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University Update - November 2018

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November 15, 2018

Dear Colleagues,

The semester is moving fast and we are just a week away from Thanksgiving. As papers, tests, and other work pile up, it is good to know a break is around the corner. Just another benefit to our work in education!

Enrollment Activity

We have 1,141 undergraduate applications so far, which is down 115 (9%) from the same time last year. The pace is increasing. 512 of these applications arrived in just the past two weeks, which is up 12 from the same two weeks last year. We are also launching an incentive (waiving the application fee) for some students in order to boost these numbers. Applications from students of color are up again.

FAEC's town hall on the recruitment and retention of students was excellent. Look for additional information soon on those suggestions we can pursue immediately.

We are also making special efforts to fill "empty seats" in some of our outstanding programs. Admissions, financial aid, marketing and academic affairs will soon be collaborating with four academic areas (Art, Computer Science, Education, and English) to better market and support their programs. I know many other programs could benefit from similar attention, but we must eat the elephant in bites. We will also be meeting with Chairs and Directors on November 30 to discuss how to enhance engagement with admitted students and yield activities for all departments.

Marketing Initiative

Every meeting I have on campus highlights two things to me. First, we are doing remarkable things. Second, not enough people know about it. That will always be a struggle, but I have concluded that Otterbein needs to invest time, energy, and money into marketing our great undergraduate and graduate programs.

Many of you have seen the draft materials with the "Only Otterbein" tagline. The feedback has been very positive on the concept and the need to do more in this area. You will soon see a public announcement of our Tuition Transparency initiative and the launch of the new marketing campaign.

We want to make sure "Only Otterbein" has an impact across the state and especially in Central Ohio. The materials are designed to allow us to highlight different messages quarterly. We will launch with an affordability emphasis, but that will shift to other topics over time.

The unknown at this point is cost. Between our marketing budget, help from the enrollment budget, and our contingency fund, I believe we can make a significant investment in this initiative. More to come on this front and I am sure it will receive attention in the Budget Committee and elsewhere.

On the topic of messaging, I have had a few people point out that I talk a lot about being “the model 21st century liberal arts college.” Know that my use of the phrase “liberal arts” is a reflection of the value of a broadly-based education, not a disinterest in professional programs. In fact, the 21st century liberal arts college will meld liberal education with professional learning and experiences in a seamless way inside and outside the classroom. The diversity of our programs is a strength and allows students to be a well-rounded professional and person. Being adept in both business and music (as examples) will help students in their careers and as they seek fulfillment in their lives. The same logic applies to graduate programs – we can distinguish ourselves by viewing our students holistically.

Staffing Levels

Our new approach to filling staff vacancies might have caused confusion and concern so I wanted to share a general overview.

As vacancies occur, supervisors may request that they be filled immediately due to some urgent need. About 20% of positions may be filled immediately and Cabinet will watch this number to make sure we do not approve or deny too many.

Unfilled vacancies will be reviewed by Cabinet quarterly. Requests for new positions will be considered at the same time. We will look at net at least three fewer positions each year across the whole institution. Given our turnover rates, that means we will likely lose about 41 staff and hire about 38. By authorizing searches on a quarterly basis, we also anticipate savings from not immediately filling staff lines. The typical vacancy should result in about three months of budget savings (after vacation payout for the departing person).

I hope that assures everyone that the changes will not be drastic and our process will be as fair and open as we can make it.

Compensation

As you have hopefully heard, the Board approved our revised budget and the first year of the compensation plan. All eligible employees (not new folks like me!) will receive a 1% base adjustment in January and all faculty and staff making below the minimum for their range will be brought up to that minimum level. The work on a performance-based system will now begin through shared governance groups in the faculty and staff.

To have developed a plan, thoroughly discussed it across campus, and made significant improvements based on feedback in just three months is a remarkable accomplishment. I’d like to thank everyone for helping make this happen!

Please enjoy a wonderful Thanksgiving!

Sincerely,
John