Rethinking and Expanding Opportunities for Alumni Engagement

As the Oberlin Alumni Association approaches its 175th anniversary in 2014, it is a good time to examine the needs of Oberlin College and its alumni to find innovative ways to connect current and future generations of alumni to the college and each other.

What are the ultimate, long-term goals of this effort?
1. Enhancing alumni engagement opportunities
2. Connecting existing volunteers and engaged alumni better
3. Building pathways for lifetime interactions (student to career to family to retirement)
4. Revitalizing programming for those with varied time commitments, those near and far from other alumni
5. Leveraging technology for alumni connections and communications
6. Revising the alumni leadership structure to be more nimble and strategically focused.

What tactics are being considered?

We hope to reorganize ourselves to reach our goals of encouraging “grassroots” efforts among alumni by a) creating and communicating clear and diverse ways alumni can connect; b) utilizing ad hoc volunteer groups for short-term projects and initiatives; c) expanding the affiliate group model to professional interests and to engage alumni in ways that go beyond class year; d) offering focused on-campus and virtual training opportunities for volunteers; e) enhancing partnerships with staff and administrators across campus; f) establishing indicators that can measure progress; and more.

What needs to be in place for success?
- Recognition of the value of alumni engagement to Oberlin community and alumni
- Many and diverse pathways for meaningful involvement
- Strategic alignment with Oberlin’s goals
- Strategic and flexible leadership
- All forms of multi-directional communication between and among Oberlin constituencies
- Accurate data and state-of-the-art, user-friendly technology

What is the timeline for this process?

The goal is to solicit ideas from current volunteers during Alumni Council Weekend in September 2013, start implementing new ideas in fall 2013 and spring 2014, and present new programmatic directions and bylaws during Alumni Council Weekend in September 2014. Moving forward, new ideas and approaches and ongoing review will become part of our practice and culture.

mdy September 16, 2013
**How will this affect the Alumni Council?**

In order to get more alumni involved at all levels, the Alumni Council will have to change. To accommodate the larger number of active alumni and groups, various affiliate, volunteer, and associated groups might return at different times of the year. Executive functions of the Council will move to a smaller representative group (much smaller than the current Alumni Council but larger than the current Executive Board) to allow involvement and deliberations, rather than just serving as a “rubber stamp.”

**Are there indicators (beyond the anecdotal) that call for major changes in our alumni efforts and organization at Oberlin?**

The 2013 Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) Alumni Survey of Oberlin College graduates from 1993 and 2003 yielded the following findings:
- Only 9.2% feel very connected to Oberlin College.
- When asked how important their alumni organization is to them, 62.8% responded “not important at all.”
- When asked whether they participated in mentoring students in the past five years, only 5.4% responded in the affirmative (other schools average 11.1%).
- When asked whether they ever plan to give financially, 16.6% replied “no” (other schools average only 10% saying “no”).

An April 2013 survey of Oberlin alumni, conducted by the Alumni Leadership Task Force on behalf of the Executive Board of the Alumni Council, provided the following information:
- Alumni have a strong desire for more connections—with faculty, students, and each other—and to be more involved in the institution. They asked whether alumni are being fully utilized for the benefit of Oberlin College.
- Comments indicate that alumni want something different and do not feel well served; they have not been thanked or valued enough; there is more interest in and need for career networking and professional development.
- Challenges to greater involvement include geography, technology, busy lives, and a desire for more events of interest to their particular age group.
- Many thanked the task force for asking alumni for their thoughts.

A complete organizational and programmatic review of Oberlin’s alumni efforts has not been undertaken since the early 1970s.

**Is there an alumni association model we are striving to emulate?**

While trends at other colleges, such as career-related programming for alumni, new uses of technology, and more segmented programs and communications have been reviewed, we are dedicated to finding programming and an organizational model that fits Oberlin’s culture and core values of passion, excellence, inclusion, community/collaboration, respect, innovation and creativity, and fun.