Faculty/A&PS discussions about Strategic Planning Steering Committee
Preliminary Report, May 14 and 15, 2015
Summary of Significant Emerging Themes
May 27, 2015

Alums/Career Center and Post-Oberlin Life ("Student Trajectory")
- Thinking about interconnectivity of Oberlin and post-Oberlin life could help students explore passions early in their careers, as well as helping faculty retool to think about students' professional lives. It's not enough to rely on the Career Center—the campus community as a whole needs to be more educated about students' professional lives. What are the investments people are bringing to lives in Oberlin?
- There was a concern that the Career Center and the Alumni Office's focus is too "outward-facing," and (at least in terms of the Career Center), should "face campus" a bit more (esp. with new director eventually coming in to the Center). There should be more integrating of mentoring and advising with the Career Center's work, across the four+ years and curriculum of the students' time here. Faculty need to know more about what students are doing post-graduation, and need better information to give to current students about post-Oberlin opportunities.
- Relatedly, there was discussion of student portfolios—connecting pieces of what students have done here with what they do later.
- Work experiences for students on campus were discussed—how they create peer-to-peer connections, and help with career building by tying student passions to "real-life" experiences.
- It was noted that emerging fields like environmental studies won't have alumni in same numbers within the Oberlin network, so we need to gather more information about those fields to share with students.
- Students and the language of their "trajectory" in the Preliminary Report was discussed, with a positive response to the notion of a cumulative student experience. It was felt the faculty should coordinate with Career Center and the Alumni Office to help with that trajectory.
- Oberlin should get a better sense of what its alums are up to—we need more tracking information from Development about Oberlin graduates, and perhaps have them teach in these proposed year-round programs.
- How can the Career Center help with need-based student support?
- There was a discussion about the "free exchange of ideas" passage in the Mission Statement—but given the various campus events over last year or two, will students feel good about their time here, and want to give back?
- It was felt Oberlin could do more to integrate alumni into the campus experience.

Diversity
- Diversity and demographics are shifting across the country—how can student and faculty make-up reflect this? These questions about diversity also tied to issues of

financial sustainability: as demographics shift, costs and access for students will shift, and Oberlin needs to address this.

- Equity, sustainability, social justice—it's good that these ideas are highlighted, but "social justice" is not mentioned throughout the document, as the other two are.
- There are a record number of students with documented disabilities at Oberlin, and that number will only grow. Our current structures are not sufficient because they are not unified. These concerns dovetail with concerns about sustainability, in terms of resources and money—the "stop gap" method we have now calls out students and is also inefficient. How can we change these measures? The group also noted the language in the Preliminary Report about "diversity" without talking about disability.
- Among the student body, the largest sub-group is those with a diagnosed disability (and neuro-diversity issues more generally), and they are not really addressed in the Preliminary Report. This population will likely grow, and we are currently insufficiently prepared.
- "Compositional diversity" should apply to staff as well as faculty. It's a very important factor in encouraging students to move outside of their comfort zones. Faculty is emphasized a lot in the Report, but staff should be mentioned more.
- The "health and wellness" passages in the Report: As with other groups at other sessions, there was strong support here for supporting students with disabilities, and prepping faculty and other students to accommodate those students. It was also asked, if our financial resources are limited, what is the place of this strategic direction in terms of supporting students with disabilities?

Education/Educational Excellence
- Are we thinking expansively enough about the range of educational talent in Oberlin's staff more generally, the kind of talent that could help students? It was suggested this could be addressed by being collaborative across departments and groups.
- Advising—it was felt this was too administratively compartmentalized, and needed to be aligned to help students (from the beginning) learn about and use the wide range of tools and educational opportunities Oberlin provides.
- Maintaining Oberlin's place in the educational marketplace: "An educated consumer is our best customer"—but how do we make our argument to that consumer? How and why Oberlin is a compelling place? Should Oberlin reframe its Draft Mission statement to distinguish itself among the competition? The college has an "extraordinary infrastructure," and our publicity/outreach materials need to emphasize how we connect the College and Conservatory.
- Oberlin could do better with its interdisciplinary work—get rid of "silos"— faculty should reflect students' cross-disciplinary work (and not just after protection of tenure). Overall, however, this group liked the Preliminary Report's emphasis on excellent faculty and staff.
- What about a possible downsizing of library holdings (only to reduce redundancy between institutions), perhaps using OhioLink to save money and space?

- Faculty members are being stretched too thin—advising is still a problem, and should be more flexible. There's not enough faculty/student face time in the College. There was some wondering if faculty governance is inefficient because it's too bureaucratic—can it be streamlined without resulting in a "faculty despot"?
- Have we allowed enrollment to get too big? The 2005 plan suggested decreasing enrollment, but that hasn't happened.
- What does a "connected educational experience" mean, and what might it look like? There is a tension underlying the idea of "interconnectedness"—it might not work well for all students. There was concern about Oberlin's commitment to its traditional mandate of educational excellence and preparing students for graduate programs—would this be diluted with all the other Strategic Directions that are competing for the time and expense of the College?
- In the future, there will be three types of colleges: Harvard, football and MOOCs. Oberlin is a "Harvard" and we should strive to be that. It's important to have a high ranking. We should prioritize academic excellence, especially given the "regionality" issues Oberlin faces, as opposed to East Coast schools.
- Is academic excellence getting lost amidst the social agendas in the Preliminary Report? Should there be more specific language in report about academic excellence?
- Oberlin is currently oversubscribed in its classes, undersubscribed in terms of faculty and staff, and "undersubscribed" in its endowment. The concept of a "straining faculty" struggling to cover all their classwork, advising, etc., is now built into the Oberlin system as a given, and this must be addressed.
- Scholarship should be mentioned more—there's been more emphasis on this at Oberlin in past, and we need to emphasize it more now. We also need to address sharing the College's workload more equitably—could low-enrolled classes be cut? Should salary tied to course enrollment numbers?
- The history of eradicating merit pay in Arts and Sciences was discussed, with the feeling that the pendulum has now swung too far in the other direction. It's nice to have incentivizing option for those who produce—not necessarily more money, but a redistribution of existing funds.
- Advising was discussed—career advising, mentoring networks, course advising.
- A tension in the Report between an imagined "core Oberlin experience" that we don't want to change v. an unsustainable status quo. How do we manage that tension? What actually is "core" to the Oberlin experience? If it's a small class, face-to-face, residential liberal arts experience—how much of massive infrastructure is actually essential to that experience—support staff, athletic facilities, dorms? Could we use more contingent faculty as opposed to full-time faculty?
- It was felt that there was not enough about "excellence in teaching" in the Preliminary Report. There was also not enough about special needs students and the opportunities we should be creating for them.
- How should Oberlin fold student activism/student complaints about the administration into academics? We should re-center questions and concerns

about diversity and other issues around the academic program: "Don't holler, but go out and do research projects on [fill-in-the-blank issue]."

- There was an observation that Oberlin is not actually a "small liberal arts college," but a "robust-sized liberal arts college." We're not an R1 institution, but we do have research capabilities, and "excellence" could mean expanding interdisciplinary frontiers, involving and engaging students in research, etc.
- There was a desire to strengthen Oberlin's messaging around the liberal arts as a personal interaction, full of person-to-person connections. This is what Oberlin offers its students, and it's meaningful. It should be brought to the fore in communications with the outside world.
- There was a spirited exchange about terminology: "excellence" v. "education" v. "engagement"—what are the best words to use to describe what Oberlin does? Is "engaged" too different in meaning from "excellence" or "education"?

Finances
- Is Oberlin at a tipping point of crisis? What are the opportunities and limits of such a tipping point, and what Strategic Directions might be "less realistic" in the Preliminary Report?
- One prevailing thought among faculty, staff and students, was—"For this much money, my needs should be met as student." How (and can) we reduce those costs? Is a high price point really a motivation for individualized needs being met?
- Tuition and its role in the College's future: The complexity of tuition—the nuances between "full pay" and "full need" students, and how the tuition of the former often supports the latter—was discussed. The Strategic Plan is an opportunity for transparency—about budgets, students' futures, etc. It's a chance for "responsible communication." Once the plan is in place, how is the College reporting back on it, what are its metrics, and how is the College reporting the metrics? Teamwork and decision-making—if trade-offs are made, how does the plan contribute? How does Oberlin highlight what it does better than its peers, and how does it keep doing those things better?
- It was felt the Report used a lot of aspirational language, but also needs to be realistic in face of the College's challenges.
- This document has more ideas of good things to do than there are ideas about how to save money. Governance and transparency—there's a need to share information broadly. How does governance work at Oberlin in comparison to peer institutions—can we overcome "Oberlin exceptionalism" in order to overcome "faculty dictatorship"?
- The College's tight budgets and structural deficits, in relationship to salary issues—there needs to more transparency around these budget issues and deficits, in order to help faculty and staff morale as any possible cuts begin.
- Compensation v. salary for all (not just faculty) groups—how, across staff and other employee groups," does Oberlin compare to peer institutions? Is it feasible to reduce some benefits?

- In terms of finances and other resources, to what extent (to use an analogy) is Oberlin really "drowning," and do we need to be pulled out by the hair or arm (the latter being the more comfortable choice)?
- There seem to be two perspectives in plan—one that's envisioning and positive, v. one that sees Oberlin as "bloated" and needing to be cut back. How do we balance these perspectives of "reality" v. "envisioning"?
- Financial aid's "bi-modal" model of recruitment (high and low pay) and what impact that has on the campus climate was mentioned.

Governance/Transparency
- Oberlin could celebrate its successes more, more specifically and with greater metrics and examples.
- Communication was noted, and again, there were concerns about "silos." In Strategic Direction "E," for instance (the focus on interrelations of the Career Center and the Alumni Office)—what about other parties that might come into that equation? How do we cultivate talking to each other, when that's hard due to lack of time, lack of a consistent communication plan, etc.? The faculty/staff divide around these issues was noted here, too.
- Making faculty governance more effective and transparent: important issue. Changing governance needs to be done carefully, so all communities are integrated and consulted, so decisions aren't just coming top-down from the Board.
- Job descriptions often seem rigid, which doesn't allow us to be flexible to outside concerns.

Innovation Zone, Innovation and Disruption more generally
- Concern about the word "entrepreneurial," as well as what "innovation zone" means, and how can that term can be fleshed out in the final plan. Is it like LaunchU or CTIE? This might be an important point to clarify.
- What are the inhibiting factors that prevent faculty or staff from participating in such innovations (scarcity of time, for instance)?
- Given the youth of students, the "Old" might look "New" to them. Therefore it's not necessary to fetishize the "New."

Language and Word-smithing
- With regards to the Admissions statement: when talking about "academic and musical excellence"—could we strike "musical" and replace it with "creative"?
- Core Values are not "core values" as written, but rather seem written more as "Strategic Directions." Could this language be altered/revised?
- Need to mention collections and the museum in the education section (in addition to what it already says about teaching, scholarship, etc.).
- A stronger spine is needed in the Report—what is its ordering? How can it be organized? All things should be tied to a core academic mission of the College (that issues like wellness, diversity, etc., should fall under that). Right now diversity is overemphasized as a short-term response to problems of the last two

years, with scholarship taking back seat. Upper administration and faculty should work together to create more proactive leadership.

- Core Value 7 (about support staff)—should say that staff should be dedicated to supporting students AND faculty.

Sustainability
- Need to have a conversation in terms of social, environmental and physical sustainability: how can we save money v. how can we generate revenue. What does "leadership" mean at Oberlin? What are its goals in this area? How do we support students in this way? Is the level of leadership on environmental sustainability specific enough in the Preliminary Report? There are cost saving/cost avoidance measures, like physical sustainability, via environmental initiatives, that might save costs?
- Oberlin should renew commitment to environmental sustainability, and there was approval for the carbon pledge. Could there be someone working in the Development office who has environmental expertise?

Technology
- Could the document add more mentions of technology?
- Technology and the inefficiency of campus communication—we are daily using inefficient software like Banner, which results in transparency issues, registration difficulties, and even affects catalog copy. This could be solved by better software.
- Internal communications are a problem—need to "break silos." For instance, the Event Management Service in Con should be easier to access and use across various campus programs and departments.
- Create a forum for thinking creatively about technology and other trends that might not have an immediate application. Could Oberlin use adaptive tech within disability services? Coordinate technology and enhance administrative efficiency, to "un-silo" software across campus.
- Concern about technology as a potential barrier or hindrance—there should be an increase in support, and an effort to make these services more efficient. CIT struggles to support what everyone needs/wants to do (that Winter Term still does much of its registration process on paper was offered as one example).

Town/Gown
- The Report's vision of connections with the City of Oberlin was noted, and it was felt that it needed to say more in about that sense of place. What's the difference between "City" and "Community"? This should be clarified.

Trade-Offs/"Hard Conversations"
- The document needs to be clearer about cuts and trade-offs, and the hard conversations that still need to take place. Oberlin needs to have hard conversations about space—perhaps the school should do a space "audit" to be more efficient and more educationally effective in its use of campus space. What might be cut to help costs?

- Financial constraints should be at the forefront of the Report—the sooner we make hard choices explicit, the better, as it provides the proper scope/perspective for the reader.

Year-round Oberlin
- There was a discussion of revenue that might be possible for/from a "year-round" institution: what are the goals of such a plan, and what is the cost/reward balance of that idea, realistically speaking? Is there a need for further research on the idea of a year-round Oberlin? When would the year-round plan actually start, when would revenue from it actually come in, and what would the cost be to students on campus who've traditionally used that time in the summer to work with professors on collaborative research? If a "year-round Oberlin" is implemented, is there a possibility of the students losing those sorts of opportunities?
- What would year-round Oberlin look like in terms of specific programs and directions?