Members Present: Sonya Armstrong, Terry Borg, Virginia Cassidy, Abby Chemers, Dennis Davito, Ray Foster, Deborah Haliczer, Simon Song, Sheri Spear

Deborah Haliczer called the meeting to order at 10:05 AM. The agenda was amended and approved. The February 17, 2011 minutes were approved.

Deborah announced that Abby will be retiring May 1, 2011 and she thanked her for her long-term service to the University Benefits Committee.

Old Business:

A. Insurance and pension update

Deborah reported that the HRS staff have been spending a great deal of time trying to keep up with the potential legislative changes to employee benefits. Anxious employees are asking for HRS’ advice regarding retirement in order to preserve benefits prior to any new legislation taking effect. Annuittants are also anxious as many live on fixed incomes. They are rightfully concerned about insurance costs being passed onto them. The pain these people are feeling is alarming and legitimate.

Employees are being directed to the NIU Budget and Pension Update & Rumors web page so that they can be informed. The future of employee/annuitant benefits is uncertain. The Benefits Office has been besieged with requests from employees to discuss their retirement options. The Benefits staff has had to prioritize their time to assist those who are retiring.

Dennis reported that the last time there was so much interest in retirement counseling was in the 1990’s when NIU sponsored the President’s Early Retirement Program. The other state universities are also overwhelmed with requests for retirement counseling. They are sending their employees to SURS for counseling but some are geographically closer to Springfield than NIU is. There are lots of employees who are waiting to see what changes are voted on before they make a final decision. Approximately half of NIU’s current employees could retire now, based on age and years of service.

CMS is holding its annual meeting to announce benefit options on April 26, 2011 in Springfield. None of the HMOs have settled on a new contract. Given this, it is unlikely that vendors will be in attendance if a Benefits Choice Fair were to be held. The Office of the Executive Inspector General is negotiating the state insurance and benefits contracts this year as part of the new Procurement laws.

Deborah indicated that in past years, when the benefit information was not available on a timely basis to hold a fair the Benefits Office sponsored brown bag question and answer sessions on Benefit Choices at the HSC. This approach was effective. Much discussion ensued and the committee decided brown bag sessions would be more beneficial than the Fair. Memos will be sent to supervisors that indicate employees should get release time to attend the brown bag sessions.

SPS Council and Operating Staff Council sponsored a series of luncheon brown bag sessions. The speakers were Ken Zehnder, Joe Grush, Steve Cunningham and Bob Pritchard. Thirty or more employees showed up to each session. There was not adequate time to coordinate the event with the Annuitants.
Association.

Steve Cunningham has been meeting with representatives from other public universities, the Annuitants Association, and legislators to talk about how to protect pensions. NIU’s administration is committed to keeping employees informed about developments in the pension area. It was noted that NIU has representation on various SURS advisory boards. John Engstrom sits on the SURS Board, while Pam Rosenberg and Jim Lockard sit on the SURS member Advisory Committee. Thus, we have some voice, though in a limited capacity.

The spring meeting of the Illinois Association of University Benefits Managers was canceled, and benefits staff will be briefed on benefit changes on April 26...

B. Benefits/Insurance Survey Update
The survey is ready. We just need a website to post the survey on.

C. Web Site and Talking Points status
Deborah reported that the materials are ready but she hasn’t had any time to meet with the University Webmaster, Jennice O’Brien. Abby and Terry volunteered to meet with Jennice to get things moving.

It was suggested that someone should talk to the Northern Today staff to get the word out about the UBC website and Benefits/Insurance survey.

D. Annuitants Update
The Annuitants Association is encouraging members to attend the SUAA regional meetings. Topics include legislation, charging premiums for health insurance, and charging more for SURS contributions. Members should join SUAA on “LinkedIn”, as there is valuable information available to members from the SUAA group.

E. Vacation Accrual Proposal status report
HRS has been assigned the task to review the proposal. The review is still outstanding as pension issues are a higher priority.

F. New Benefits Proposals: Pending comments on the Benefits survey.

G. Domestic Partner Benefits
The new Illinois law on Civil Unions becomes effective June 1, 2011. It covers both same and opposite sex partners. Current employment policies that reference family relationships are being reviewed to determine the changes required so NIU is in compliance. SURS was asked about the impact of the law on pension matters, and will be seeking a legal opinion. Candidates for NIU faculty positions often ask about our domestic partner benefits.

New Business
A. At the March 24, 2011, BOT meeting the President announced he would be appointing an Ad Hoc Pension Advisory Committee.

B. One proposed legislative bill will eliminate the dependent waiver benefit. The President understands the importance of this employee benefit.
C. After much discussion, it was decided that Terry would draft a letter to President Peters on behalf of the UBC supporting the President’s efforts to preserve employee benefits, particularly the dependent tuition waiver. The letter would be finalized through email. Deborah will get it to the President & University Council right away.

Meeting was adjourned at 11:20 AM.
Respectfully submitted by Abby Chemers, Secretary

Next meeting: May 5, 2011 10 AM – 11:30 AM
LaTourette Building Room 300