

OBERLIN

COLLEGE & CONSERVATORY

The Oberlin College Strategic Plan Steering Committee Summary of Meeting

Meeting date: September 16, 2014, 12:30-5:00 p.m.

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

Members:

B. Alegant
D. Campana
C. Canavan
M. Coward
S. Davis
M. Deane
R. Dearon
A. Derstine
L. Edwards
T. Elgren

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

C. Maddox-Dorsey
M. Makhmudov
L. Manz
C. McGuire
M. Peters
C. Spitulnik
E. Tallman
L. Wagner
A. Wurtzel

Coordinator:

K. Stuart
J. Min

Guests:

C. Christ
R. Peacock
F. Protzman
S. Subramanian

1. Introductions

The meeting began with introductions of all committee members in attendance.

Oberlin's last strategic planning process took place between 2003 and 2005. Based on the current shifting landscape of higher education and numerous other factors influencing our world, as well as the amount of time that has elapsed since the last planning process, the Board of Trustees felt it was important to launch a new strategic planning effort.

The steering committee will be studying driving forces and trends that will affect Oberlin's planning for the next two decades, and make specific recommendations to be implemented over the next three to five years that will be consistent with a longer term vision of Oberlin. The goal of the steering committee is to advise the Board on the strategic direction Oberlin College and Conservatory should take to ensure that Oberlin is one of the most distinguished institutions in the world.

The timetable for this process is relatively short, with a scheduled completion date of December 2015.

The steering committee discussed the charge and confidentiality issues. As a general matter, the discussions and identities of the members will be kept confidential to prevent premature disclosures as well as inconsistent and confusing reports, and to enable people to speak freely, boldly, and candidly as the steering committee grapples with the issues. Meeting summaries will apprise non-members of the progress of the steering committee, as well as the themes, topics, and process that are discussed. Members are expected to consult and obtain thoughts, reactions, and ideas from constituents and others in the community who are following the strategic planning process. The members agreed that as a diverse group, they must act as citizens of the College and Conservatory, rather than as representatives of a particular department or interest.

2. Overview of trends in higher education

Public perceptions of issues in higher education can be sobering, as shown in the recent series on PBS Newshour, “Rethinking College.”

Consultant Carol Christ provided an overview of the current higher education landscape, focusing especially on two areas - (1) demographics and financing and (2) impact of information technology. Demographic trends include a rising number of first graduates (those in their families who are first to attend college), coupled with falling median incomes for families with a 20 year-old and fewer families with high incomes. Financial trends are making the traditional model of high tuition and high aid difficult to sustain. This results in pressure on financial and enrollment management.

Profound information technology changes are making possible new modalities that are no longer dependent upon place. The above demographic and economic trends put immense pressure on residential, tuition-based institutions like Oberlin. New institutions are emerging that build on these technological advances and purport to offer a low-cost alternative to obtaining a college degree, while provoking questions about their impact on traditional accreditation, government and external rankings and ratings, and the organization and transmission of knowledge.

It was noted that while it is important to understand and prepare for these potential changes, it is critical that Oberlin seize the opportunities that these challenges represent.

2. Summary of the strategic planning process and timeline

The Planning Advisory Group, consisting of several members of the Board of Trustees, has been working since December 2013 to help set the stage for the steering committee’s work, study trends in higher education, collect data on Oberlin specifically, and also solicit feedback from the community. The steering committee will build upon this and also look to outside experts to begin formulating scenarios and identify threats and opportunities. Over the next year, working groups will

analyze the issues and propose recommendations for priorities and actions Oberlin should undertake over the next 3-5 years and 10-20 years. These preliminary findings will be presented to the community, modified as appropriate, and then submitted to the Board. At the end of 2015, the report will be submitted to the General Faculty Council and the General Faculty and for endorsement and to the Board for approval. Priorities for implementation will also be set. A chart outlining these steps will be uploaded to the strategic planning website. It was also noted that while community input was formally listed at two milestones in the chart, opportunities for input will be available throughout the process. Listening sessions for students, faculty, staff, and for the greater Oberlin community are planned throughout the year.

3. Strategic Plan Speaker Series

The Speaker series began with Eugene Tobin's lecture on September 4 on the challenges faced by liberal arts colleges. Upcoming speakers include Sylvia Hurtado and Terrell Strayhorn on diversity in higher education on October 9; Aaron Dworkin, Jenny Gersten, and Michael Kaiser on the arts and arts education on November 11; and, on December 4, Sandy Baum, Mike McPherson, and Dan Madzellan on financing higher education. Spring speaking events will address disruptive innovation in education, technology, sustainability, and an additional presentation on the arts. As appropriate, additional experts will be invited to contribute to discussions. All speaking events are free and open to the public.

4. The use of scenarios in strategic planning

A presentation was given on the use of scenarios as a tool in strategic planning. Developed originally for government and business, this methodology uses narratives about plausible futures to stimulate thinking and creativity. The tool is less about predicting the future and more about considering multiple paths toward the future, to entertain a variety of ideas about what might happen, and to free up conscious or subconscious assumptions. By doing so, Oberlin can test assumptions about its identity, understand the impact of environmental factors, and make smart decisions for a range of futures.

5. Brainstorming on trends, uncertainties, and aspirations

The committee divided into small groups to brainstorm on trends and uncertainties in higher education, from both the institutional and individual viewpoint. These addressed societal, technological, economic, environmental, and political perspectives. The entire group also listed aspirations for Oberlin College.

6. Scenario development

Groups discussed four critical trends affecting higher education: globalization, the changing financial landscape, the proliferation of ways to earn credits toward a

degree, and the explosion of information technology. They were asked to consider potential opportunities and responses for Oberlin within these scenarios.

7. Draft of potential working group issues

The steering committee approved the recommendation of the Planning Advisory Group to form three Working Groups to assist in the strategic planning process. Working groups can add members with specific expertise and experience to inform discussions and propose approaches and recommendations. The working groups will be listed on the steering committee website. It was recognized that certain topics would be relevant to all groups, such as financial and sustainability issues, two concerns strongly expressed in the community responses received. Committee members will indicate their preferences in terms of working group service. Each working group will have a fair amount of latitude regarding process.

8. Upcoming meeting schedule.

The next Steering Committee meeting will take place on October 9. At that time, the scenarios and working groups will be refined.

Meeting ended at 5:02 p.m.