

Strategic Planning Steering Committee
Meeting October 8, 2015
Meeting summary

Present:

Marvin Krislov
Diane Yu
Kathryn Stuart
Carol Christ
Brian Doan

Board Members

Tom Cooper
Meg Coward
Motoko Deane
Lillie Edwards
Michael Kamarck
Robert Lemle
Chesley Maddox-Dorsey
Leanne Wagner
Liz Welch
Alan Wurtzel

Alumni

Andrea Hargrave
Chuck Spitulnik

A&S Faculty

Ron Cheung
Bob Geitz
Chris Howell

Erik Inglis
Maureen Peters
Sandy Zagarell

Conservatory Faculty

Lorraine Manz

Senior Staff

Tim Elgren
Mike Frandsen
Andrea Kalyn

A&PS

Deborah Campana

Andria Derstine

David Kamitsuka

Students

Jasmine Anderson
Hayden Arp
Sophie Davis
Machmud Makhmudov

Avalon McKee

Sarah Minion

Umazi Myurya

Guests

Joyce Babyak

Bill Barlow

Debra Chermonte

Ben Jones

Ross Peacock

Ferd Protzman

Introduction

Marvin began by welcoming everyone. He said that he and Diane Yu will remain the designated “point people” for responding to media and other outside groups.

He then outlined where the Committee was in the process:

- It is critically important that we move forward with two parallel processes to complete our strategic plan.
- The first, which is the charge to this group, is to determine strategic priorities that reflect Oberlin’s mission and will strengthen even more the quality of the education and of the entire Oberlin experience we offer our students.
- The second is to acknowledge that the board will evaluate and determine key factors and metrics including enrollment, net tuition, and endowment payout rate, while senior staff works on divisional budget development.
- After the plan is approved by the Board of Trustees, groups composed of members of all constituencies will be formed and charged with implementation. These groups will be asked to develop metrics so we can measure and report on our progress.

On issues of budget and finance:

- We are *not* a poor college.
- In fact, we have demonstrable strengths in our faculty, staff, students, admissions, facilities, and endowment.
- We do, however, need to develop a more stringent fiscal discipline.
- Mike Frandsen, vice president for finance and administration and the deans are already working budgeting going forward.

- Further, Arts and Sciences and Conservatory dean have guided faculty in making excellent progress on some of the curricular initiatives in both divisions.
- In terms of the recommendations emerging from our plan:
 - We should determine—with an awareness that not all have high prices—the recommendations with the greatest strategic content.
 - We may decide to make some choices from among those on our current list and also think about those that we can phase in over time.

Mike Frandsen's comments included:

- We are in the very fortunate position of having financial choices as a result of our considerable strengths.
- We can do many things, but our resources are not unlimited.
- While that means we must consider trade-offs, we get to make the choices.
- The reason for strategic planning is to guide those decisions in accordance with our values and the environment we face.
- We may choose to do some things full speed ahead.
- We may choose to do others over a longer period of time than we might ideally like.
- We may also decide that there are some things we cannot do even though they represent good ideas, consistent with our values.
- We are not in crisis. Like any organization, especially higher education organizations today, we may get there if we do not consider carefully where to allocate our precious resources.
- We have to balance the present and the future. And we have to balance the need reduce costs with the imperative of maintaining an excellent Oberlin experience.
- The Board, guided by market and institutional data, our discussions, and their fiduciary duty, must set the broad parameters for financial planning.
- In the near-term, the 3-5 year period of this plan, there are just a few things that determine the majority of the resources we will have and set boundaries on our financial plan – how many students, how much they pay, and how much we are willing to spend of our 100-year-plus asset, the endowment.
- Within those boundaries and from the priorities established through this strategic planning effort, we will embark on a related process.
- The Oberlin community will get to implement the plan and make choices about how to allocate the resources we have.
- In the meantime, as we have been doing, and as Marvin mentioned, we will seek to reduce costs and free resources for reallocation to more important priorities. We will step up those efforts.
- We will seek new resources, too, and these will add to what we can do at the margin. The President has asked me, the Deans, and the other members of senior staff to lead the decision-making process. We will enlist the input of our colleagues.
- We will need to find some things we can stop doing.
- We do need to reduce costs, but I believe we can do that in ways that, while not completely painless, will not fundamentally change Oberlin and may, in fact, allow us to move resources from old uses to new that will make Oberlin even better.
- The importance of determining alternative revenue streams—such as possible summer programs was also noted.

Carol Christ comments:

- thinks process is in a terrific place, and she is impressed with the improvements in the report.
- supported Mike and Marvin's comments about Oberlin's wealth: compared to many liberal arts colleges, Oberlin is wealthy.
- suggests identifying a peer group more similar to Oberlin in terms of resources, as this could allow a more useful comparative exercise.
- budget-cutting can't be a Plan's center—it's about choices and priorities that drive the budget, rather than vice versa.
- a strategic plan should focus on the distinctive—it doesn't contain everything you believe and do, but focuses on the few things that will make a difference.
- noted a few things we might put greater focus on:
 - The 4+4 Plan: The need to prepare students for careers and life after college; it is market savvy and adds value to young alumni and students
 - Sustainability: This is a role in which Oberlin is distinctive leader
 - Connected learning is important, but we need a different, less "inside baseball" term for it.
 - Renewing Oberlin's commitment to diversity—racial, ethnic, gender identity/identities, socioeconomic.

Marvin noted Diane's thanks for everyone's work. Her comments included two points that we should consider:

- pay more attention to highlighting what is distinctive, what will distinguish us reaching out to alums and other Oberlin communities
- make language more forceful, dynamic and appealing not just suggesting incremental choices/changes, but offering exciting new directions with technology, multidisciplinary learning, ways for faculty and staff to interact with students.

Summary Document Discussion

Kathryn introduced the preliminary Summary Document, which includes informal responses to new draft strategic plan, and she outlined next steps:

- a new draft strategic plan will be posted for community feedback as soon as possible after review of the new draft by steering committee, senior staff, and Board.
 - in terms of seeking feedback, the deans will have meetings with standing faculty committees; we will also have feedback sessions with students, administrative and professional staff, and with the Alumni Leadership Council.
 - the Steering Committee meeting in November will include a discussion of feedback already received.
 - a revised draft will be presented to the Board for the December meeting.
 - there will be two General Faculty meetings (November and December) for discussion of the plan in preparation for GF approval of the document in February, with time to make changes for the March Board meeting.
 - following approval by the Board in March, we will turn to implementation strategies.
- Marvin led a review of the Draft Strategic Plan, focusing on the three directions.

Direction One: Connected Learning (4+4) and Advising

Marvin moved to focusing on Strategic Directions 1-3 on page 21.

Recommendation on advising

- discussion about this began in the Education Futures group as a unifying recommendation: it involved broad-based advising about course selection, class deans, career advising, work with alumni, etc.
- concern about the morphing of its language into something “quite different”—what does “holistic advising system” mean? Is this something faculty and students want?
- the term “holistic” reflects a variety of positions and communities for students—life here at Oberlin, life beyond, life across and within various communities—and using technology and other tools to restructure the facilitation of these advising relationships.
- how can we help students coordinate these systems? What is the core of a liberal arts experience, and how does advising help students with this core?
- when departments were surveyed, the majority said that students took many courses in subjects outside the major, so there has to be a broader conversation about advising that reflects that reality.
- whether “holistic” reflects student development or the institution and its various advising services, the language should focus on individualized trajectories to promote high achievement, and how advising complements that.
- agreement not to use “holistic”; question about finding a word other than advising e.g., coaching, mentoring; also “integrated” or “comprehensive,” advising system.”

Connected Learning

- section should reflect importance of courses outside a student’s major and our distinctive blend of Arts and Sciences/Conservatory/Museum as a means to offer opportunities for kinds of “connected learning” not available at other schools.
- consider language about pre- and post-plan and what students will receive (Colorado College and block plan as distinctive)
- strategic plan is a place to build on a core of a traditional liberal arts education, then moving out in innovative directions. What will an Oberlin student know or have done by the time they leave in four years?
- offer a concluding statement about the structures through which students move—i.e., “we will create structures that then integrate all these components and experience (academic, civic, global, etc.) and individualized trajectories.”
- the document is institutionally-centered, but thinking about it as student-centered might be one way of reorganizing it.
- note the importance of peer advising and the role of staff mentoring.
- importance of health and wellness

Direction Two: Building Oberlin’s educational community

- Concern that “Building Oberlin’s education community” makes it sound like we don’t have one. Different word there?

- We need more language about building community on campus (interactional diversity, health and wellness).
- We need a strategic recommendation that could help build and retain student populations once they are here (not just when we recruit them).
- Work with documents and language from the Bicentennial group and/or Meredith Raimondo’s work on interactional diversity.
- Needs greater focus on strengthening the residential experience: not just getting students here (where language is now focused) but about what happens when they’re here.
- Oberlin may be ahead of the curve on health/wellness issues; might this be a way of making Oberlin distinctive?
- Should “regional community” material of [direction] number one be moved to number two?
- Discussion about action steps to further interactional as well as compositional diversity.
- Include creating and fostering opportunities for new interactional experiences
- residential experience including OSCA is part of community; how can this be better reflected in the plan?
- Does political diversity fit into this section?
- “Transparency” and “equitable” should be part of “inclusive institutional processes.”
- Build on what Oberlin already does with tracking diversity data in order to benchmark our aspirations in this area.

Direction Three: Financial Resources, Governance and Sustainability

- Question about the meaning of “scale”—means balancing size of student body with what we’re able to deliver to students in terms of resources and experiences.
- Important to highlight environmental sustainability.
- Should “governance” be its own direction because of its importance.
- Use caution with recommendations that start with the word continue—better to use stronger language.
- Governance: “streamlining the system of governance”—clarify what this language means, and where the power goes. Its intention was not a “board-autocratic” system, but rather making better use of time.
- Is issue of stewardship directly related to questions of faculty governance; perhaps more context would be useful. “Stewardship” is not so much about finance, but a broader context of institutional leadership.
- Should Library be listed among Core Values? It is directly related to academic rigor.
- Concern about the first bullet point in the executive summary: “...financial progress achieved by Oberlin...”—since tuition raises are a difficult point for students, perhaps best to contextualize this point by noting flattening of national, family incomes in relation to rise of tuition, in order to help explain the problem of increasing financial pressure.

- Perhaps governance shouldn't be a bullet in this document, but we might have it as a bullet in final strategic plan. Consensus was not achieved on whether governance should be removed from this version of the draft strategic plan.
- Are the optics of the Core Values were "off"? There is a lot on education, but less on diversity and sustainability.
- Board meetings in October, November and December will include discussion of payout and tuition. Steering Committee needs to understand revenue and operating budget going forward.

Discussion of Document Language

- Lack of excitement in the document, both language and ideas. Perhaps not adequately "bold." What will get people excited? What phrases will pop?
- "Curating life" is nice phrase: helping students make decisions. This might fit in multiple parts of the document.
- A "path-making exercise," through college and beyond, perhaps as a phrase to craft a story around?
- Metaphors about student paths (arabesques or ampersands) were then mentioned, as a way of offering imagery that was cross-disciplinary.
- "Students as curators and composers of their own lives" might be a way of thinking about language and pathways.
- The language of the document is already too "flowery," we are "trying too hard"; "curate" is already an overused cliché.
- Other suggestions:
 - Make document shorter; cut it by 25-30%.
 - Use more "plain Anglo-Saxon words."
 - Concern about the language being too academic and jargon-y for 'average person.' Should we re-write to "sharpen" the "actual ideas" with "real language."

Conclusion

- Marvin offered a general summary of the meeting's discussion, and asked for final comments.
- In response to how these notes will be incorporated into the new draft, we will use today's summary document, looking for themes that seem to make a material difference moving forward, and also reflect comments about what we like in this document. We welcome emails that raise points that were not discussed today.
- There was a "sense of the group" motion to move forward to next draft. The motion was approved.
- The meeting adjourned at 7:15 p.m.