

Sessions for Student Feedback to Preliminary Report

May 6-7, 2015

Summary of comments

May 6, 2015 [11 in attendance]

- first full paragraph on page 3 made me aware of the urgency of changing our financial model; sounds like this should be the #1 issue throughout the document, and we should be clear about ways to generate revenue that we are or are not willing to do (i.e., that correspond with our values as an institution)
- something that might help in understanding the document is differentiating between maintaining/renewing goals versus new initiatives
- would like to think more about what students as a body can do to help accomplish the goals of this document, e.g. environmentally sustainable actions; unsure how to do this because of student turnover, perhaps it would need a committee that would eventually lead to a cultural shift
- on SD G: currently seems like vague and catch-all for finances, e.g. the phrase “maximize endowment growth” could be accomplished by spending none of the endowment -- this demonstrates we need to be more specific
- on the idea of connected learning/”innovation zone”: in core curriculum and requirements, we should have a more vocational tilt or classes that can be applied to everyday life; e.g. right now I am taking a science class that will not be helpful in my future at all; reminder that Oberlin is rated very low on “return-on-investment”
- on asking for top 3 priorities: we don’t know the consequences/give-and-take of saying those are our priorities; e.g. worried that if we say “no tuition raise” as a priority, that will be used to justify cuts in ways that we do not support
- would appreciate having a “state of Oberlin” that is genuine and transparent, and not trying to cover acknowledged problems up from students, would like to have explicit information that will convey to students how decisions will be made
- we know that the climate of HigherEd/liberal arts is bad right now, but students are still here, so we should ask them what aspects of their education/experience here are most important to them instead of trying to guess; students will be the ones who best see how to connect Oberlin values to values of the 21st century
- student has been learning about “appreciative inquiry” -- have we talked about that as a strategy at all?
- on context for the Strategic Plan: throws out ideas like MOOCs and “utilitarian training,” but doesn’t discuss how those might fit into Oberlin -- are we definitely considering them? are we saying they don’t align with our values? more specificity
- students do not come here for strictly utilitarian education, i.e. making money in the real world; rather, we want to learn how to “build a bridge,” but a bridge with morality and equity in mind; we need to reconcile utilitarian and liberal arts view

- career preparation is really absent at this school, it seems to come through in weird ways like mentions of “innovation zone”; right now we have policies that directly limit ways to make our education more affordable, e.g. it’s harder to transfer credits from community colleges (worried that we will make MOOCs inaccessible too by making people pay too much for them); ExCos are a great example of accessible education: students/community members teaching students about something they love (if we’re talking about personnel costs, this seems like a possible solution)
- demographic of full-paying students is dwindling, what that suggests to me is that perhaps we need to monetize/brand ourselves to appeal to a bigger body/corporation that will invest in Oberlin; for the sake of maintaining integrity inside our institution, financial assistance needs to come from the outside
- happy to see mention of “reliance on tuition increases is not tenable”; need to remember this is not only bad for our financial model, but also bad because it results in “school push-out,” keeping students out who might come here, and making students want to leave once they’re here
- policies don’t seem to line up with concern about this, e.g. info about tuition/fee increases comes out after students have opportunity to consider transferring
- experiences with Lorain County residents are that they think we are a bunch of rich kids and do not feel that Oberlin College gives back to the community; the mandatory meal plan upholds Oberlin as a food desert, remember that there used to be a second grocery store (Missler’s) in town
- all members of Oberlin College community are always citing our radical start to inclusion, but we seem to no longer be willing to make radical change (clarification: we let in black students because Oberlin was going bankrupt and an abolitionist offered money to do so)
- on elitism at Oberlin: we try to be accessible while upholding value for the arts, it’s hard to reconcile these; we should think more about OC as part of a wider community and how we can have a better relationship with them by fostering connections that benefit both parties
- within the report, mention of “Oberlin community” is ambiguous: does it mean OC community or broader community?
- we should differentiate between the obligations of our institution providing educational excellence and residential experience, the former should take priority over the latter if it means lowering costs -- Oberlin students are smart and can figure out how to care for themselves
- more transparency should also be a priority in this document, it is not mentioned often; e.g. transparency on Illuminate and future capital campaigns, also where costs are going in ResEd and within broader college; more transparency will mean students will not have to exert so much energy finding out information that is important to them

- need to have students more involved in processes like investment, finances, admissions; we know what will work best for us rather than administrators trying to guess, and then students can convey information to student body in a way that makes sense and prevents the defensive shield that they feel often gets thrown up

May 7, 2015 [5 in attendance]

- need to prioritize alumni revenue by making students' experience here good, including their experience in the type of financial aid they received -- that will make them want to donate in the future; even right now, alumni are hearing about how students are unhappy and it is making them less likely to donate
- small experiences are far more influential than financial aid numbers, e.g. equitable treatment from S&S, having safe, comfortable living spaces (which they are not experiencing right now)
- again, transparency is of the utmost importance and should be woven throughout this document, e.g. mentions financial situation, but being absolutely clear about where we're at would make students feel like the fact that things are bad isn't being hidden from students
- Oberlin is in an image crisis right now because our values are constantly touted, but are we actually listening to students' contributions and how they experience Oberlin? Oberlin students are being vocal about what the issues are but feel they are not heard, and issues of transparency and validation never improve
- Merit scholarships should be questioned, although we do see the advantage of them as strategic scholarships in bringing in higher-paying students
- mediation of relationship between faculty/admins/students -- we are horrible at this, and tension consistently exists because we go into conversations expecting the worst of each other and that everyone will get defensive; one bad experience in a department generalizes to all departments, makes people reluctant to reach out; it's hard for students to advocate for themselves, takes a ton of energy
- OCDC is supposed to serve the purpose of mediating, but are not seen as effective or used often -- maybe this should be revamped as a resource?
- there is a clear dysfunction/lack of coordination between resources like deans, Office of Disability Services, professors, other administrators
- what does problem with "governance structure" refer to? This needs to be made more specific so that everyone (i.e. students) can understand what it's talking about