Northern Illinois University

**Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment**

148th Meeting
Tuesday, November 12, 2013

**Minutes**

**Approved**

Present: T. Bough (VPA), W. Johnson (LIB), M. Kolb (Acting Associate Vice Provost for Birberick), V. Krishnan Palghat (BUS), M. Stang (Ex Officio, Student Housing Services), J. Stevens (Student-LAS), J. Zambito (Ex Officio, Student Involvement and Leadership Development)

Absent: K. Chung (HHS), K. Gasser (LAS), W. Pitney (EDUC)

I. **Approval of Agenda**

W. Johnson made a motion to accept the agenda seconded by C. Lin. The motion passed unanimously.

Kolb indicated that the minutes from the last meeting were approved electronically.

V. **Old Business**

Lin asked whether the topics for discussion mentioned in the minutes were going to be discussed this year. Bough asked how much of the spring schedule had been filled. Kolb and Ratfield indicated that they were having difficulty arranging for guests to attend the meetings. Ratfield referred to the information she provided with the agenda. Paul Carpenter, chair of the University Council’s Resources, Space and Budgets committee, was initially away from campus when first contacted but he indicated that his committee was only advisory and suggested the committee contact Jeff Dauer. Ratfield said she had not received any response upon contacting the Director of Financial Aid.

Bough pointed out that he thought it was within the committee’s guidelines to pursue anything that applies to the undergraduate academic environment. Over the past six years the committee has toured the housing facilities several times. He felt it was worthwhile. He suggested that if the committee wanted to tour academic buildings and make recommendations, that was within their purview and they did not have to hear from other committees or individuals to do so.

Lin said that campus safety was another important issue. In previous years, the NIU Chief of Police had been invited. Lin also mentioned that previously the Ombudsman, Tim Griffin, was involved with this committee and he would present statistics regarding the issues that students would bring his office. Lin suggested the new Ombudsman be invited to update the committee.
Kolb brought up the previously discussed topic of the relevancy of the committee. There has been discussion to merge this committee with CIUE. Kolb thought it would be useful to the committee to discuss whether or not to merge. Lin indicated that topic has been discussed before. He said in the past, the committee would keep functioning because its’ responsibilities are well defined as are those of CIUE.

V. NEW BUSINESS

Kolb presented information pertaining to the work of the General Education Visioning Task Force. He has presented this information to the Faculty Senate as well as each College Senate. He was invited to share the information in several departments as well. The task force is composed of 20 members representing faculty, staff and students. The task force has gained the support of President Baker and interim Provost Freeman. Their work ties in with the national movement of curricular reform as well as the Great Journeys Strategic Plan and the work previously done by the baccalaureate task force.

He explained that the task force has been involved in some information gathering – looking not only what NIU is doing but at the national movement and what other universities are doing. Getting the word out and obtaining feedback.

He said the focus is integration. Integrating freshmen/senior experience, professional programs and curricular vs. co-curricular activities (experiences and educational opportunities that are not credit bearing). Employers are looking for specific skills that need to be integrated into coursework not just major coursework – the entire baccalaureate experience. Teamwork is very high on the list, along with critical thinking and oral communication. Workplace dynamics are very fluid these days. Individuals do not typically stay in the same job their entire career.

For NIU, the idea of curricular reform started in ’07 and resulted in the creation of the baccalaureate task force. Eight learning outcomes and three goals came out of that initial work. The Gen Ed task force is trying to pick up and build upon the previous work. The baccalaureate outcomes are online and they have already been vetted through the academic curriculum committees. Very few faculty and even fewer students know what these are. Students should walk away with an understanding of various competencies in these eight areas. Some are traditional, such as critical thinking, communication, quantitative/qualitative reasoning and others have been added such as synthesizing knowledge, collaboration, global interconnections and intercultural competencies.

He said that the baccalaureate goals are important for three reasons. 1) To allow students to contextualize what they are learning. How what they are learning is relevant to them in whatever major they are pursuing. Whether the context be historical vs. modern, global vs. local as well as the unity and diversity within our own campus or culture. 2) Helps educators
to frame our instructional practices in a consistent way – delivery, assessment as well as organizing our learning environments. 3) Integrates the curriculum – giving them the same message throughout the process of their educational career. Integration of general education, major studies and co-curricular activities is important, spotlighting in particular our student learning outcomes and doing these other things such as teaching essential skills, engagement, co-curricular learning and including assessment in order to help our students succeed.

Kolb said the task force’s focus in their curricular recommendations are engagement, many of the practices are well known on campus and what is nationally known as HIPs (high impact practices) – these are a variety of other skills that are in many ways tied into engaged learning, such as capstone courses, collaborative assignments, themed learning communities (which we already employ), common intellectual experiences such as Freshman read. Kolb said that employment of HIPs is shown to improve graduation and retention rates.

Bough asked a question about HIPs and if they have the kind of impact talked about, why was the funding for the freshmen experience, UNIV 101 cut? UNIV 101 would be considered in the category of HIPs. Kolb said that was a good question that he was unable to answer but that would be a great issue for this committee to take up.

Kolb talked about the data from the surveys that the task force created for faculty and students. When asked to relate a word or phrase about their general education experience (NIU or otherwise), only 8% were positive. 36% was negative - indicating waste of time/money, easy, boring, pointless. The group agreed that they had all heard that from their own students.

In the surveys, they asked questions pertaining to nine components of student needs. The highest ranking component was course scheduling, followed by quality of classes and convenience during the academic year along with cost. The things that were least important were social connections, social life and size of classes. Within these nine components students were also asked to compare NIU with community colleges. NIU was strongest in student life. Cost and size of classes were two of the areas that students ranked community colleges better than NIU. There was brief discussion about college costs and comparisons of NIU and other state schools as well as private institutions, which typically have more opportunity for scholarships.

In regard to the faculty survey, where they felt the SLOs should be placed – results showed that most felt that departments were better at delivering issues of communication, thought, collaboration, qualitative/quantitative reasoning and synthesis. Faculty viewed general education slightly better in the area of human experience in relation to the natural world. Faculty also indicated that they believed in some way they could contribute on some level to achieving the SLOs in their courses.
Kolb indicated that the task force is on an accelerated schedule for making recommendations. Interim Provost, Lisa Freeman, has requested their recommendations by early September 2014. This would enable changes to the curriculum to go through the curricular process with implementation for the Fall of 2015.

Kolb asked the committee to take on an issue or work in tandem with the task force. If the issue of making UNIV 101/201 mandatory was an issue – this committee could do research and make recommendations which the task force could include in their report. Kolb indicated the task force has some very strong ideas about gen ed – give it more flexibility, streamline the system, etc.

Bough asked to have Denise Rode invited to the next meeting to discuss UNIV 101. There was discussion about the instructors for the course. It was brought up that because the stipend for teaching the 12 week course is $1000 – there are not a lot of faculty members that teach it. Lin brought up that if the objectives outlined are to be reached than we must have quality instructors n- well paid instructors. Kolb said they have talked at length about the quality of instruction in gen ed courses. He also mentioned that there are other institutions where the administration has provided the resources necessary to make changes.

Members present agreed that this was a worthwhile topic to pursue. It was suggested that discussion follow Denise’s presentation, and the committee use the March meeting to work on their suggestions/recommendations for UNIV 101. Copies of the UNIV textbook will be requested for committee members prior to the next meeting.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

W. Johnson made a motion to adjourn @ 3:15 p.m., seconded by T. Bough. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeanne Ratfield