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Campus Update from President Comerford

President Comerford <PresidentComerford@otterbein.edu>

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Dear Colleagues,

Only five weeks left! The past twelve months have been both the longest and shortest of my life. I'm sure you feel the same! And yet, somehow, we are on the cusp of celebrating the accomplishments of the Classes of 2020 and 2021. Their accomplishments are yours too – it is only because of your hard work, adaptability, and positivity that these students will walk across the stage!

Looking Ahead

We are firmly in the middle of undergraduate deposit season, and I know the Enrollment Services staff check for new confirmation payments several times each day.

Applications continue to be up about 23%. Admits are even a little higher (up 26%) as we are able to more quickly admit students without required ACT or SAT scores. About 75% of our admits have filed the FAFSA, which is down from a more normal 83%. And Pell Grant eligible admits are down 1%. There continue to be concerning signs that lower income students are not looking to higher education as they should.

About 8.1% of our admits have deposited, which is lower than the about 10% we would see at this point in a normal year. With the larger pool, that puts the actual number of deposits close to normal. But, we would really like to see more of our great admit pool make a commitment to Otterbein. Your continued engagement with admitted students who are now making their choice is critical and I thank you for all you have done. The new Coordinator-Liaison (CL) organization in Academic Affairs has been especially impactful.

The OAC schools also share data and we are seeing a HUGE variance among schools. Some are up 20% in applications (no one is up more than Otterbein) to down 13%. Change in yield (deposits) ranges from up 38% to down 31%. The patterns are not clear, but these large variances are not normal. No one can predict student college choice right now.

Returning students have begun signing up for housing, with about 580 having done so at this point. That's around what we would expect in a normal year, and we have begun to encourage students who chose to commute this year to return to campus living in the fall. We will also soon see registration numbers and you know how important it is that current students return. So, reach out to them now!

Transition to Fall

As we've shared, the advice from public health officials is to expect a normal fall. We know nothing is guaranteed, but this is certainly encouraging. It has also prompted questions about what the workplace expectations will be.

As we hopefully see public health restrictions dropped and vaccination rates increase over the summer, we will return to normal workplace expectations. Classes should be in-person unless there is a good curricular reason to offer continued on-line or hybrid sections. Supervisors may approve flexible or work-from-home schedules for select non-student-facing positions, but this will be the exception not the rule. And those with health concerns will need to follow the disability accommodation process in HR.

I've also been asked if we will require employees or students to get the vaccine. At this point, we do not plan to make it a requirement. Of course, we will strongly encourage it (I got mine a few days ago!). We believe

students and employees will make decisions not only in their own interest, but in the best interest of their family, students, and employees including those who are immunocompromised and vulnerable.

ITS Options

There is no area of campus more worthy of praise for their work over the past year than our ITS staff. Their crazy year started with a cyberattack and has not slowed down. I am truly humbled by their professionalism and commitment.

In the past few months, we have had a number of key ITS staff leave Otterbein. The remaining staff are truly stretched thin now. We have also been told by Ellucian (provider of Banner software) that a move to cloud maintenance is required and will cost an additional \$250,000 per year. There are also concerns about our network infrastructure and ideas to outsource its maintenance, again at significant additional cost.

Given the turnover and potential new costs, I've asked Willie Neumann to study three paths forward. Path one would have us search for vacant positions and seek to maintain all our services in-house. Path two would be to selectively outsource things like Banner maintenance and the network. Path three would be a more compressive outsourcing of most ITS functions to a single vendor, who would hire our staff.

I am worried that what we are doing is not sustainable. Our staff are stretched too thin and often working hours and dealing with stress that is not healthy. We struggle with maintaining staff expertise, cross-training, back-up, development, and competitive salaries in a hot Columbus IT market. In other words, it is time to review new models and Willie, the ITS staff, and a cross-functional team representing all divisions will undertake this study.

Every Student Will

Ryan Brechbill, Jen Bechtold, Gina Calcamuggio, and many others have been working hard to bring this concept to life. I hope you can attend the town hall on Tuesday, April 6th at 4 p.m. to learn more about how we can take many of our amazing experiential learning opportunities and ensure that every student can complete at least one of them.

Part of the idea is to make this a real differentiator for Otterbein. If you come here, you will develop an academic and career map, participate in a Sophomore career conference, complete an immersive experience, and have access to mentors who are eager to help you prepare for your post-graduate plants. I know graduate programs are also considering new ways to incorporate many of these concepts.

In order to market this to the class that would arrive in fall of 2022, we need to start integrating Every Student Will into viewbooks and other materials by the end of April. Of course, we will have lots of details to work out as the program begins and evolves, but I hope everyone can contribute to its development now.

Program Review

I also want to briefly note the important work happening on an updated program review process. A task force of faculty and staff are in the middle of this process through which we hope to arrive at a more proactive approach to assessing the health and sustainability of academic programs. While we followed the Faculty Manual for the program discontinuance process just concluded (after ten months of work), I certainly felt like we could do a better job of helping program leaders identify and work to solve issues before it comes to discontinuance.

I know there will be a wider conversation about updating the Faculty Manual given all that we have learned over the past year, and I welcome a collaborative approach to that revision.

As always, there is lots going on at Otterbein! You have all been amazing colleagues and you should be very proud of what we have accomplished together. Thank you!

Sincerely,



John Comerford, Ph.D.
President

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Otterbein.**