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University Update - October 2019

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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

October 21, 2019

Dear Colleagues,

As they say on TV, “Now we return you to your regularly scheduled programming.” That’s how it feels in the days after the debate. Something big, important, and disruptive happened and now it’s over. We just need to remember that our “regularly scheduled programming” is the real reason we are all here – teaching, learning, and supporting our students.

In the midst of all this, we had a Board meeting October 11 and 12. Kristi Robbins has shared a summary of their meeting, but many of these updates give some additional detail.

Debate Wrap Up

Besides all the well-deserved thanks, there are a few other things to wrap up and questions I’ve received.

My sincere apologies for those who had tickets, but were not admitted to the venue. Another organization (not related to Otterbein) gave out too many tickets and overbooked the event. There was not much we could do once the seats were full and we were pushed up against fire code. Clearly this was a major disappointment for those affected. Again, I am sincerely sorry.

Some have wondered how much this all cost. I have no idea what CNN spent on all this, but I’m sure it was a lot. Our contract with them ensured that Otterbein is reimbursed for all expenses related to the event. We accelerated a few facilities tasks (i.e. cleaning the Rike roof and lighting Towers with energy-efficient color-changing LEDs), but these were probably good ideas regardless. In addition, we received an incredible amount of media coverage as a result of hosting the debate, which was priceless.

I have also been asked whether it is appropriate to host a politically one-sided event. Clearly, Otterbein has done this before with Republican presidential candidate rallies. What seems important to me is not that each event be perfectly even, but that the institution as a whole endeavors to educate without political bias. We would approach a Republican presidential debate with equal enthusiasm.

Financial Aid and Discount Rate

The Enrollment Management division hosted a town hall on September 26 and then presented to Chairs and Directors and the Board of Trustees. The short version of the presentation is that at Otterbein, as is true at universities across the nation, our tuition discount rate (TDR) is rising faster than we planned. Our discount, however, is similar to other private universities in our market. The vast majority of aid we give to students is unfunded, so a growing TDR means we have less revenue per student than we did ten years ago.

Some concern has been expressed that the focus on enrolling low-income and under-served students is the reason for our increasing TDR. This is not the case. Our average TDR for Opportunity Scholarship students (who bring significant State and Federal aid with them) is actually lower than our overall TDR, which is impacted most heavily by high academic ability students, including students whose families have the ability to pay more, but have not expressed the willingness to do so.

We are identifying areas in which we can slowly decrease our TDR for new students without negatively impacting our enrollment or student outcomes. The reallocation of some portion of institutional aid away from students with higher discounts towards students who require less discounting to enroll will take time, as it must be done cautiously. Enrollment Management is working closely with Business Affairs to identify appropriate strategies and to project revenue and discount more accurately as we move forward.

Budget

At this point, the current year's budget is still about \$600,000 away from our original projection. We need to get back to the \$2.4 million deficit we had as part of our three-year plan to balance the budget.

Know that we are going back through expenditures and revenues looking for ways to get this done. We aim to complete this by mid-November, along with an updated look at the next two fiscal years. Look for much more on this as we move forward.

Campus Center

As you know, we have been considering a more economical approach to the Campus Center project by building a free-standing dining hall and then renovating the Campus Center in phases. This concept has received a warm reception from faculty and staff, but a very negative one from our student leaders. In fact, Student Government passed a resolution opposing it.

Student concerns include the need for student organization/diversity space (as opposed to dining space), that the Campus Center will languish and further deteriorate without a dining hall, and that commuter students may not be welcome in the new dining hall. If I could summarize their points it would be, "We don't want a dining hall; we want a campus center!"

Some of these concerns can be addressed, such as designing a dining center with accessibility for students without a meal plan. Other concerns may be alleviated as we revise a plan for the Campus Center without a dining hall, which ought to give more space for student activities than the original renovation plan.

I continue to hope that removing the dining hall from the building will actually speed up our ability to create the Campus Center we all want. Over the next few months, we will start the design for the dining hall and Campus Center remodel. It will include timelines, costs, and designated spaces for students, and hopefully build buy-in for the concept. It ought to also give us a more financially responsible way to proceed.

All of this is preliminary and does not obligate us to move forward with construction. We would not go into a project that does not address most of the current worries.

Green Revolving Fund

We got the good news that Alan Goff and Coral Harris have generously provided the first gift (\$100,000) to a new Green Revolving Fund at Otterbein. The fund will be used to pay for campus improvements that

improve our energy efficiency and lower our environmental impact. The financial savings from these improvements will be put back into the fund to then pay for the next sustainability project.

For example, we might change all the lights in a building to LEDs which might have a five-year payback in lower electricity costs. The annual savings goes back to the fund and five years later we can go to the next project. It is all very exciting and we hope and expect that many donors may find this model attractive.

Speaking of generosity, I am pleased to announce that Dr. John Tansey and Lisa Byers have agreed to serve as Faculty and Staff giving chairs this year. You will be hearing from them in the very near future.

Again, thanks for making the past few remarkable weeks at Otterbein possible! We are lucky to have such a wonderful campus and dedicated students, faculty, and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Comerford". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "C".

John Comerford, Ph.D.
President