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**Strategic Planning
Discussion Document
21 February 2005**

Background: Context and Process

Oberlin College enters this process of strategic planning with great strengths. Oberlin uniquely combines a premier liberal arts college with a world-renowned conservatory of music. Our proud history manifests ambitious dedication to academic and artistic excellence. Oberlin's excellence encompasses the highest standards for liberal and musical education and diversity, inclusiveness, and social engagement.

Those involved in this strategic planning process have worked to identify ways that Oberlin can build on its strengths to continue its distinguished and distinctive tradition combining commitment to academic and artistic excellence with the conviction that a liberal education is not only a private good but also a social good.

All academic institutions require periodic reassessment, and Oberlin is no exception. This self-analysis is particularly important at a time when the value of a liberal education and of liberal arts colleges is being questioned by an increasingly skeptical public. The key to Oberlin's future is to enhance the value of the education we offer. The strategic directions and strategies contained in this plan are all dedicated to this end.

While the College's academic core is rightly the major focus of planning, no plan will succeed without the attainment of institutional financial sustainability. Indeed, Oberlin's academic program and its financial viability are inextricably linked. Only an education of the highest quality will command resources commensurate with Oberlin's aspirations, and only a disciplined financial plan, focused on generating additional revenues, will prove capable of underwriting the programs that ensure the College's continued standing as one of the great institutions of American higher education.

Over the course of this strategic planning effort, Oberlin's faculty, trustees, students, alumni, and administration have been invited to participate in discussion and consultation. The ultimate goal for the strategic planning process has been to produce a plan that will enjoy confidence among all sectors of the Oberlin community, in particular its faculty. The faculty, the staff, and student leaders, in turn, will be responsible for generating the energy and ideas for implementing much of the strategic plan. The plan will be in place when both the faculty and the board, by vote, have approved it.

The implementation of strategies will be flexible and pragmatic, and guided by several principles. Although all of Oberlin's constituencies will be involved in the work of developing ways to implement the many and various strategies of the plan, the faculty must, through their regular, elected representative governance mechanisms, consider and

47 give approval to all recommendations and proposals concerning educational policy,
48 academic legislation, curricular and academic program change, and the allocation and or
49 distribution of faculty positions.

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51 The effectiveness of the strategies Oberlin implements will be assessed by a set of
52 quantitative and qualitative indicators. These will be appended to the end of this plan.

53

54 **Principles**

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56 Oberlin has long been guided by a set of principles that give specific meaning and
57 direction to an excellent education. These principles include a commitment to the life of
58 the mind; a conviction that music and the arts are central to human existence; a
59 commitment to social inclusion, diversity, the free exchange of ideas and respect for
60 many points of view as foundations of academic community; internationalism;
61 responsibility for stewarding the natural environment; and commitment to informed
62 social and political engagement. Oberlin's genius has always been bound up with the
63 conviction that individual men and women can change their society—and the world at
64 large—for the better. And Oberlin, throughout its history, has taken pride in the ways its
65 alumni have dedicated their intellect and their art to understanding human needs of all
66 kinds and finding constructive ways to meet them.

67

68 As a college and as a conservatory of music, we are committed to academic and
69 artistic endeavor within the context of a rigorous and supportive educational
70 environment. We challenge the individual and cultivate the creative spirit, we encourage
71 the process of discovery, we expect the mastery of craft, and we promote the
72 development of the intellect. At Oberlin, the pursuit of knowledge is undertaken in a
73 culture of integrity and driven by the desire for achievement.

74

75 In addition to being an educational institution that serves its students, preparing
76 them for successful lives and careers, Oberlin College is also a center of scholarly,
77 artistic, and musical activity in its own right: an institution that provides an intellectual,
78 intergenerational community of scholars, musicians, and artists – consisting of students
79 and faculty – with the resources to interpret, understand, explain, express, and represent
80 the world and themselves. The pursuit of excellence drives both these purposes.

81

82 As a conservatory of music, Oberlin is committed to professional education at the
83 highest level. Specifically, we provide an experience that allows students to reach their
84 greatest potential as musicians, as individuals, and as aspiring artists in the field of
85 professional music. We cultivate skills that are conducive to long-term success in both
86 music and other disciplines and we seek to graduate future leaders who prosper in the
87 years following their Oberlin careers. The faculty and students of the Conservatory are
88 committed to the pursuit and the achievement of excellence.

89

90 As a liberal arts college, Oberlin has always interpreted education as connected to
91 and informed by the pressing social and cultural questions of the day. Our students have
92 benefited from the belief that education will be enriched when it is not simply an abstract

93 exercise but entails grappling with evolving social concerns. The college encourages a
94 multiplicity of views. The hallmark of Oberlin has been teaching students *how* to think,
95 not *what* to think. Through exceptional teaching and a dynamic curriculum, we prepare
96 our students to achieve their personal and professional aspirations for the future. We
97 foster an environment that attracts serious and gifted students and serves as a catalyst for
98 their intellectual and artistic development. We seek to provide an education of enduring
99 importance.

100
101 The college has long emphasized the significance of interconnectedness among
102 the different modes of inquiry that enrich our curriculum, rather than the isolation of
103 excessive specialization, and it has done so with an eye toward encouraging students to
104 become informed social and cultural leaders. In the spirit of free inquiry and expression,
105 Oberlin today, for example, is committed to providing an education that develops
106 scientific knowledge, global perspectives, environmental consciousness, concern for
107 social justice, and artistic understanding.

108 **Foundations for Excellence**

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111 Oberlin’s foundations for excellence are its faculty and students. The College and
112 Conservatory have long been served by a superb faculty of scholars, musicians, and
113 artists who are also exceptionally able and dedicated teachers of undergraduates.

114
115 The College of Arts and Sciences recruits, nurtures and retains a distinguished
116 faculty committed to providing students with an unusually broad and deep liberal
117 education that involves rigorous study across the humanities, arts, social sciences, and
118 natural sciences. Arts and Sciences faculty are also excellent and engaged scholars and
119 artists who are committed to ongoing research and publication, artistic production and
120 performance, and development as innovative teachers.

121
122 The Conservatory of Music recruits, nurtures, and retains a faculty of
123 distinguished teachers, performers, and scholars who are committed to providing the
124 highest level of conservatory education to young musicians and to ongoing performance,
125 composition, and scholarship.

126
127 Faculty in both the College and the Conservatory are actively involved with
128 campus, community, and professional service and participate in the ongoing governance
129 of the College.

130
131 The qualities that our students bring to Oberlin are also central to this institution’s
132 excellence. Our students are independent, active learners who value ideas, diversity,
133 creativity, independence, individuality, and social and political engagement and action.
134 They are intellectually engaged, artistic, and idealistic.

136 **Mission**

137

138 **Oberlin as a liberal arts college and a conservatory of music exists to**
139 **achieve—and to enable its students and faculty to achieve—academic, artistic, and**
140 **musical excellence.**

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142 Oberlin’s mission is to:

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144 --Graduate liberal arts and conservatory students who have learned to think with
145 intellectual rigor, creativity, and independence;

146

147 --Provide the highest level of conservatory education to exceptionally talented young
148 musicians;

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150 --Offer superb liberal education across the arts and sciences, in the humanities,
151 natural and social sciences, and the arts;

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153 --Open the world to its students and develop in them the skills and knowledge they
154 will need to engage with and navigate in highly diverse communities and in a
155 global society;

156

157 --Nurture students’ creativity by providing rich curricular and co-curricular
158 opportunities for studying and making art and music;

159

160 --Help students clarify and integrate their intellectual strengths and interests, social
161 commitments, and vocational aspirations;

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163 --Enable students to integrate and apply their knowledge;

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165 --Nurture students’ social consciousness and environmental awareness;

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167 --Provide outstanding preparation for success at the highest level of graduate and
168 professional education and in careers;

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170 --Graduate individuals who are humane, thoughtful, and influential actors in the
171 world who will provide leadership in their communities and professions and in the
172 arts, politics, education, international relations, public service, science, business
173 and communications.

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175 **Goals**

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177 Oberlin’s current strategic planning integrates academic planning with financial
178 planning in the conviction that programmatic excellence cannot be sustained without
179 robust financial health. Throughout this plan, two overarching and interactive goals are
180 central:

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1. **Educational Goal:** To enhance the value—and the perception of value—of an Oberlin education in ways that strengthen Oberlin’s appeal to current and prospective students, serve its mission and values, and strengthen its leadership position and reputation in liberal arts and conservatory education. It is especially important at this time in Oberlin’s history that the College focus on enhancing its reputation as an undergraduate institution that provides an excellent education of singular quality and rigor to every student.
2. **Financial Goal:** To enhance the quality and value of the education it provides its students, Oberlin must attain financial sustainability. Oberlin must enhance each of its revenue streams, but at this time its most critical financial priority must be to realize more net tuition in order to remain a great institution of American higher education.

Strategic Directions

Each of these strategic directions serves the goals of strengthening Oberlin’s appeal to current and prospective students and enhancing the value of an Oberlin education.

1. Focus the Educational Experience.

Rationale: A robust culture of academic and artistic achievement is integral to Oberlin's mission and values, and its appeal to the world's most promising students. We can serve our students better by being more intentional about how we advise and support them; how we help them focus their wide range of interests with their academic program and their thinking about vocation; and how we encourage students' academic achievement. Seniors report completing fewer independent research and writing projects than are reported by students at most of our peer schools; more curricular verticality would respond to this concern.

Strategies:

- Set and communicate high academic expectations and aspirations for students, thereby helping to strengthen Oberlin’s culture of achievement.
- Fully integrate and enhance student advising in ways that help students to address the distinct educational challenges of each undergraduate year, and help improve student retention.
- Augment the professional training of Conservatory students by expanding opportunities to perform beyond the frame of the core curriculum, and by fostering

228 strategic alliances with individuals and organizations beyond Oberlin, such as the
229 currently successful collaboration with the Cleveland Orchestra.

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231 -- Ensure appropriate verticality in every arts and sciences degree program.

232

233 -- Adjust the credit system and/or the student course load in ways that help students
234 move steadily and in timely fashion toward a degree.

235

236 -- Identify and emphasize the many intellectual interconnections across Oberlin's
237 curriculum to create coherent curricular pathways that help channel in a more
238 intentional way the wide-ranging interests of our community.

239

240 **2. Strengthen the Educational Experience.**

241

242 **Rationale:** Oberlin is distinctive among its peers for the extraordinary resources
243 of its college of arts and sciences and conservatory curricula and its art museum.
244 Oberlin can enhance the value of its education and strengthen its appeal among
245 students by creating new and innovative curricular collaboration among faculty
246 and students, paying more attention to creating meaningful opportunities for
247 students to integrate and apply their learning, and building new student
248 opportunities for experiential learning.

249

250 **Strategies:**

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252 -- Support curricular collaboration among the College, the Conservatory, and the
253 Allen Memorial Art Museum to encourage innovative and exciting curricular
254 offerings that only Oberlin can offer.

255

256 -- Encourage curricular and co-curricular developments aimed to help students
257 explore, understand, and focus appropriately upon careers.

258

259 -- Enhance student opportunities for community service, academically-based service
260 learning, and internships.

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262 -- Find effective ways inside and outside the classroom to help students view the
263 world from perspectives other than their own, to deal with complexity and
264 ambiguity, to make reasoned and effective arguments, and to deal thoughtfully
265 with disagreement and difference.

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3. Support and Build the Faculty.

Rationale: At the heart of Oberlin's excellence is the creativity, vitality, and dedication of its faculty. Oberlin's faculty is going through a major demographic transition. The College must understand the professional development needs of all of its faculty, and enhance its competitiveness in the recruitment, retention and professional support of its faculty. Oberlin must approach faculty development and satisfaction in ways that consider the quality of life in our local community.

Strategies:

- Improve our competitive salary position for faculty among our benchmark institutions.
- In consultation with the faculty, reduce the standard teaching load or otherwise reorganize the curriculum to allow faculty more time for scholarship/ artistic production, mentoring or advanced work with students , or greater attention to developing teaching excellence.
- Improve individual faculty support for research, artistic production, and professional development.
- Increase the number of faculty grants and contracts.
- Expand and develop institutional collaborations such as the Oberlin-University of Michigan Partnership.
- Revitalize and revise the governance system with the aim of producing greater efficiency, transparency, and enthusiasm. Develop more effective and collaborative faculty-administration decision-making.
- Develop means to foster faculty communication and collaboration across disciplinary, departmental, and divisional lines.
- Reshape department and program administration to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.
- Build the Oberlin Public Schools-Oberlin College partnership, fund and establish the new graduate teacher education program, and work collaboratively with the City of Oberlin to enhance the quality of life in Oberlin, Ohio.

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4. Build Campus Community.

Rationale: Members of the Oberlin community are deeply interested in exploring the educationally enriching possibilities of our diverse residential campus community. Increasing co-curricular programming that fosters the development of multicultural competencies and other life skills for communal and personal development will help build a stronger sense of campus community, enhance the value of the education we provide, improve retention, and strengthen our appeal to prospective students.

Strategies:

- Develop an excellent and distinctive residential life program that supports the academic mission of the College, embraces diversity, and provides for imaginative and lively residential community that fosters students' personal, social and educational development.
- Complete the new student housing projects and develop a plan for renovating our central campus residence halls.
- Create more programs along the lines of Bonner Scholars, Mellon-McNair Scholars, the Multicultural Resource Center, and the Oberlin College Dialogue Center that build multicultural community and enable students to gain important and usable skills for community building and leadership.
- Build successful intercollegiate, intramural, and club sports programs that meet the needs of Oberlin student-athletes and that integrate our athletic program with the academic and social life of the college.
- Improve communication among the faculty, the students, the administration, the trustees, and the alumni.

5. Internationalize Oberlin.

Rationale: Oberlin should play a leading role in American higher education by making itself a world college. Oberlin's capacity for international education is more important than ever. The major challenges that will face current and future generations of Oberlin students, such as climate change, the AIDS pandemic, racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural conflict, social inequality, and economic development must be understood and addressed in a global context. Oberlin is well situated to address these challenges by building upon its international curricular offerings and its cosmopolitan campus.

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Strategies:

- Build on the strengths of our area studies programs and other international curricular offerings to make our curriculum richly global.
- Emphasize the study of foreign languages and cultures.
- Enhance the recruitment of international students.
- Create opportunities for meaningful international study and research for every student, regardless of academic major, who desires such experience.
- Establish relationships and collaborations with international institutions of higher education and with business, governmental, non-governmental, and other organizations in the interest of creating educational exchanges for students and faculty and creating additional opportunities for international study and internships.
- Consider using Winter Term and the summer months for international programs abroad and on campus.
- Collaborate more with Shansi.

6. Identify Key Academic Priorities in Each Division and Across Divisions.

Rationale: It is imperative that Oberlin’s faculty identify specific critically important academic priorities for the next generation in order to maintain and strengthen our academic reputation and leadership position as a liberal arts college and conservatory of music. The establishment of such priorities will be essential for effective curricular planning and for the success of our next capital campaign. This work will be taken up after the adoption of this strategic plan.

Financial Stability

Oberlin is not now in a sustainable financial position, and any strategy designed to maintain and enhance Oberlin’s excellence will be dependent upon a successful strategy to build the college’s financial capacity. The second strategic planning goal focuses on attaining financial sustainability:

Oberlin will develop a financial profile that enables it to secure a revenue stream adequate to meet the ongoing operational and capital needs of an institution devoted to academic and artistic excellence, to balance revenues and objectives, to improve its relative financial standing among comparable institutions, and to ensure the perpetuation of an institution

397 **devoted to the highest standards of liberal education and professional**
398 **music education for coming generations.**

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Oberlin’s current strategic planning has intentionally integrated academic planning with financial planning in the conviction that programmatic excellence cannot sustain itself without robust financial health. Much of the work of the Financial Task Force and, more recently, the Joint Strategic Planning Task Force has focused on Oberlin’s need for additional revenue. We have examined Oberlin’s operating and capital expenditures, investment management and performance, and fundraising. We have found that the slow growth of Oberlin’s revenues, most particularly net tuition revenue, relative to much more rapid growth of the College’s expenditures is the most serious and systemic of Oberlin’s financial problems. Both net tuition and expenditures need to be addressed in a manner consistent with academic quality and Oberlin’s historic commitment to access and diversity.

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A fuller discussion of these issues, together with background information and an enrollment model, will be presented in a separate “white paper.”