



OBERLIN COLLEGE
Student Senate

we are oberlin. opinionated

Comments and Questions from Oberlin Students on 'Fearless'

we are oberlin. opinionated

Why this Forum was Necessary

As Oberlin begins its new marketing campaign, many students felt left out of the process and confused or suspicious about its goals. Student Senate, working with the Oberlin College Dialogue Center and College Relations, organized a presentation on how we got to 'Fearless' and an open forum with Mark Edwards. This was the first time that students were openly allowed to see Edwards's presentation and invited into the process—almost a year after the General Faculty saw his slideshow. Although students disagreed in reaction to 'Fearless', they all agreed that they wished they were involved earlier and hope that opportunities exist for their involvement in the future.

So that students could be involved in this process, Student Senate has compiled students' comments and questions with the promise of delivering this document to key stakeholders in this marketing campaign. We ask you to take some time to read through what students are saying. General summaries of their responses are available below.

Questions or comments can be addressed to colin.koffel@oberlin.edu.

Summary of Student Responses

During the forum (minutes on pages 3-6), critiques of the Fearless campaign (and specifically the viewbook) fell into three categories: (a) 'Fearless' does not fit Oberlin nor its students, (b) the creative execution is poor and the viewbook not reflective of Oberlin, (c) we should not run from negative connotations like 'weird' and the related ideas of the tent of consent, transgender, gay mecca, etc. There was general concern that significant parts of the community were not well represented in the viewbook.

At the forum, students were encouraged to write out or email Student Senate longer responses, comments, and questions (pages 7-13). While some students called for the return of 'Think One Person Can Change The World? So Do We,' many also felt a need for a new marketing campaign. A few students rose in favor of Fearless but many found it lacking. They felt that Oberlin—the students, campus, organizations, co-ops, etc.—were not well represented. They reacted poorly to the flashy colors of the viewbook and asked if we wanted to attract students who like bright colors or who those who read. They are suspicious of who this will attract. Students would like to see this printed on recyclable paper. And they would like to be involved in the evolution of this campaign over the coming years.

Fearless Forum Minutes

The following minutes from the Fearless Forum were taken by Sarah Bishop, a senior at Oberlin College and a member of the Oberlin College Dialogue Center. Please note that these notes are paraphrased and not guaranteed to be the exact words of the participants.

Mark Edwards PowerPoint

Questions that new Oberlin advertising was trying to answer:

- I. How to appeal to students of color?
- II. How to align advertising with Oberlin's mission and strategic plan?
- III. How to show both Conservatory and Academic excellence?

Conversation with high school students:

- I. Students don't approach a college as if it's a blank slate.
- II. Emotion plays a large role in a students' decision of a college.
- III. People make decisions about schools according to their perception of a school's name.

The market is competitive, and perceptions are in the way of some of Oberlin's marketability.

- I. If a school is not well known, it's harder on students at home to say they will go there.
- II. The strongest organizations own a thought in their audience.
- III. Students felt like they were rebels coming to Oberlin. A desire to get the name more well known.

Oberlin as a "Artsy left wing weird place." Get beyond that idea

- I. Admissions does not want students shutting the door on Oberlin, how can perspective students be engaged?
- II. All college phrases sound exactly the same, so we need to make Oberlin's phrase memorable.
- III. If Oberlin wants to stand out as more distinctive, it needs to find those differences.

Prospective students, alumni, guidance counselors and current students (more than 200 people) interviewed. Found 4 main things about Oberlin: Music, Social Justice, Academic, Weird.

- I. But four things is too many, we needed one thing.
- II. Some words: courageous, independent, brilliantly different.
- III. Someone said "Weird is the cake, academic excellence is the icing." It should be "academic excellence is the cake and weird is the icing."

It came to these words: Incredibly intelligent, challenge traditional ways of thinking, community, with aspiration, intellectual, personal, risk-taking, and it needed to have a personal quality. This came to fearless.

Some Perspective student reactions:

- I. "Now I get it, this is exciting, this stands out, it has self confidence."
- II. The view book is just to get people to pay attention, not give in-depth info.
- III. The view book is still being tested by an independent company for more feedback.

Discussion

Student: Why does the cover of the view book not say the whole word fearless on the front?

Mark Edwards: Half of the word fearless was found to be more intriguing.

S: If people want to confirm their preconceptions of a school, I find fearless surprising because it suggests being courageous without thinking. I would not have found that idea credible at all.

ME: Through testing it was found to be positive. Fearless helps people who are on the margin with the idea weird. It was within preconceived notions of Oberlin but helped people feel comfortable.

S: Why did you use the colors you used in the presentation for us to see, and then such bright colors for the book? It distorts readability. Also, I think that the people that come to Oberlin and do best are the people that look for Oberlin. People come because it's for them.

ME: A lot of students would be happy here but do not know about it. Admissions is saying that we should get to those people. We also want to get people that have Oberlin as a back-up school. But we also want to be clear in our presentation, Oberlin is not for everyone.

About readability. Students tend to read print better than slides. They tend to look at obscure things first, they are looking for complexity.

S: I question the process of making a brochure be about alumni, and have pictures that do not show Oberlin's campus nor tell anything about Oberlin, if the brochure is supposed to be about students at Oberlin.

ME: 17 year old students who are looking at these brochures are not looking for detail in print. This is a first impression that is a part of multiple impressions. It is supposed to be more like a 15 second commercial.

S: Fearless, intentionally or otherwise, seems like it will change the people that come to Oberlin, and change the image of the school. Minorities are not necessarily fearless, they have seen oppression. This seems like it will attract people with a macho perspective. Its really loaded.

ME: The test group of perspective students did not respond saying "You must be looking for macho kids." I was under no mandate to attract or enroll a different type of student. Perspective students tested were just like current Oberlin students. This is only one impression against many other things.

S: I liked the old book, it caught my attention. Is the school having problems with recruitment? Also, the book is on glossy, non-recycled paper.

ME: The first thing we did was test the old book. Our first thought was to keep the one Person Change the World slogan, but lots of other schools talk about this, it's not unique.

S: If fearless is meant to make people who are less comfortable with "weird" more comfortable with the idea of Oberlin, why are we trying to attract people who are uncomfortable with transgendered people and sexual consent?

ME: If there is not clarity about what a school stands for, one thing gets put in the spotlight, like the tent of consent. But that creates problems. If all Oberlin stands for is the Tent of Consent, over time it will become an even bigger problem and admission will decrease. The market told us it was time to change.

S: Thank you, Mr. Edwards, for coming. That was a fearless thing to do. How does fearless compare to other schools? What are the trends, how do you see its relation to others? I think that Oberlin is a place where people can become comfortable with weird.

ME: Its great that you all are so engaged and here. Its very useful and healthy. We see 1,500 marketing messages per day, and this is only one. We are not going to change people based on one website or book. People that were tested thought that they could see weird in this idea. It creates a bucket for weird. Just weird puts the focus on tent of consent.

S: My sister is in the process of applying to Oberlin, and she said that if this book was the first thing she saw about Oberlin, she would not have applied here. How much does this have to do with raising the number of people that apply to the school so that the school looks a certain way? How much does this have to do with rankings?

ME: I don't think that everyone is going to love Fearless. Other materials weren't gaining traction. People close to Oberlin will come anyway. We also did a lot of testing with African American students and got positive results. I received no specific mandate about US News or changing Oberlin's student body.

S: Imagine Fearless as different schools slogans and Change the World as different school's slogans. I came to Oberlin because I thought I would be surrounded by other people that wanted to change the world. Duke, Penn State or a community college could all have the slogan of fearless. You could see anything in it.

Also, every product flop in history has been tested with a focus group.

Why not look at the negative connotations of weird and try to change them. Democrats do not become conservative to have a better media campaign, rather they reframe their message.

Just because the marketing and design suck does not mean that the ideas behind the Oberlin website suck.

S: If you are marketing to alums, you use a different approach. Did you show this to alumni, what were their reactions?

ME: 10 days to go 50-60 alumni were tested by an independent testing organization. Talk to College Relations for more feedback. Overwhelmingly positive response. I was surprised how positive the response was. How this word is populated is very important. How it is manifest based on the market.

S: At what stage is this process? When will it hit the market? What is still flexible about the campaign?

ME: This is the first piece of the campaign. In the next 1-2 years we will continue. I believe strongly in getting feedback and eliciting reaction. This is an ongoing process of development of material.

S: It seems that in a marketing campaign, you have outliers and you have a base. I was diehard Oberlin, but I think I would have been turned off by seeing the view book and would not have applied. If I had come to campus expecting this I would have been disappointed.

ME: I see fearless every day at Oberlin, in the conservatory, I see it at every moment. And the positive feedback has been from perspective students. What perspective students are saying is that it is real and appealing. All the testing in the world does not necessarily create something that wins. Maybe we will find that this will flop. Only time will tell. I have confidence that if all of the testing is saying the same thing, then other people will agree. This is authentic. Alums like it. I have never run into a campus that had more fearlessness than here.

S: Talking about life at Oberlin at present, Fearless does not describe anyone I know on campus accurately. People I know are terrified, people are intimidated. Fearless is different from brave and courageous, which mean being afraid and doing something anyway. Courageous is a word that is encompassed by being brave. Fearless is not.

S: I kind of like fearless. As higher education I wonder why we are not capitalizing words in the view book. The view book has no subtleties, and Bush has no subtleties with some success. I would like to see how this evolves.

ME: This is the first time in my life I have been compared to President Bush. Design of the book is an argument worth having. We tested 6-7 versions. Some were more tame, some more literal, but they didn't come close to the positive reaction that the current book did. I have not heard of anybody that is not interested in exploring nuances. You find the things that you care about and then you do more research about them.

S: If all the testing is positive, what about the room full of students here that do not like it. If we all do not like it, that is a pretty bad sign. This reminds me of a commercial for Burger King that says "Eat Fresh." But we know that Burger King is not fresh food. In the same way, Oberlin is not fearless. The viewbook is not just another ad, people are looking for information. And people have thoughts before they get the brochure as well.

ME: I cannot convince you that you should like this. I deeply respect your opinion. When someone creates something that is outside the mainstream, they will find a lot of polarity. But we talked to a lot of people about what they wanted out of view books and other media.

S: You talked about Focus Groups, where were they, who were the people testing, what kind of student was being tested? You said Columbus, Boston, New York and Chicago. How did you select the focus groups? What decisions went in to that process?

About the view book: When I first heard your presentation last year, I thought, "Its an ok idea, I can imagine it." But now that I see the view book in print, I do not find it appealing at all. This view book makes me close the door. It makes me think that Oberlin thinks that I am dumb. That I like things with bright, shiny colors and no text.

ME: The Focus groups came from students that had applied to Oberlin, and it was phone and survey work. People tested were people that were interested in Oberlin. The colors were tested in many different ways. This was the most appealing graphics, according to perspective students.

S: You said that you tested Fearless with perspective students and alumni. What reactions did you get from on campus students about Fearless? Were there negative reactions?

ME: We tested the concept on campus, but not graphical choices. Reactions were—Some wondered, Can Oberlin live up to this—if it is in fact fearless enough. Some others were concerned with things that you have brought up tonight. There is such cynicism about the ways that colleges communicate. But we got a lot of positive feedback.

S: I am trying to handle my aggression calmly, so this may not be accurate. I understand that you were testing African American students and higher income students, but how did reactions differ between different groups?

ME: We tested a wide variety of students, African American students, and students from zip codes that were thought to be of a higher income. We were surprised how little difference there was between different categories. There was a lot of consistency out there.

S: We were over capacity with the number of freshman we let in this year, so I don't understand how the admissions office has had problems with getting students to apply to Oberlin. It seems like we are changing what we are marketing. I don't see students of color in the view book. I'm worried about who we are trying to attract to Oberlin, and want to know what problem the student body has.

ME: There is no problem with the student body. The problem is that Oberlin is inside a narrow bucket, and it does not get to project more of its story. This time of strength for Oberlin is a good time to say "We may have trouble getting students in 5 years if we do stay on this trajectory, so let's try to stabilize." That was what we were thinking behind this.

Comments & Questions

Students attending the Fearless Forum were provided an opportunity to fill out a question and comment card at the forum. They were also offered the chance to email Student Senate any questions or comments they had.

Oberlin Students Speak

I know you weren't given a mandate to change the kind of student here, but you seem to have no goal to not change the kind of student here. This offends me.

Do you really think that this campaign will not change the students here (matters of race aside)? It concerns me that this does not rank higher for you priority-wise. I understand the fear about 5 years from now, but then why aren't you more concerned with making sure people like us find this place in 5 years? Thank you so much for listening to us. Please incorporate our concerns into the campaign.

I STILL don't understand the objection to the "fearless" campaign. This school prides itself on its fearlessness, whether we use the word or not. From Harkness to the Con it is what we're all about. So what's the {EXPLETIVE} problem? Do we just object to marketing or are we just too stupid to understand how they work? I have to say I'm pretty unimpressed with the objections to the campaign. Grow up, Obies.

It seems that the main goals of the marketing campaign were to represent Oberlin in an accurate way, and a way that appeals to prospective students. If "fearless" and the graphic design of the new book are supposed to accurately represent Oberlin, does it come as a surprise that there has been such a negative reaction among students? Was focus intentionally put on appeal rather than accuracy? Is there a particular reason why the graphic elements of the new campaign were not tested on current students, or is this seen as a flaw in the methods of development?

I like the new focused approach, but I think the "Think One Person Can Change the World..." motto implies fearlessness. The new one is just so obvious. There is no thought-provoking question and no surprise answer. I miss the old motto. It definitely helped make Oberlin my 1st choice school. (Plus I'm not fearless; I'm just strong).

The Fearless brochure is so slick, but Oberlin is not. That is why I like Oberlin. Oberlin is a place where students take the time to read the text of a brochure instead of being immediately seduced by bold colors. Oberlin kids wear used clothes & don't worry too much about being conventionally cool. This catalog does not stand out from mainstream culture. It blends into all the other 1,500 ads that we see on TV.

I loved the old ad. It caught my attention, and now I am a student here. I really love Oberlin, and I hope that we can continue to attract students who don't need slick ads to draw them in.

I hope that more opinions of current students will be taken in later developments to this campaign.

Could we hire Oberlin's talented art students to help design a less-generic, more aesthetically pleasing viewbook? I think a viewbook with the artwork of current students would be really awesome.

Could we just bring back our old slogan?

None of us are Fearless.

He's a really good salesman. I don't think this campaign's all bad. I don't understand why there are such few pictures of students and teachers at the school. I don't think the word "fearless" really makes sense with the brochure. And there is one picture of a little boy swinging on a swing which I think is weird. I feel like the student body is going to be very critical. I don't think the brochures before were not very good, and I think that the student body doesn't get that this is not really about them.

Isn't a one-word catch-phrase dangerous? "Fearless" has lots of positive AND negative connotations – not the least of which being "lemmings." One word also seems as if it's trying to provide a summary of Oberlin, but everyone I've met here is afraid of something – Bush, Peak Oil, etc.

I want real pictures of the campus! Mr. Edwards mentioned seeing fearlessness everywhere on campus – why not take real, non-photoshopped pictures to back up this huge concept. Prove it's real here.

"Fearle" on the cover of the viewbook is bothersome. Could the word finish inside or on the back?

A graphic representation of the co-op knock? I'd personally enjoy it.

Is there any way I can get more information about the focus groups, who approved/did not approve of the various campaign ideas? Thanks.

My top 2 choices were Oberlin and Bowdoin. These were my top 2, at the end. If Oberlin wasn't a bucket of transgender freaks, I would have chosen Bowdoin. ALSO I saw that Oberlin had a creative writing degree (something that NOT many schools have) and I see NONE of that in this campaign. I hope your testing isn't done, because I feel like our opinions SHOULD be valued. We are the ones who go here and know what it IS to fit in here. I feel like another marketing strategy should be researched.

Regardless of how I feel about the campaign (and brochure), if a prospective turns away from Oberlin because of a brochure (like many of my classmates have accused) then they are not doing a good job of looking for a college. Rock on. P.S. The brochures should really be recyclable. Seriously!

The only way that fearless could ring true with the experiences of the people I know here is if its irony were explained right up front.

We are afraid because of the state of the world, and we don't want anyone here who isn't afraid.

Fearlessness suggests thoughtlessness.

We want the people who might look at this book and laugh because they know it is not true.

First, I appreciate the choice of topics you choose to cover in your book.

However I wonder about the lack of Oberlin in the book. There is one picture of Oberlin in the whole book, and the lack of Oberlin specific information on the cover or page 1 (just a hard to see image).

I do want to thank you for coming and for trying something other than fall foliage in the catalog (even though I don't like the final product much).

On the "student organizations" list on the last page, how did you come to represent certain clubs and not others? I'm especially surprised and devastated that "Pro-Life Union of Students" was shown but not "Students United for Reproductive Freedom"? Other groups not mentioned: Hlp Hop 101, The Grape, Hillel, Recyclers, George Jones Farm. But I'm mostly upset about no SURF.

Other complaints about brochure: Environmental sensitivity shown after athletics. Also, Experimental College not described.

In general, though, I feel our old brochure was too stale and dull so I'm glad there's a change. It's a little extreme, but so it goes.

I like that you brought this guy, but I really wish forums like this happened before decisions had already been made. Rather than seeking our input, it seems like you're trying to defend a decision that's already been made.

While I understand more and support more the campaign, the approach is still something that worries me. The word choice is so aggressive. And since it is one word that matters even more. Perhaps it's not "macho" but it is confrontational and does not make me think of intelligence. It makes me think of the X-games and the Army, etc. Once I start reading the brochure, I understand the intellectual aspect, but it does not change much of my feeling, except to think the "fearless" claim is false. Bravery, courage, etc is something that represents us well, but the reckless, unintelligent aspect of "fearless" is a very negative portrayal.

My biggest fear (no pun intended) is that this project will be successful. Already this year, we are over capacity, so I don't understand how we could have a problem with enrollment. Therefore, we must be trying to change our student body, and I have to question why? What is the price that we're willing to pay for prestige? What's really wrong with weird? What's wrong with fear? And what's the problem with a student choosing a different liberal arts school? I'm sure there are people who would be just as happy at a different school. Oberlin is not a product to coerce people into buying. We want people who want to be here, not people who were tricked into thinking it's the "cool" place to be. Finally, I just had a problem during the presentation that "transgender" was in the negative "weird" category. I'm not sure exactly what was meant by this, but I think one of my favorite things about Oberlin is its progressive view toward movements like the transgender movement, and that we would want to hide something like that because it would make pros. Students uncomfortable is sad.

P.S. I'm also concerned that this does not speak to students of color, and that the "push the boundaries" of global collaboration smacks of colonization & globalization, not social justice.

I don't know why the approach and language of "Fearless" – a lot of which seems valuable – can't be used in coordination with the "Think one person can change the world? We do."

I also think this view is, in its way, Fearless, and does fit with the language of “fearless” and a new/flashier presentation without the same connotations of recklessness, thoughtlessness, terror and risk without thought for consequences, which is not what Oberlin is or has been about. I don’t want to go to school and be in an environment with “fearless” people who don’t think about consequences, feel no fear, and think action without thought is a positive and productive thing. Oberlin is a place where people examine themselves and question themselves, think about their positions and privilege. Fearless (to me) connotes a sort of comfortableness with not questioning and just forging ahead without checking ourselves and without thinking about the responsibilities of power and its consequences.

The graphics look like a cross between Go Army ads and PowerAid. It’s insulting.

If social justice is unappealing, there is something very wrong.

The teal page at the end “Are you fearless? Oberlin is not right for every student...” This is intimidating.

We are here right now and we don’t like it – don’t we count?

**Courageous is much better. More positive, less intimidating connotations.

Applying to colleges, lots of places had the attitude of “We’re great & we know it and that’s why you should come here.”

Oberlin was different – it was more “we’re here, come see if you like it.”

Did you consider that “fearless” might make Oberlin’s weirdness/individuality too gimmicky? Might this turn off truly individual students who don’t want to be clumped into some stereotype.

How long was the process to come up with this idea? When will the booklets begin being distributed?

Where else have you been contracted to adjust Admissions campaigns? Are those campaigns successful? Has there been similar growing pains at other schools?

You said a few times that you are picking this approach for people who have never heard of Oberlin, not for people who actually know the place. But if people who really do know the school object so strongly, doesn’t that indicate a dishonesty?

Also in terms of to whom you are directing your marketing...you said that we don’t want people to only think of Oberlin in terms of the “tent of consent”. But that DOES NOT mean that we should be targeting people who think that that sort of consent, along with being transgender, are negative things. There is a difference between not wanting it to be our whole image, and considering it to be a negative thing. Similarly, “social justice” came up as “unappealing” on one of your charts. Does it really fit Oberlin to be targeting students who are against social justice?

Many of the photos in the viewbook blurred people together as if to push conformity. Was this intentional? Was it addressed? And if so, how?

“Fearless” makes me think of extreme sports. Fearlessness is not courage but stupidity.

Mr. Edwards never answered the question about what negative responses were like. Ok, results were “overwhelmingly positive” but I want to know what people said when they didn’t like it.

I wish we could put the brochure on recycled paper since it would reinforce the environmental section.

Also, I don't really find the fearless website as very helpful for information on courses and all of the programs. So if this were one of the first things a student saw it might be ok but they need a better way to get actual info on the school. Thanks for coming!

On the page about social inertia, firstly, why is it at the back of the book, when Oberlin puts a high priority on social justice? And why doesn't it mention anything about the quality of the community for queer students?

The clubs/organizations list is quite incomplete, and some of the organizations that are on there don't seem to be active anymore (Pro-Life Union, Chess Club). What about OSTA, OMTA, Queer Jews, Hillel, the Experimental College, The Grape? Also, there are WAY more theater productions.

During the "How we got to 'Fearless'" forum, I was asking myself, 'What better (more successful & more popular) slogan would take all these valid concerns and goals into account?'

I came up with one idea, which of course may simply serve as a mental stepping-stone to a better idea occurring to you. Hence, this e-mail's contents:

- I. slogan proposal
- II. theory (why this might be a good idea) + initial feedback I received
- III. 'deep emotion' issue (Fearlessness is the effect, not the effect's trigger.) {relevant to marketing in general!}
- IV. 'scary' issue (regarding the admissions essay)
- V. personal angle (my connection to Oberlin, Earlham, environmental, and high-prestige schools, my bias toward consensus)

I. " OBERLIN. EDGE-PUSHING INTEGRITY. "

- II. Theory. I think that this slogan helps incorporate the following valid goals. I think it:
 - A. reframes 'weird'
 - B. indicates a high level of excellence and prestige
 - C. is a less generic, more complex, more spelled-out version of 'Fearless'
 - D. is more emotionally accurate than 'Fearless'
 - E. encompasses everything (from the co-ops, to the Conservatory of Music, to neuroscience, astronomy, Safer Sex Night and Drag Ball, deep community involvement, athletic programs (both the institutional and the student-run ones), historic firsts, current students' social justice activism, and more)
 - F. differentiates Oberlin from what either Harvard or Earlham would choose to emphasize about themselves to prospective students, especially now that the next point is needed...
 - G. updates the previous slogan; it is a new way to try to stand out from the crowd now that lots and lots of colleges say that they are about 'changing the world'
 - H. helps attract students who would say, 'Yeah, THAT's me!'

Initial feedback:

- A. body language: a sigh; verbal language: "It's better" [than 'Fearless'] (this student wanted to keep the previous slogan)
 - B. "Yeah! It's more like 'Oberlin. Weird.'" (current student)
 - C. "Too long." (an administrator's comment) Please note that it is still far shorter than the previous slogan.
 - D. "Not as catchy [as 'Fearless'] though - too many g's" (current student)
- III. Deep emotion issue.
Fearlessness is a result, a manifestation, a perceived effect. It is not the cause nor the trigger. People do not do things because they have unavoidable fearlessness; they do things because they have unavoidable integrity. People are courageous (from performing on big stages to volunteering in difficult parts of New Orleans) because they feel afraid and go forward despite their fear. Fearlessness is not (or rarely?) deeply emotionally accurate.

Another word about emotional accuracy. People are not bold to be bold, or nerdy to be nerdy, or weird to be weird, so much as they have something in them - their personality's own particular spark and integrity — that pushes them to reach out to their audiences as a performer, to pursue their scientific curiosity down to the tiniest details and out to the most enticing undeveloped possibilities, to pursue their interest in human interaction in the most elemental of dance forms, to find ways to talk about sex and gender when that is awkward, to test their beliefs in communal living experiments, to compete against athletic rivals stronger than themselves because they love the game and they love learning through it, to speak truth to power in public, to volunteer with the neediest, to get aid to the most dangerous situations, and so on.

The college may want to try to attract by being affirming (of the prospective), not just spunky and showy (of themselves).

IV. Scary (admissions essay) issue.

Not only does an admissions office want prospective students to respond with the emotionally accurate, “Yeah, that’s me! I could belong there!” response (the first step, the 15-second commercial that keeps them from shutting the door in Oberlin’s face and makes Oberlin stand out), an admissions office also wants to appeal to their target audience whom they know is facing the somewhat scary task of The Application Essay (the second step, actually writing and sending off the application). They do not want to scare off prospective application-essay writers. A high school writer might balk at figuring out how to say, ‘I was fearless in the following way. I belong here.’ But they might feel, ‘I can tell you about how and why I pushed the edge in the following way.’

V. My personal angle.

I grew up in Oberlin, was influenced by Oberlin (to feel somewhat normal, I think, in having edge-pushing integrity), and chose to go to Earlham College. At the time (the early 1990’s), Earlham’s slogan was ‘Education with a Purpose’ and their admissions materials had a sub-slogan of ‘Those who would shape the world, need more than just concern.’ It appealed deeply to me. Earlham’s current slogan of ‘Engagement with a Changing World’ strikes me as weak and undistinguishing. Now that ‘changing the world’ seems more mainstream or common as a purpose among liberal arts colleges, I do think that Earlham could update its old slogan to stand out better. Earlham, an actively Quaker school, could emphasize its focus on social justice, peace studies, and sense of community, in a way that encompasses all of Earlham — that would not so accurately characterize Oberlin, which is a much bigger school, includes a big music school, and has other ‘personality differences’ from Earlham.

As a prospective student (who had grown up in Oberlin, influenced by Oberlin College’s environmental studies department to believe that I could grow up to be an environmental studies major), I was also considering schools dedicated to environmental studies, such as Northland College and the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute. (There is now an entire Eco-League of many environmentally-focused liberal arts colleges, including Prescott College in Arizona.) I was also considering schools with more famous names. Why did I go to Earlham, which does not even have an environmental studies major? (I would end up designing my own major.) Earlham was not the most environmental college, not the most hands-on college, not the most prestigious college, not the most co-op-rich college (I was also looking for another OSCA, or Oberlin Student Co-operative Association of dining and housing co-ops), and not the most of several other aspects that I desired. But the point was that it seemed to be the best *combination* of desirable aspects, in an accessible school, for me at the time. So I think that prospectives are looking for *combinations* - that is, that they are looking, from a school known for one or two desirable qualities, to hear one or two other, different desirable qualities also come out of that school’s mouth. If Oberlin is already known as a fairly rigorous academic school with a bent towards social justice and the arts, perhaps Oberlin is searching for a way to articulate an additional aspect of its campus culture that sets it apart from other schools that are prestigious and progressive.

I also have a bias toward consensus. I believe that it is worth striving for. When there is an obvious block to consensus, I view that as a sign that a group of people can do better.

I am not attached to the above suggestion for Oberlin’s slogan. It is just a suggestion meant to help in the slogan-seeking process — as people continue to listen to each other’s concerns and to brainstorm.