

OBERLIN

COLLEGE & CONSERVATORY

Oberlin College Board of Trustees

March 26, 2018

Dear Oberlin community,

The Board of Trustees met in Oberlin on March 8th and 9th. We had a very productive gathering. I would like to share with you the highlights of the meeting.

We took care of some important business. We approved, unanimously, the tenure and promotion appointments that were brought before us. On the Board's behalf, I would like to congratulate the faculty involved.

I'm also very pleased that we voted unanimously to name Donica Varner to be Oberlin's Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary. (She had an interim appointment up to now.)

We also continued to explore new ways to engage with students during our Thursday evening student-trustee forum. Besides the usual small-group conversations, trustees had a chance to meet with student organizations. By all accounts, everyone was very pleased with the event. On Friday, Student Senators Kameron Dunbar and Mia Antezzo shared with us the findings from the constituency survey they conducted on recruitment and retention. For trustees, it was another source of extremely helpful insights into how students are feeling. I would like to thank the Student Senate for all of this great work.

President Ambar and I also had our regular meeting with The Grape, the Review and the Student Senate after the board meeting.

We devoted a good deal of time to a retreat on how to improve the inner workings of the board. If shared governance is to work well, each constituency has to govern itself as effectively as possible. We want to make sure that we have a clear understanding of our responsibilities as a Board and that we make decisions as effectively as possible. I want to thank the *ad hoc* committee, led by Diane Yu, that designed and carried out the retreat.

We also considered a proposal to carry out a review of Oberlin's academic and administrative programs, which we believe will give Oberlin the valuable information we need to face important challenges, financial and otherwise, over the next few years. We voted unanimously to proceed with the review.

I don't think unanimity means we think this will be easy. I know that some of us think it's high time we pressure-tested Oberlin. Others believe that because we make value judgments implicitly any time we vote 'yes' or 'no' on a substantial

matter, we should do so explicitly and with as much information as possible. Still others wonder whether a review like this misses the point: that it's impossible to parse a liberal arts education into constituent parts and compare the value of each part to the others; and that this kind of approach will lead us away from what makes Oberlin distinctive.

I also know that some community members are concerned about who leads the review, and whether it usurps prerogatives enshrined in our traditions.

It's hopeless to think that we can avoid charged debates about the review. This is Oberlin, after all, and a healthy debate can only improve the review.

But I do cling to three hopes.

The first is that we can avoid exhausting our stamina litigating the 'who governs?' question. As a community, we need that energy to make sure the review is designed and carried out as well as possible. Besides, 'shared governance' means collaborating to govern the whole of Oberlin. It doesn't mean dividing Oberlin into separate spheres, with each constituency governing its own sphere.

My second hope is that we can let President Ambar and her team do most of the heavy lifting, especially as she puts together the steering committee that will oversee the review. The steering committee will reflect all of Oberlin's constituencies, and it will report back to the community frequently. There will be many opportunities for the community to share its views on the review.

I have one more hope.

I was asked whether news that Oberlin is reviewing its programs, motivated in part by financial concerns, could turn off prospective students, their families and new faculty. Who would want to be at Oberlin during all of the storm and stress of the next few years? I said that I expect the next couple of years at Oberlin to be challenging but also ambitious. Rather than resting on our laurels, we will be asking probing questions about what a residential liberal arts education is. We will build a strong case for how to make Oberlin more relevant than ever in the 21st century. And we will establish a model that many other institutions will want to follow. Why wouldn't you want to be at Oberlin for this?

I hope you agree.

Before I headed back to New York, I spent part of Saturday at the home of Rabbi Shlomo Elkan and his family. They had invited me to hear about Chabad, but it turned into a very wide-ranging conversation about life at Oberlin. I left their home as optimistic as ever. Every year they build and maintain a community, mostly of students, that is steeped in tradition and grappling with 21st century issues. They've made it work in the face of some serious challenges over the past few years. I want

to thank Rabbi Shlomo and his family for their hospitality, and I am grateful for the work they do in the Oberlin community.

All the best,

Chris