FAQ: Questions from Saturday Morning 9/28/13 ACW Session
(culled from the table texts by Andrea Hargrave '98 and Mike McComb '05)

1. Are the proposed changes to the Alumni Association driven by development/fundraising interests?

No, the decision to re-examine our alumni volunteer efforts, programming, and leadership structure were not driven by development or fundraising interests. There have been indicators from our alumni themselves that we could do better in reaching out to engage alumni, and that some of our efforts may be outdated or may not be meeting current needs and interests of our current students and broader alumni community. Members of the Alumni Council’s Executive Board, and other alumni volunteers, have taken the evaluation of our efforts on behalf of the alumni community seriously. With that said, we believe that if we engage more of our alumni in meaningful ways, we might experience a positive fundraising byproduct.

2. How is the college going to support these changes in terms of increasing staff and resources?

In recent years the administration has been very supportive of alumni engagement efforts; staffing in the Alumni Office has increased by two positions in the past four years and we are investing more in technology. The Career Center now has a full-time staff member who is charged with career-related programming and connections with alumni. The integration of the Alumni Office and Oberlin Annual Fund teams, under Executive Director Danielle Young’s leadership, is also seen as a way to create some staffing efficiencies and collaboration in support of future alumni programmatic efforts. We are also looking at existing programming to determine what may no longer be so relevant, what must be maintained, and where new technology can better support volunteer and staff members.

3. What can I as an individual do over the next 12 months to help make this change happen?

Many alumni serving in key volunteer roles will be approached in the coming months to provide feedback and ideas specific to those roles or areas of programming. We also ask that Alumni Council members watch for information from members of the Executive Board and task forces, read what is sent, and respond to inquiries to the best of your ability.

4. How do/will we engage students?

From the beginning, building stronger connections with students and faculty has been a key focus of this initiative. We are considering permanent seats on the leadership body for student representatives. In addition, we are looking at ways to connect more alumni and students around networking, mentoring, and regional activities. We are also looking at where students could get involved in our existing alumni programming, thus introducing them to alumni and involving them actively in the Alumni Association before graduation. One idea is to involve students in the Outstanding Young Alumni Award selection process.
5. How do we implement?

Change for an organization as steeped in tradition and practice as our Alumni Association takes time. The process actually started back in 2012 when the Executive Board agreed to review the Alumni Council and all of its related programming and structure. Since then, the Alumni Leadership Task Force and the Executive Board have done a lot of the groundwork of defining long-term goals, determining what needs to be in place for success, and considering some tactics for implementation. Much of that is outlined in the “Rethinking and Expanding Opportunities for Alumni Engagement” document that was distributed prior to Alumni Council Weekend. We are also taking into consideration findings from an Alumni Engagement Survey which Consultant Steven Roth conducted on behalf of the Alumni Association in 2009-2011. We have also solicited ideas for programming and outreach efforts via regional focus groups, surveys, peer college benchmarking, and the recent Alumni Council Weekend focus groups.

Now one team (the Strategic Alumni Collaboration “SAC” team) of Executive Board and other Council members is reviewing current volunteer efforts and the new recommendations, and a second team (the Alumni Council Transition “ACT” team) is tasked with communication to the broader Alumni Council and alumni community. As these teams move forward, they will reach out to others for more detailed discussions.

Communication to Alumni Council members will continue throughout this process. Please watch for correspondence, be sure to read what is shared, and respond to any inquiries posed by the SAC, ACT, or Executive Board.

Once the Executive Board arrives at a firm proposal for a new structure and direction, we will develop a proposed transition plan that we will share with the Council. We are planning to present the new direction and bylaws prior to the 2014 Alumni Council Weekend. A key aspect of this initiative is to make the review of alumni programming an ongoing part of our practice and culture.

6. How do we inspire/persuade people?

We are already finding that this “re-envisioning” exercise is inspiring Obies to think in creative ways about our alumni volunteer and programmatic efforts. Knowing that they have a chance to provide input, mention past and current frustrations, discuss alumni engagement with less involved Obie classmates, and be part of creating the Alumni Association of the 21st century is having a positive impact on the leadership and broader alumni body at Oberlin College and Conservatory.

Here are some principles we are considering for future inspiration and persuasion:

- We need to generate a wide variety of ways for alumni to get involved, with different time/skill expectations in order to make involvement opportunities easier and more varied.
● We need to be strategic about providing engagement connections and activities for various alumni life stages (student orientation, student life, graduation, parenting, grad school, marriage, retirement, etc.) so more alumni feel they are part of an active community throughout their lives;

● We need to share stimulating/intellectual/musical content with alumni far and wide so they feel inspired by their ongoing relationship to Oberlin;

● We need to support our volunteers well so they feel valued and want to continue serving and are eager to recruit classmates and other Obie friends;

● We need to stay current with our messaging and programming through regular strategic planning and we need to ask alumni what interests them on a regular basis;

● We want alumni to feel invested, and to provide service to each other, current students, and the College and Conservatory. We need to do more grassroots outreach so alumni feel that they are part of an active alumni community and can benefit from their relationship with each other;

● We also look to you--our creative and passionate leaders--to help us think of ways to inspire!

7. How do we manage intergenerational connections?

As part of this process, we have regularly asked ourselves and each other what aspects of our current organization and experience we hope to preserve. Recurring themes include working with incredibly diverse people of different decades and interests for an institution we all care about and a sense of community and camaraderie. Intergenerational connections enhance what we do as we strive to better connect across the lifetimes of our alumni (student to career to family to retirement). Volunteer weekends and gatherings will be designed to bring back alumni from a wide range of class years; affinity events can draw intergenerational Obies together around similar interests; volunteers for service will be recruited to represent a wide range of ages.

One of the appealing aspects of having more time for volunteers in similar roles to interact with each other on campus, at regional training events, or digitally is to come together intentionally to plan intergenerational programming for reunion weekends or to infuse more intergenerational interest into other engagement efforts.

8. What does success look like? What will be the benchmarks?

In broad terms, we will be successful if there are more alumni volunteering for Oberlin College & Conservatory and there are more meaningful student-to-alumni and alumni-to-alumni connections through activities like mentoring, internships, and others. We do want to be intentional and measure what we do moving forward, which will allow us to test some ideas and determine whether they are working or not. We have not determined exactly what benchmarks we will quantify, but here are some of our initial ideas:

● Contact information updates submitted by alumni
● Attendance of alumni at Commencement/Reunion Weekend and off-campus events
● Number of internships offered by alumni
● Number of donors to the Oberlin Annual Fund
● Votes cast for alumni-elected trustee candidates (was 5.6% in 2013)
● Responses to future alumni surveys

9. How can we understand and represent the people who are not at the table?

Our goal is to involve even more alumni in the life of the College and Conservatory through engagement and service. Starting with the Engagement Study led by Steven Roth ’77 in 2009-2011, and through the start of our current initiative, there have been focus group sessions with less engaged alumni, an alumni survey made available to all alumni who have active email addresses, benchmarking with peer schools, conversations with staff members and administrators at Oberlin, and discussions/focus groups with Alumni Council members.

Questions from Saturday Afternoon 9/28/13 Focus Groups
(summarized from the focus group debrief sheets by Elana Gartner-Golden ’98 and Carol Levine ’84)

1. What is the effect of smaller, more exclusive groups on alumni council? Concerns include losing diversity, sharing information, diluting our message, and creating a silo effect.

Our goal is to include even more alumni in our efforts, not fewer. Currently, Alumni Council is seen by many alumni as an exclusive group that is not always easy to join unless one has served previously or has a special connection to other members. We are considering how to make volunteerism more inclusive and to provide more opportunities for alumni and volunteers to be actively involved and to participate in on-campus, off-campus, and online activities and training. We would like to welcome back to campus alumni who are associate agents, serving as alumni recruiters through the ARN, on regional club steering committees, and through new efforts around mentoring, professional-based communities, and other affinities beyond class year. Many alumni equate volunteering with Alumni Council; we want to shift the paradigm to a more inclusive model where all Oberlin College and Conservatory volunteers are recognized and more have opportunities to share information and see how their efforts support the broader community and to learn about what is happening on campus today.

Diversity and inclusion are core values for Obies and will be considered and emphasized in all of our efforts. We are also looking at establishing a mechanism to bring the leadership of our identity affiliate groups together for more cross-pollination of ideas and collaboration.

If we create a culture shift away from volunteerism being tied so closely to Alumni Council service, we will actually strengthen the message that we value all alumni volunteers who serve the College and Conservatory.
2. What will happen to committees? Will they go away?

Some committees will continue in the same or similar fashion as today while some may go away. We are looking at innovative ways to do our work that will involve more alumni volunteers for shorter periods of time to tap into their expertise, skill sets, and interests.

3. How will this change the role of class presidents and how we get info?

Class presidents will continue to be key volunteers for communications to classmates and reunion planning. Some aspirations include more intergenerational sharing of ideas and programming for Commencement/Reunion Weekend, which will be encouraged through opportunities for class officers across the reunion years to gather and share ideas and best practices. We would also like to see a shift away from an annual campus update towards gathering more information about classmates (class notes and contact information) and the sharing of class-specific news and volunteer opportunities.

4. Why wait until Alumni Council next year to present the proposal? Can you provide clarity on the proposed structure?

While a mission, core values, key vision pillars, and strategic directions have been determined, a specific proposal of the changes is not yet in place. We intentionally wanted to meet with Alumni Council members to gather ideas and feedback, and present some of the ideas behind the initiative, before creating a specific proposal. There is a lot of work ahead of us in the coming months as we determine what the actual proposal will look like. You will receive updates and once the proposal is ready, it will be distributed to you. The proposal will be sent to Alumni Council members in advance of the September 19-21, 2014 meeting.

There are some principles that we can share now. For example, the current size and structure of Alumni Council makes it difficult to respond quickly to changing needs and priorities. We are convinced that accomplishing this will require a leadership structure that is more nimble and strategically focused. The Executive Board is recommending a broadly diverse and representative group that will be significantly smaller than Alumni Council, but larger than the current Executive Board.

5. How do we compensate for the loss of us all being together for the fun of Alumni Council weekend?

We plan to provide more than one annual opportunity for alumni volunteers to return to campus for meaningful training, the exchange of ideas, service to the college and conservatory, and fun. The composition of the groups of Obies returning at any given time may change; however, the opportunities will continue and will be intergenerational and include a diverse range of alumni. We want to support and steward existing volunteers, but also want to get many new alumni involved. There are many dedicated, passionate, and creative alumni who could add greatly to
the community if given the opportunity. Also, don’t forget that “fun/quirky” is one of our core values!

6. What is the implementation timetable?

The Executive Board plans to continue its work on developing a specific proposal in the coming months for distribution to Alumni Council members prior to the September 19-21, 2014 meeting. We hope that implementation of some aspects of the initiative will begin immediately after the 2014 meeting; others will develop over the coming years. For example, we hope to encourage professional-based alumni groups, such as a healthcare alumni group or an entrepreneur alumni group, and those efforts will depend on interest and volunteer leadership over time. Some programmatic ideas may actually start sooner, if there are no barriers to implementation.

7. How do we make sure the Conservatory remains integral to the conversation and how do we specifically engage Conservatory alumni?

Conservatory students and alumni are very important to this effort and we are being intentional about how Conservatory alumni will be best represented in a new structure and how Conservatory alumni interests and needs can be best met. We know that the experience of Conservatory students differs from that of Arts & Sciences students. We also realize that the ties back to Oberlin are different.

Performing musicians often have a difficult time returning to Oberlin over weekends, which makes it difficult to recruit volunteers when meetings are held on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. These are all important considerations as we move forward.

9. How can I be more involved with the discussion and decision-making process?

Be an advocate on behalf of the broader alumni community and support the need for change. Share what is happening, encourage other Obies to attend events, volunteer, and educate alumni. Let them know that we are committed to serving and involving more alumni in the life of the college. Educating fellow Obies about the need for change is an opportunity to highlight the principles that are driving our efforts. Remind alumni that while we appreciate ideas and feedback, we can’t always be additive. We have to think strategically about how to strike a balance with time, resources, and staffing. Since Oberlin is committed to excellence, we want our governing body to reflect that value. Making a commitment to excellence may mean making difficult choices about sacrificing some things in order to push other critical needs forward that will benefit the largest number of alumni and future alumni. If you have specific ideas or questions, contact President Chuck Spitulnik ’73 and Executive Board members by sending a message to alumni@oberlin.edu.