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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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February 24, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I occasionally join our Student Government leaders for a walk around campus. We ask students what they like about Otterbein and what could be better. It strikes me that every time (without fail) the top referenced “like” is our campus community and caring faculty and staff. Know that all you do for students is noticed and appreciated. Thank you.

As always, there are lots of good things going on (and a few challenges). Here are some brief updates:

Climate Change Town Hall

Hopefully you’ve seen the news that we will host Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Secretary John Kerry, and Governor John Kasich for a conversation on climate change. This will be at 2:30 p.m. on Sunday, March 8 in Cowan Hall. While this is at the end of Spring Break, students are able to return to campus on that day. It is the first town hall for a new organization called World War Zero, which is handling the ticketing directly. Stay tuned for additional information regarding ticket availability and other viewing options for the campus community which will be shared soon.

As you know, we changed cleaning companies this year and the fall was a challenge as they could not hire enough staff to meet their contractual obligations. We have had some cleanliness issues as a result. At this point, we have more staff on campus and results should be improving. We are monitoring the situation closely to ensure our expectations are being met. If not, we will pursue other options. In the meantime, please let us know where there are areas in need of attention by submitting a Facilities Services work order and e-mailing Susan Bolt, CFO & Vice President for Business Affairs at bolt1@otterbein.edu. Sometimes we don’t know there’s an issue until it is pointed out, so please take the time to pass along concerns.

Columbus State

As previewed in previous letters and a town hall on November 15th, we have been encouraging Columbus State Community College to move their operations currently located behind the Maxtown Road Kroger to our campus. We are nearing that agreement.

CSCC would rent two classrooms all day and then use several others between our classes, primarily in the Art & Communication building, but also at The Point and other locations. Long term, they want to be one of the larger tenants in a new building next to The Point (more on that in a moment). We expect all their programs offered in Westerville to eventually be 2+2 or even 2+2+1 programs with Otterbein.

This is an exciting new partnership that will give us access to more transfer students, hopefully re-engage adult degree completion students, and be a model for other private university/community college partnerships.

The Point 2.0

We have been pursuing \$1 million in state capital funding to seed another Point-type building (The Point 2.0 pending a better name!). The reception has been positive in the Statehouse given the success of The Point in creating over 100 new jobs and nearly \$17 million in new payroll for the City of Westerville.

Given limited University reserve funds (reduced by deficits and the original Point project) and other pressing capital needs (see the Campus Center next), we are pursuing the project in partnership with a developer. Ideally, Otterbein will lease some of the land next to The Point to a developer, who will build the building and share some of the rent revenue with Otterbein as payment for the ground lease. Or, Otterbein may take “payment” for the lease by using some sections of the building for academic programs. This project will begin moving with some haste, as any state capital money received obligates us to the project and must be spent within two years.

Campus Center/Dining Hall

CFO & Vice President for Business Affairs Susan Bolt, Executive Director for Facilities Management & Planning Troy Bonte, and two planning groups have begun work programming the two potential projects. We are planning for two paths.

One path would see a free-standing Dining Hall construction within the next year or two and Campus Center with new programming space thanks to the freed up second floor. We know the cost of the Dining Hall would be around \$6 million, but need to determine the content, cost, phasing, and source of funds for the remaining Campus Center project.

Another path is to renovate the Campus Center in more-or-less its current configuration. Rather than the expense of moving the dining hall to the first floor and moving the theater out of the building, we would retain these functions in place and simply look to upgrade the design, accessibility, and efficiency of the building.

Watch for more information about multiple opportunities to participate in this process. A decision will need to be made by the end of this semester.

Professional Development

The Point’s opening has really created a new element of Otterbein’s reputation or brand – we can be the place that provides both liberal (broad) education and professional experience to undergraduates. We further built our reputation for corporate collaboration with our partnership with Alloy providing professional development for corporations. And we are further expanding those collaborations now with a new program in which we ask major employers for regular access (seeking student internship and learning opportunities and marketing our graduate and professional development programs) in exchange for discounted tuition for employees and their dependents (but still at a price beneficial to Otterbein).

This is all great, but to really “own” a reputation for linking liberal (broad) education and professional development, I think we need to get to a place where every student has a guaranteed experiential learning opportunity. This could take many forms. Ideas include requiring two of the Five Cards for graduation, bringing back Sophomores early to do a career/vocation exploration week, embedding professional exposure into each major and/or INST, etc. We need to decide how to get to a place where we can tell every student that they’ll have some unique experiential learning opportunity at Otterbein. We have all the ingredients, and I’ll bet the vast majority of our students are already doing it.

Look for opportunities soon to be a part of this discussion.

VP for Student Affairs

Whatever path we take, much of the experiential learning program will likely involve Student Affairs. I want to be certain we hire a new VP with the right experience and expertise for whatever direction we choose. To that end, I have decided to delay the search and ask Director of Athletics Dawn Stewart to serve as Interim VP for another year. She has agreed and has the full confidence of the Student Affairs staff. I am thankful she'll continue to juggle two jobs with the help of great staff around her.

Budget

Last, but not least, Spring census reveals that our revenue fell below our projections based on Fall enrollment, resulting in an additional budget deficit of \$370,000 on top of the planned deficit of \$2.4 million. Some of the factors involved include more students enrolling part-time for Spring semester than we planned, especially in the fourth-year class where part-time enrollment jumped to 9%, as well as lower than projected graduate student enrollment.

We have opportunities to close that gap this year, and I'm asking everyone to be conservative in spending. Enrollment revenue shortfalls are also the "gift that keeps on giving" and thus affects future years. More importantly, as we look ahead to Fall 2020 enrollment, we see challenges. First year undergraduate applications are down here (as with most of our colleagues across the state). The much discussed demographic declines in Ohio are very real, with the 2020 high school graduating class estimated to be 3,000 students fewer than the 2019 class. The hyper-competitive nature of recruitment looks to get even more chaotic as a DOJ lawsuit has resulted in the dismembering of the National Association of College Admission Counseling "Code of Ethics and Professional Practices." We are also projecting lower enrollment in the Graduate Nursing program for the cohort arriving this summer. Most people know we seem to face some budget challenge each year (or even semester) and we look to scrounge our way back to the budget plan. This is not a strategic way to allocate limited resources.

I've asked Cabinet to begin working on three different areas so we can break this cycle. First, we are refining our multi-year projection model to see what gaps and risks may exist on our path to a balanced budget in FY22. Included in this we need resources to continue our compensation plan, and to invest in new initiatives and programs. Second, I've asked each division to review expenditures and provide a list of options (with consequences) to create 2-3% of savings. Any cuts will not be made evenly – we will look at our priorities and the consequences of our choices.

Finally, Provost & Sr. Vice President Wendy Sherman-Heckler is leading a review of cross-functional efforts that could be done more efficiently or even eliminated. Are there annual events being planning in multiple areas that could be merged or ended? Programs (curricular or co-curricular) that were launched with high expectations that are not bearing the fruit we expected? Do we have overlapping staff responsibilities that could be consolidated?

This is, of course, a longer conversation that will be had in each division and I am sure you will each have opportunities for input. We need your ideas and perspective. Again, thank you for all you do!

Sincerely,



John Comerford, Ph.D.
President