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Campus Update from President Comerford

President Comerford <PresidentComerford@otterbein.edu>

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Dear Colleagues,

And we're off! Suddenly campus is bustling again and I love it. I can tell how busy it is again by the number of times I've sat down to work on this letter. Sorry for the delay!

Enrollment

With census day September 12th, we are very close to knowing our enrollment. As of Friday, September 2nd, it is 547 new first year students (compared to 569 last year) with 88 new adults and transfers (91 last fall). The class looks as diverse as other recent classes – about 27% students of color. It looks to be 62% women and 38% men. Average test scores and high school GPAs are consistent with previous years. In other words, another great class. We wish there were a few more, but these new Cardinals will add a great deal to our community.

Enrollment Management, the academic CLs, and others are already engaged in planning for next year. We expect to focus on growth in international students, focus financial aid on incenting students to return to residence halls, marketing Every Student Will, and leveraging the resources of our new system. The lesson from the past few years is to understand what we can impact and we cannot. Some of the drivers of enrollment are beyond our control (pandemic and now economic uncertainty and inflation). But, what makes Otterbein distinct (ESW, system, personal connection, etc.) is more important than ever.

Budget

As always, enrollment leads to budget. And fewer students means fewer resources. It is tiresome, I know. But, the reality is that the past three years have left us a smaller institution. And smaller institutions do not need as many employees, services, etc. But, there is still great disruption and pain to having to continuously make changes.

The enrollment this fall leaves us about \$2.3M short of the revenue we expected. We have identified \$1.7M in cuts, which includes vacant positions but no layoffs. A few of the other changes include an end to our "free" health center and delivery of medical care through telehealth and local providers, the end of our financial subsidy of the Westerville Symphony, and the expectation of an additional \$125K in revenue from events and rentals.

And while I know we are unable to keep up with the pressures of 8%+ inflation, I am pleased that we prioritized the final third of our equity compensation adjustments and a modest across-the-board increase.

Merit Pay

As you may recall, the premise of the compensation study and resulting adjustments was that once we made the adjustments we would move to a merit-based pay system. I expect adjustments in future years will include a merit component. Making that process fair and transparent is key, so finalizing how we will make compensation decisions is important.

I know the faculty have had a working group on merit pay. We'll also reconvene the Total Compensation Committee. So, more to come on this topic!

Space Allocation

Speaking of being smaller for the moment, I have asked several offices (Registrar, Facilities, etc.) to collaborate on a space allocation plan. With fewer faculty and staff, we have empty offices and underutilized spaces spread across campus. If we can consolidate them, we can accomplish several things.

First, I expect we can get most offices currently in houses into more appropriate spaces. Houses are not built for office use and lack accessibility and campus connection. We can also sell a number of houses or convert them to residential use. This is not to say we will move every office out of houses, but I believe that doing as much as we can is important.

Second, the key to what makes Otterbein special is community – the connection our students, faculty and staff have to one another and the support that brings. Yet, we have some people or whole departments working in isolation – disconnected from colleagues and sometimes hidden from students. We can make Otterbein better for all by being more intentional about our work places.

Of course, this gets complicated really fast! It is like a game of dominoes or rummikub – each move affects three others. So, we will approach this in phases and it will take several years to accomplish our goals. Rest assured, if you or your department is being considered for a move we will engage you well before decisions are made.

Student Affairs

After ten years of service, we are sorry to see Dawn Stewart '98 depart this week. But, we know she will continue to be a great partner for Otterbein at the Columbus Sports Commission!

As mentioned in the announcement of her departure, my initial reaction was that we would wait until spring to a search. But, with some additional feedback I now believe a fall search can be successful. Even if not, we can still do a spring search. We will organize a search committee soon.

As for interim leadership, I am pleased to announce that Bob Gatti will act as Interim Vice President. For those who may not know Bob, he worked in Student Affairs at Otterbein for 41 years, including 27 as Vice President. His integrity, wisdom and experience are welcome as we complete a search.

We have asked Connie Richardson to become Interim Athletic Director. We will also be merging the Center for Student Involvement and the Center for Committee Engagement into a new unit dedicated to student activities and serving learning. I'm pleased that Melissa Gilbert will lead this new combined Center (her first job is coming up with a name!). Colette Masterson will move to the Center for Student Success and Career Development to lead student transition programs - orientation, RISE, NEST, etc.

I'm thankful to everyone in Student Affairs for being so flexible and dedicated, especially Bob, Connie, Melissa and Colette.

It's great to have the campus energized with athletic practices and contests, concerts, theater performances, and student interaction. We look forward to welcoming families and many alumni back for Homecoming and Family Weekend in a few weeks as well as celebrating our 175th Anniversary.

As always, lots going on. Thanks for all you do!

Sincerely,



John Comerford, Ph.D.
President



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