here to update the committee on first-year initiatives but also to present ideas they have had as a result of the heightened interest in UNIV 101 as indicated from the feedback from the Bold Futures workshops as well as the PLUS task force.

Rode started with a hand-out of the Philosophy Statement, which CUAE adopted at the close of last academic year. She indicated that it is a foundational document on which their initiatives are based. The philosophy statement was a result of the Foundations of Excellence initiative that was undertaken by First Year Experience. The pioneers of Foundations of Excellence, John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot, have been mentors to NIU’s program.

Smith presented the existing model of the majority of the UNIV courses. Currently the courses are seminar style, discussion based with small class size (last year’s average was 18 per class). The course is elective. Open only and limited to first-year, first-semester students (this is currently the only opportunity for the course to be taken. It is one credit hour course that meets the first 12 weeks of the semester. It typically meets two days per week. It is designed to help students transition into the University; it helps set their expectations-academically, socially and personally. There are different types of sections. Some are open to anyone. There are specialized sections, which could be the undecided majors or other specific majors, STEM-interest students, Latinos, etc. There are also those courses that are linked with the Themed Learning Communities. The instructors consist both of faculty and staff, although most are currently staff members. They have a recruitment process in place. Instructors must have a master’s degree and have prior teaching experience. An application must be completed as well as an interview process. There is also an extensive training that instructors are required to complete. They also have Graduate Student leaders who assist the instructors – this allows them to gain experience. Peer Instructors consist of 45-50 upper class, undergraduate students, who also assist the instructors and serve as role models to the students.

Rode discussed the current context. The university’s student body is changing. The retention rate is declining. The retention rate for first and second year students and is currently at 66% - this is not good. There has been a lot of chatter on campus from the Bold Futures workshops, the Retention Summit and the PLUS Task Force about how UNIV can play a role in assisting to rectify the situation. Rode pointed out that students rate the course very positively, specifically in terms of course effectiveness and especially in terms of instructor effectiveness. Rode emphasized that as they talk about re-envisioning this it isn’t to fix something that is broken but to enhance something that has been working well and to improve it to focus on the changing needs of the student body at NIU. Rode mentioned that the Vice Provost as well as others have expressed a strong desire for more faculty to teach the course. There is also significant discussion about whether the course should be mandatory.
Rode spoke about issues to consider if UNIV 101 were to be required. She said there appears to be the desire for the course to be more standardized, the syllabus as well as some content areas. There is also a desire to extend the course to be offered over 15 weeks instead of the current 12. She said it is very likely that these changes could happen by next fall. She anticipates that some of the more significant changes could be put into effect the Fall of 2015 or the Spring of 2015. Some pilots may be run as early as next fall. She pointed out that students desire to take the course as well as faculty desire to teach the course must be considered. She said making the course required changes the complexion of the course. She pointed out that conveying consistent information is essential to the students’ success. Resources are another critical issue to be considered. She mentioned classroom space, funding, support and staffing as issues.

Smith presented the college specific model. The example she gave, linked an introductory course with UNIV 101. One example was from the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology; a required course for all engineering students, UEET 101, a large lecture class would be linked with 4-6 sections of UNIV 101. This would allow more personalized options for the students. The students would learn success strategies for their major. It would be an opportunity for students to take more than one course with the same group of students. Students and faculty would have more access to each other and therefore, more opportunities to build meaningful relationships. Some of the challenges would be obtaining college consent and collaboration; the logistics; faculty incentive and advisor support - it would be an additional two hours if the courses were linked.

Pitney asked if they could comment on why it is only available to first semester students. Rode pointed out that the content and nature of the course leads itself to well to the students’ first time on campus. She indicated that could be another consideration.

V. Palghat asked if there was statistical data regarding the retention of students - those that take UNIV 101 and those that don't. Rode said that of students that take UNIV 101 - 90% return the second semester while 88% of those that did not enroll returned.

Lin talked about the participation of the leadership of the university. He said the President, Provost and Deans promote how important students are to the university and how the university is important to them. In addition he talked about incentives for recruiting the undecided majors and into a major. There was discussion regarding incentives needed for faculty members to teach the course. Although money was a primary issue. Things such as release time, credit on service report, acknowledgement/value by college for faculty to participate. Time spent for training is another issue- some faculty are discouraged by the amount of time in relation to the compensation. Bough takes this as an opportunity for the committee to come up with ideas and send a recommendation forward and see where it goes. Rode pointed out that retention isn’t the only thing driving this effort - it is the right thing to do for our students to encourage them to be successful and satisfied with their
major, develop into good citizens and have fulfilling careers. She said this is a good starting point. She also indicated there is some discussion of connecting e-portfolios with this effort.

Rode went on to present the second model - the dual mode. This model has precedent on campus. A number of years ago when the demand for the course was much greater than the availability of sections offered. The course would still meet twice a week but the first meeting of the week would be held in a large lecture hall most likely lead by a faculty member and the second meeting of the would be smaller groups lead by SPS or other staff member with peer instructors or graduate student leaders assisting. The opportunities of this model would include two primary instructors teaching from their strengths. Students who are certain about their major making early connections. Faculty could prepare students more intentionally for academic advising. The use of resources would be used efficiently as well as serving as a collaborative partnership across divisional lines of the university. The challenges of this model include finding the faculty members who teach well in a lecture environment. Student/instructor relationship might be weakened due to not having the same instructor both days of the week. There could be a disconnect between the two instructors or overlap of materials if there isn’t good communication/collaboration. This would require the budget to be expanded to cover the cost of additional instructors and training.

The third alternative was presented as an intensive course. It would actually be offered prior to the beginning of the fall classes. It would consist of approximately 32 instructional hours beginning the Wednesday before classes start through Sunday. She proposes that it be facilitated by faculty with support of student assistants. During the semester, September, October, November the students would meet one hour with their teaching team as well as each student meeting one-on-one with their instructor for 45 minutes in September. There would be a final assignment due in mid-November. Opportunities associated with this model include some of the reading/assignments could be done over the summer. Time is built into the schedule for reading and assignments. It could be a psychological advantage that a course is complete prior to the semester. There is front-loaded exposure to campus resources. Students could participate in Welcome Days events as a group, perhaps building relationships, etc. Challenges include the course not meeting regularly during the fall semester. It would be taking place during a time of high campus activity. Some students would not be able to participate due to other commitments (i.e., marching band, athletes, etc).

The committee continued discussion on how best to get support from the university’s leadership. Palghat suggested showing statistical evidence that supports retention efforts. Another debated topic was whether the course should be required or remain elective. Student representative Moore indicated he was in favor of it being required and said it was very beneficial to him. Stevens indicated that although he didn’t enroll in it – he has only heard positive feedback from individuals who had. Motivation of students plays a large part in their success at college.
The discussion focused on the possibility of recommendations they could make; whether or not to make the course required, which would have an impact on resources that need to be devoted to the program. The other focus was how to recruit faculty to teach. Kolb indicated that upper administration, the President especially, is interested in UNIV, with perhaps even piloting something next Fall. Kolb indicated that this is the time for faculty to have a say in what happens. This committee, as a shared governance body, can come to a consensus and make recommendations.

Bough said he would prepare the thoughts/ideas of the committee in a document and email it to members for comments to move the issue forward.

V. ADJOURNMENT

C. Lin made a motion to adjourn @ 3:51 p.m., seconded by W. Pitney. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeanne Ratfield