March 24, 2015

To: University of Idaho Faculty Senate
From: Jeffrey A. Dodge, Chair, Ubuntu Committee

RE: Annual Ubuntu Committee Report

The 2014-15 academic year started a little slow for the Ubuntu Committee, but began a full sprint of work midway that will continue until May. By the end of the year, the Ubuntu Committee will have met 6 times. In the future, pending the desires of the future chair, the Committee hopes to meet once a month. Below is a summary of our efforts:

MLK Art & Essay Contest

In 2014-15, the Ubuntu Committee served as the inaugural sponsor and administrative organizer of the MLK Art & Essay Contest. The Contest was financially sponsored by HRAI, ASUI, GPSA, the College of Law, and the College of Graduate Studies. There were four award categories – best undergraduate essay, best undergraduate art, best graduate essay, and best graduate art. Student submissions for each category were asked to respond to the following:

As we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there is still so much more work to be done. Reflect on the status of civil rights today and what challenges remain to fulfilling the aspirations of the civil rights movement. Issues related to civil rights can include health care, religion and belief, voting, housing, employment, gender equality, immigration, racial and ethnic justice, domestic violence, public accommodations, gay rights, veteran status, Americans with disabilities, and others.

The financial sponsorships permitted us to award $500 to winners and $100 to honorable mention recipients. Faculty members from the College of Art & Architecture were invited to participate in the art contest judging and the entire Ubuntu Committee judged in all four categories. In total, the contest attracted 9 undergraduate essay submissions, 14 undergraduate art submissions, 8 graduate essay submissions, and 3 graduate art submissions. Students from every college at the University participated. A winner and honorable mention recipient were selected in each category, except in undergraduate art where the Committee decided to award one winner and three honorable mention recipients.

All participants were presented awards at Shades of Black in early February, an event to celebrate Black History Month. Winners and honorable mention recipients will be listed on the Ubuntu Committee’s website, with links to their submissions. Winners were also included in a press release that went out statewide and internally.

The Committee recently debriefed the Contest experience and unanimously agreed to continue it next year. The Committee worked closely with Dr. Carmen Suarez on the Contest and plan to ask all sponsors to participate again next year. The Contest will hopefully launch earlier next year, perhaps in October or early November. The Ubuntu Committee is also discussing whether we should add more categories, in particular in the arts where the many mediums of art made it a challenge to decide the winners. While numerous notices went out about the Contest, greater
publicity is desired next year. Overall, the thought and reflection inspired by the Contest met the goals of the Committee and sponsors. Students engaged in powerful reflection and expression through written word, paint, music, and more.

**Same-Sex Marriage Questions on Benefits & Life Change Process**

The Ubuntu Committee was integral in the past obtainment of medical insurance benefits for same-sex couples. In that spirit, the Committee felt it was important to understand the changes to same-sex couple’s benefits in light of marriage equality in Idaho. With the legal change to the definition of marriage, the Committee wanted to know that same-sex couples now have access to all benefits available to opposite-sex married couples. That was not the case for same-sex couples before. The Committee also wanted to make sure the process by which these newly married couples were accessing benefits was the same as opposite-sex couples. More specifically, there was a question over whether or not the proof requirement for newly married same-sex couples was the same for newly married opposite-sex couples. The Committee lastly wanted to know if such a proof requirement exists for new employees.

Questions were developed for Human Resources on these topics and a positive response was received. Married same-sex couples now receive all the benefits available, not just health insurance, that married opposite-sex couples enjoy. These new benefits include “soft benefits” like access to the recreation center discounts, the lower tuition rate, and more. Human Resources made it clear that “married is married for our purposes.” The second concern was about the process to access these benefits. Newly married same-sex couples shared seemingly different proof requirement experiences about how to inform the University and what to provide. The Committee sought clarity to ensure there was not a procedural bias in place that required same-sex couples to show proof of marriage when opposite-sex married couples are not required to do so. The issue was then complicated by a new employee’s experience with not having to show proof of marriage at all. Human Resources provided the below policies to the Committee, which cleared up why there may have been different experiences for different people.

All employees are required to provide documentation when they have a “life event” such as a marriage. The system automatically triggers a notice indicating the document is required. An email is sent to the employee as well as a document notice within the Benefits Online system.

All Employees new to the University who are electing their benefits for the first time are not required to show proof of relationship. This is also true when adding a spouse or dependent during annual enrollment. If an audit were conducted, employees could be required to provide proof of relationship at that time for these types of events (new hire, annual enrollment).

The Committee considers the work in this area done for now and thanked Greg Walters and Brandi Terwilliger in Human Resources for their quick assistance.
Gender Inclusive Restrooms & Campus Lactation Rooms

In addition to expected, routine updates to our website, the Ubuntu Committee brainstormed ways to better highlight the presence of gender inclusive restrooms and campus lactation spaces at the University. This week links to campus maps of these spaces on the LGBT and Women’s Centers websites will be on the Ubuntu Committee’s homepage. The Committee has also discussed the need for more campus lactation spaces and brainstormed possible locations. Members of the Committee are currently involved in the establishment of a new lactation space in the Commons. Other members were involved with obtaining a gender inclusive restroom in the new Integrated Research Innovation Center. While these last two projects were not done under the Committee’s name directly, they reflect the opinion of our members who care deeply about these issues. The Committee will continue to find ways to advocate for and promote the need for these spaces as signs of support for LGBT and nursing students.

Disability Accommodations, Technology & Online Courses

The final project for the year is a collaboration with Disability Support Services (DSS). At the most recent Committee meeting, Gloria Jensen and DSS staff presented on the growing challenges their office experiences coordinating the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act with advances in classroom technology and online courses. The Committee reviewed a draft version of “Course Accessibility Guidelines” that give guidance to instructors on various course related activities, from the development of a syllabus to classroom technology and more. The presentation was meant to highlight the growing challenges with ADA compliance and illustrate the complexities of online courses. The Committee agreed to take up some of the issues raised in the presentation over the remainder of the year. DSS is to narrow down the top five issues we can work on and provide concrete, desirable outcomes. One of the outcomes could involve proposed changes to FSH 6400 and 6420 to better address the responsibilities that come along with advances in technology and the emergence of online courses. Another outcome could be the development of an accessibility checklist for web content and online courses that serves as a self-assessment tool for faculty. The challenges described by DSS with ensuring compliance with the ADA will be the focus of the Ubuntu Committee’s work the rest of the year.