A group of eighteen volunteers from the Executive Board, the Alumni Leadership Task Force, and others conducted 17 focus groups during Oberlin’s Alumni Council Weekend in September 2013. More than 100 participants representing alumni from the 1940s to recent graduates participated in a one-hour session that focused on two questions:

- What are ways that we as individual alumni at our various life stages might feel (more) involved with the College and Conservatory?
- How might we update and innovate alumni programming?

The goals of the focus groups were to (1) hear from individual council members representing themselves and additional viewpoints from their regional and/or social networks; and (2) start a formal process to gather alumni-defined interests that can be addressed by the Oberlin staff and volunteers.

Focus group participants prioritized their ideas for each question via a decade-linked colored dot process as a way to identify the “top three” ideas for each question and to see if there were decade differences within the groups’ choices.

It became apparent that there were no specific decade differences except in one particular instance (see # 4 and #5 below). Additionally, we observed that “media of choice” for communication was more defined in the oldest (snail mail, round robin letters, phone, face to face) and youngest generations (email, texting, Facebook) with variations in between. When all “top three” topics were combined for the 17 focus groups, we noted a rainbow of colors representing all or a majority of decades for most topics.

Another overall finding is that the two main focus group questions, while treated separately, were hard to distinguish for a large number of participants. After a debrief session with the facilitators and scribes, it was determined that the answers could be joined together.

The facilitators and scribes reported that their focus groups were lively in discussion and participation, “too short” for Obies to discuss the issues completely, and a positive experience, where participants stated that they “felt listened to” and able to give some substantive ideas for the future.

The following 15 categories represent the top choices for the combined set of seventeen focus groups. Often there were co-occurrences of categories where, for instance, regional activities included “streamed” activities or focused on strengthening student/alum relationships or addressed continuing education desires. They are presented as separate categories below, with acknowledgement of
such overlaps. A full list of ideas collected from the focus group process (final "top three" submitted ideas, “also rans”, and collected participant notes combined) has been submitted to the Alumni Office.

1. **Enhancing Regional Programming** was the most submitted category with ideas for what regional programming could look like as well as how to go about doing it. Participants suggested in-person regional activities such as Alumni Excus (Experimental College, part of the current student programming at OC) in their own region; cross-generational networking events in the form of panels of people with similar professions or affinity interests; dinner parties where Obies can gather around a specific topic of interest and/or combine it with a musical “jam session” or opportunity to sit with other Obies watching live or archived Oberlin performances, sports events or presentations. Many focus groups identified the role of a regional “Welcoming Committee” as organizing ways that prospective students and recent arrivals of Oberlin alums could be recognized and brought into the regional “fold.” Opportunities for regional alums to volunteer or come together with an Oberlin presence at local events were suggested. There was great interest in being cognizant of the “Real Oberlin,” one way to bring current students to different regions and share their talents and current experiences was named “OC on the Road.” Participants referenced regional events that have worked in the past and stated that they would like more of them and to increase the number of places where such events can occur.

Many of the “how to enhance regional programming” ideas are connected to the other categories below- e.g., online/ObIEweb ideas, streaming, “giving” that are addressed in other sections of this report. Participants suggested that gatherings, when not specific to an affinity group or specific topic of interest, should be diverse, representative of more than OC “hub” cities, targeted, well-advertised, meaningful, offered at times/locations that are accessible, intergenerational and family-oriented. People involved with regional planning should be creative and consider the different communication modes that might work to bring people together- e.g., “meet-ups” online for a specific volunteer opportunity that alums can join; a regional survey/local focus groups to gather local ideas of what appeals or could be offered. There were suggestions to leverage ways for alums to become more involved regionally-such as recruiting outside of one’s own area, being a “welcome wagon” member, sharing what alums have just published/created musically, hosting a potluck in the neighborhood. A couple of creative ideas suggested were incentivizing (via games, etc.) people to participate in regional events or a “homework” assignment for alums who have recently been on campus to connect with five Obies back home to share news, further collect ideas, and bring them to regional meetings. Future training for regional organizers could cover the sharing of successful ideas from all regions.

2. **Streaming** various types of OC “great stuff” was mentioned with much excitement in the majority of the focus groups. Oberlin alums would like to view live and archived events that originate on Oberlin campus, such as faculty webinars, operas, dance, sports events, and concerts. When events happen- like the Bias
Events debriefing/programming event in Finney Chapel that was live-streamed this past Spring or Toni Morrison’s recent visit and lecture, they wanted to find ways to let Oberlin alums know about it so we can be on the other side of our screens drinking it in as well. As noted in the “Giving” and “Obie Talks” sections below, Oberlin alums also participate in events (lectures, continuing education, performances) that can be archived/live streamed as appropriate, creating a “two-way” sharing experience. Participants were very creative about what this streaming could look like and how people could gain access to these events: from podcasts to a part of the OBIEweb to a separate “Obie Channel,” there was great interest from participants on both the giving and receiving end. It was recognized as a way that could help strengthen faculty/alum/student/campus relationships and keep Oberlin “current” in people’s lives. “Watching parties” were referenced as something that could happen easily at regional events—alums could meet around a certain topic and spend part of the time viewing a relevant Oberlin event. Participants requested more “interactive” livestreaming as well—opportunities for people “back home” to have conversations and share their opinions on current events, Oberlin issues, etc.

3. **Communications.** This was a broad category that addresses the question that specifically asked “What are ways that we as individual alumni at our various life stages might feel (more) involved with the College and Conservatory?” in addition to general programming desires. The communications category seemed to get to how and what individuals were looking for from the Alumni Office/alumni leadership who have a communication role. As noted earlier, there may be generational preferences for the kind of communication medium that works best. Some of the “how” or “kind” of communication desired included: notes/cards/written letters addressing milestone events like birthdays and death of a partner; round robin letters to circulate and provide in-depth information to classmates; phone calls with knowledge about the individual on the other end of the phone; social media use to connect alums and their interest/skills; interactive maps on the OBIEweb/linked site; notices and communications about current Oberlin events, including livestreamed/archived events; class notes via the Alumni Magazine; newsletters with departmental updates; inter-regional notification of events; ways to connect alums by region/interest areas; live/daily list of alumni accomplishments/performances; and bumper stickers. Individuals who have been on recent boards or council positions indicated that they don’t want to lose the feeling of being connected and valued for what they have to offer.

Alumni also emphasized the “what” or “content” of communication they would like to receive: people want the opportunity to hear about current events at Oberlin--both positive and negative. They want to hear about the accomplishments of their peers/other Oberlin alumni, including students and faculty, as well as the alumni who consider themselves “mere mortals” or “differently successful alumni” doing some interesting work or hobby. They want the results of surveys to alums shared to help with programming/development work. Specific topics included department info, career-related info, info for people delving into new careers, national/international shopping guides, Oberlin products/services offered.
domestically and nationally (they made references to the Oberlin grad who created the "Book-a-Lokal" website where you can arrange to eat with local alums while traveling and the recent “food” issue of the Oberlin Alumni Magazine that highlighted Oberlin activity in food-related industries), and notification of changes/”how to” information about the Oberlin website.

4 and 5. The common thread linking Professional Networking with Mentoring is “use of alumni expertise.” Participants are hungry to share what they have learned and their skills/expertise with others. While these two topics were of interest to all alumni, both the newly graduated (2000-2010s) and the 1960s era graduates were particularly keen. Linking newly careered or career-seeking folks with alums who potentially have years of experience and expertise in specific career areas looks like a promising combination.

For Professional Networking, participants are looking for ways to connect with other alums who are or were (now retired) in their same career/field of interest and skill base. Some alums are looking to change careers and would like exposure to people who have expertise in other areas. Many participants expressed that they would like enhanced topic/subject-focused connections between current students and like-minded, skilled alums (e.g., primary/secondary teachers). Some alumni would appreciate specific career help from Oberlin College. Participants came up with several ideas for how to make professional networking happen, including Facebook communities; inviting professionals to campus; in-person alumni group meetings in regions targeted by professional area and other variables of interest; engaging alums who work outside of their original major; offering career assistance; developing/maintaining a database of alumni interests/skills; and orchestrating “cross-career” gatherings of interested Obies.

Mentoring is a similar topic area that involves the act of “one with experience/expertise” sharing with one who seeks it. Older/experienced alumni expressed a desire to “give back” and share expertise/insights/knowledge with younger alums (e.g., mid-career decisions) and current students (future life/career decisions). This can be done in person on campus as well as regionally and online. Other ways that people suggested were via a Winter Term project, a shared database of mentors/mentees, online networking, or a formalized relationship of “life coach/advocate” set up with every student starting freshman year and lasting the full 4-5 years of being at Oberlin. Some participants referenced the “two-way” aspect of mentoring—that alums can learn from students and vice versa. The MRC (Multicultural Resource Center) was offered as a specific example where alumni could be involved in shadowing/mentoring.

6. OBIEweb enhancements and online attractions. For alums who live outside of Oberlin, the online world can be an essential part of staying in touch with Oberlin, classmates, and Oberlin’s connection to the rest of the world. Participants offered ways to fix, fine-tune, or add/link to OBIEweb to give it the capability that people are yearning for. What are they yearning for? Some of the ideas expressed in the
focus groups: an online calendar for “ObieWorld”- what is happening outside Oberlin? This calendar would be sortable by zip code and include all things of interest (many cited in other categories in this report)- performances, sport and other events, places where there are opportunities to “opt in” in various ways; a “subscription” series only accessible to Oberlin alums; special interest online groups; issue-oriented listserves-e.g., sharing best practices in your field; two-way book clubs where Oberlin (and other) authors can have conversations about their books with readers of their books; live/archived streaming of events; Obie channel with two-way capacity; online dating or match.com “Obie style”; Obie “classifieds” to advertise beyond career needs, with ability to focus regionally and beyond; online education; alumni travel exchange/Book-a-Lokal models; a more relevant/timely alumni web portal a la the Conservatory; virtual events with engagement; LinkedIn type connections (e.g., architects and designers able to connect about real estate); a press site with articles about Oberlin—both good and bad—and a place for discussion; interactive map to highlight various Oberlin interests (e.g., Alumni Mag Food issue- where the Obies are; other filters, such as housing available for travelers, or a People Finder by profession, etc.); local Facebook communities- what people are doing/performing, etc.; Google Plus conversations- e.g., James McBride and other authors active on Google Chat permitting many people to watch; blogs on issues by contemporaries; visual notification of breaking Obie News via a ticker banner; and more!

Easy access to and use of the new Super OBIEweb goes along with all of the yearnings defined above. Participants expressed frustration with the current OBIEweb experience and would like to enhance the user experience. The new and dreamy Super OBIEweb will be able to be navigated intuitively by alums from all graduation decades, include all of the new resources and links identified above, and offer assistance for navigation where/when needed.

7. Affinity Groups. Apart from professional networking, some Obies want to get together for “like interest/special interest” reasons. Affinity groups given as examples by participants in the focus groups include: people with children; those caring for aging parents; friends of the library/museum; transgendered community; non-conventional career groups/academic voyeurs; non Conservatory music/non-classical; former SIC (Sexual Information Center) volunteers, and age cohorts. Participants suggested finding ways to assemble these groups regionally, on campus, and electronically via Skype/online discussion groups, Facebook and LinkedIn groups, Chatroulette-esque pairing, and targeted invites. One group requested guidelines for starting and maintaining affiliate (chartered) groups.

“The purpose of Liberal Arts is to teach people how to live not how to make a living.”
(FG participant)
8. **Continuing Education.** Oberlin alumni would like to continue learning from the college, faculty, students, and each other. Thoughts of how to accomplish this ranged from auditing courses online via open courses or an alumni-only subscription service, to attending classes in person or via online/streaming services, to alumni educational retreats. A current class president from 1969 (Wayne Alpern) submitted a detailed summary of Educational Alumni Retreats (EAR), that he established and successfully ran in New York as well as at other sites; it could be tailored to Oberlin alumni.

“*Oberlin has a voice, but you can’t hear it unless you come to campus.*”
(Mark Herron ’89, about online classes)

9. **Reunions.** Obies enjoy the reunions on campus and suggested that they continue both on and off campus. Reunions by affinity groups (e.g., Steel Drum Band reunion), professions, and “themes” were identified as valuable. Mini-reunions in the form of workshops with alumni and students were also mentioned. Ideas of how to improve reunions included being cognizant of the timing of reunions: if they are separate from a class/age cohort-related reunion, participants might have to choose one over the other, thus “missing out” on something and reducing the number of reunioners in one of the settings. Combining affinity reunions/mini-reunions and events (such as Homecoming or sports events) with age cohort reunions was one answer. Another suggestion was to create fun reunion activities, such as a kazoo orchestra. Regional reunions (e.g., West Coast Obies) were another suggestion for gathering Oberlin alums together.

“*Seeing human faces is important to me.*” (FG participant)

10. **Giving.** Alumni noted in the focus groups that it is important to give monetarily to Oberlin for all of the reasons that we know are good for the college. Some participants suggested a department/faculty “wish list” to alert alums of needs beyond the more generic annual fund and a compelling video by/for alums to show why and how giving is so important.

One focus group thought that there should be a way to give "micro-grants" to student groups, similar to Kickstarter. With a suggestion of attaching this to OBIEweb, an alum could peruse a list of groups of students who are raising small amounts of money (e.g., under $1000) to do things like creating/delivering a new magazine, bringing a speaker to campus, recording music, or funding someone’s travel for a winter term project. It would allow alumni to give back to Oberlin in a meaningful, direct, and engaging way and help foster connections between students and alumni.

Alumni also noted that “giving” also can be measured by donated alumni time, expertise, and knowledge.
“Oberlin Wants You, not just your money.” (Paul Safyan ’68)

To that end participants suggested a non-monetary wish list, a database of resources that individual alums have to offer, or specific outreach to alums for their non-monetary giving, e.g., Winter Term hosting, on-campus panel expertise, a regional/national alumni speaker series, service and volunteer projects. “Giving” in a non-monetary way appealed to young alums who don’t have financial resources to give and to the older generations who have more “giving time” to offer and the experience of many years of professional expertise/skills.

“People giving their time or talent or treasure.” (Walt Galloway ’69)

11. **Shared Services** combines several creative ideas from focus group participants. Most focus on travel and ways to host and be received by Oberlin hosts. There were two “couch-themed” ideas: (1) “couch surfing” for alums—when you are looking for a job in a new city, you can stay on an alum’s couch, not at a hotel; (2) “share a couch”—if you are going on a trip, you stay with an alum and you or the alum can contribute a nominal daily fee for that stay directly to Oberlin. People referenced an Obie-created version of this called Book-a-Lokal or an Alumni Travel Exchange, an online service addressing national and international requests. As noted earlier in the “giving” and “streaming” categories, Obies referenced the fact that fellow alums are successful writers, speakers, product makers, and innovators, and these products/services should be able to be easily found (e.g., online, via an interactive map, on an “Obielist”). Oberlin alum “needs” (career change advice, matchmaking, translation, grantwriting, etc.) can similarly be placed on such an “Obielist” (a la Craig’s List), easily accessible to all.

12. **Oberlin “TED Talks.”** This topic came up in four different focus groups and suggests that alums/students/faculty do an “Obie Talk” based on the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks series that originated in the Silicon Valley in the early 1980s. “Obie Talks” was a name brought forward and excitedly discussed by people who have attended (in person or via a streamed archive) a TED Talks session. Overlapping with the “Giving,” “Streaming,” and “Regional” categories, focus group participants thought that it would be an interesting and “do-able” project for alums.

13 and 14. **Strengthening Student/Alum and Faculty/Alum Relationships.** Connection with current students has great meaning to alumni of all generations. There was much discussion, not limited to but especially among recent alums, about the importance of including students on the Alumni Association’s leadership body to provide the current view of Oberlin from a student perspective. Students today are the alumni of tomorrow, and participants wanted to find ways to enjoin student understanding of and interest in being alumni and becoming active participants as graduated Obies. Some of the other categories (“Giving,” “Regional,” “Obieweb/Online Attractions”) offered ways that alums and students can connect.
Additional ideas included hosting social gatherings for Winter Term students and alums in a given region, sponsoring dinners/hosting students during holiday times either on campus or locally, alumni-in-residence on campus, and ways to mentor students regarding careers and life stage decisions.

Alumni value their relationships with faculty from “their time” at Oberlin as well as the current faculty teaching the alums of tomorrow. The focus group participants talked about ways to get more time with faculty members – regionally/locally via a faculty/alum “trip” together, hosting in regional areas with presentations, concerts, or gatherings in a home or local café, and on campus via alumni/faculty co-presentations/performances and webinars. Alums want to be kept current about new and exciting faculty publications and interest areas. Likewise, alums would like faculty to be aware of alumni skills, knowledge, and experience in various topic areas that might be of assistance to their work.

15. **Economical Alumni Trips in the US.** The final shared topic from the focus groups involved adding more low-cost options for alumni to take trips and have adventures together. Ideas for increasing the number of existing successful low-cost interesting trips included canoe, bicycle, and regional flavor trips in various areas around the United States. Incorporating educational/service aspects into these trips and affording more opportunities for more connection with faculty, other alums, and current students would be seen as an alumni “benefit.”

The focus groups ended with an opportunity for participants to share their remaining questions regarding the changes proposed for the Alumni Association. Those questions were compiled and combined with a list collected from the morning session and are included in a new FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) document.

Additional ideas are welcomed from alumni and are being collected here on a continual basis:

- Via mail: Alumni Center, 65 E College St Suite 4, Oberlin 44074 ATTN: Jackie Hughes ’76

- Via email: alumni@oberlin.edu ATTN: Jackie Hughes ’76