

The Oberlin College Strategic Plan Steering Committee
Meeting summary
12.19.14

Meeting date: December 5, 2014, 7:15-8:30 a.m.

In attendance: Co-Chairs D. Yu, M. Krislov

Members:

D. Campana
C. Canavan
T. Cooper
M. Coward
S. Davis
M. Deane
A. Derstine
L. Edwards
T. Elgren

M. Frandsen
B. Geitz
A. Hargrave
C. Howell
J. Howsmon
E. Inglis
A. Kalyn
M. Kamarck
D. Kamitsuka
R. Lemle

M. Makhmudov
L. Manz
C. McGuire
M. Peters
D. Shapira
C. Spitulnik
E. Tallman
L. Wagner
L. Welch
A. Wurtzel

Coordinator:

K. Stuart
J. Min

Guests:

C. Christ
R. Peacock

1. Introduction

Marvin Krislov opened the meeting with a brief introduction and reviewed the agenda for this meeting, to review progress from the working groups.

2. Working Group reports

Working Group: Education Futures

The Education Futures group has been imagining what Oberlin should look like in the future, and have had a series of enlightening conversations.

They have divided the discussion into a number of themes:

- a) Learning in residence: Oberlin needs to find ways to enhance further the value of being a residential college. Not just being together in classrooms, but creating an environment in which students and faculty and community can interact in enriching ways. Could the “in residence” be less than four years?
- b) Learning on and off campus: How to create a richer virtual campus e.g., study abroad, study away, but also to be an active participant in the Oberlin community.
- c) Learning across walls: Finding a way to break down barriers between, for example, the Conservatory, the College, and the Museum, as well as among academic divisions and departments.
- d) Leaving Oberlin: How can we expand and fortify the bridge from Oberlin to whatever students do afterwards, and how can we increase the 2-way traffic. Thinking about what students do next in life tends needs to be considered in

discussions about alumni and students, and how we might better integrate those two groups.

e) Woven thru all of this are issues of finance and technology, e.g., how to make this affordable and take advantage of the technological revolution?

The group acknowledged that it has been great having the conversation with students, faculty, staff, and board members, and appreciated the energy and creativity that the work group has put into their endeavors. The group also discussed how the eventual recommendations should be made. There are already many initiatives in development [separate from the strategic planning process]. An overarching theme in the discussions has been *interconnections toward learning outcomes*, thinking of ways in which we can make an environment where the sum is greater than the parts. How do undergraduate years connect to life after Oberlin, within campus, and toward learning outcomes for students.

Working Group: Students of the Bicentennial

This group addressed the need to have common language before focusing on defining “students of the bicentennial.” On December 4, Meredith Raimondo gave a tutorial to the group on the academic study of diversity in higher education. Her slides will be posted on the Strategic Plan website. She spoke of how diversity is multidimensional and that it can’t be talked about without also addressing inclusiveness. There are different types of diversity such as structural diversity and interactional diversity. There is a need to remedy the effects of the past.

The concept of “inclusive excellence” was raised as a more constructive set of words to use: What ways do we have to change to meet our own goals for excellence? The group also acknowledged the challenges of students who must work multiple jobs, doing lab science, etc. From Sandy Baum: “We believe that an institution takes inclusive excellence seriously if it 1) accepts the responsibility for producing equitable educational outcomes for students from historically underrepresented groups and 2) monitors the development of high achievement among students from these groups” (Bauman et al 12 - see http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/mei/bauman_et_al.pdf).

It was noted that the first two reports are efforts to make Oberlin the ideal version of itself, and a question was raised about whether the steering committee should also be thinking about elements that might not currently exist. What was meant by “a better Oberlin” was also discussed, including ideas about integration, utilizing technologies, graduate school, and the shape of future revenues.

Committee chairs answered that at this time, the work was more about taking an inventory of what is being done and what could be done better, although that includes consideration of scenarios both positive and negative for the future, and thus some new areas. They would be interested in ideas about launching new things without

added expenditure. It was noted that new things can also add revenue, and that, as presented in the Speaker Series talk on December 4, some things can be curtailed.

Working Group: Resources & Sustainability

This working group has spent a lot of time learning to understand Oberlin's financial model. At this point, they have identified more challenges than opportunities. They are also examining the changing model of philanthropy, as well as environmental sustainability, the relationship between the college and community, technological advances that might change the way Oberlin delivers administrative services, and also how federal scrutiny will impact the vision of Oberlin.

The group heard a presentation by Admissions and consultants to that Office. Although the college uses consultants, the process is guided by Oberlin, follows Oberlin values, and allows a fair process.

The working group is also looking at the faculty governance model, with the goal of increasing its nimbleness and ability to work in a proactive manner, encouraging strategic planning on a smaller level. Members are also examining federal regulations and what we might anticipate in terms of needs for students. The group acknowledged that the college could do better in tracking what students do after they graduate, including long term career development. Members are thinking about the impact of the college on environmental sustainability, and what can be done in that area. They are also gathering information on community relations and will in the future address administrative structure.

Five ideas for reducing costs mentioned in the Baum/McPherson/Madzellan presentation were raised: reducing operating and infrastructure costs; increasing class sizes; reducing the number of majors/minors/programs offered; using technology to find cost savings; and looking at partnerships and consortiums. Federal demands were also addressed.

The committee chair replied that partnerships tend to work better with colleges that are in close proximity and Oberlin is thus a bit limited in terms of direct interactional collaboration. The working group stressed the need to provide meaningful communication to all constituents so that everyone understands the hard decisions that need to be made. It is critical that the process is something people buy into as a community.

It was suggested that looking back at the evolution of services over the past 20 or 40 years might be useful, to get a better understanding of how services have grown.

3. Committee observations and identification of shared topics

The Conservatory and issues of sustainability were two areas that need more focus going forward. A common concern among the groups is understanding the financial aid model, so they may wish to discuss that together.

It was noted that a number of students feel they need to be more involved in the process.

There was discussion about scheduling and considering longer meetings. Evenings and weekends could be considered.

Given the issues of mutual concern to more than one working group (for example, co-curricular and interactional diversity), there should be a process where common goals can be considered at the same time. A definition of diversity would be helpful for all the groups.

It might be useful to have a conversation about making choices, perhaps an exercise with a hypothetical model.

The readings on the website give a sense of the landscape, and compel us not to be complacent or too passive. We need to think about how best to communicate complexities of finances, governance, etc.

The mission statement from the 2005 plan is a useful measure. Implicitly, this process is a discussion about what defines Oberlin, and what qualities of Oberlin need to be preserved and enhanced, and what are secondary or no longer relevant. All the recommendations that emerge from this process should support the mission. The materials that the Alumni association used last year in their reorganization might be helpful in this regard as well.

4. Planning for next meeting

A discussion was held on the best date for the next meeting in February. The committee wants to make sure that enough time and community process are being given to this effort. Members will be polled for their availability for longer meetings in February and March.