December 9, 2019

Dear President Nellis,

We want to begin by thanking you for meeting with us on November 21. As the Executive Committee of the Ohio University chapter of the American Association of University Professors (OU-AAUP), we left that conversation heartened by the sense of mutual respect exhibited; that is essential to the kind of “constructive engagement” you are calling for.

We were thus concerned by your November 25th letter to the campus community accusing unnamed parties of spreading “misinformation” in order “to elicit fear.” As members of Ohio University's faculty and of OU-AAUP we agree that misinformation is the enemy of sound planning. It is in this spirit of transparency and good-faith that OU-AAUP hosted public forums and published a white paper on budget planning at OHIO. We have entered the budget conversation because we believe the perspective of educators should be front and center in these matters.

Given the concerns your letter raises about misinformation, we would like to formally engage your letter, which fails to accurately communicate some of the messages that have been conveyed to our members by representatives of the university administration.

First, your letter states that “Some critics have shared a narrative claiming we can solve our problems by cutting all institutional funding for athletics programs.” OU-AAUP has never made this claim, nor have we heard it credibly made by others on campus. We have asked about the comparative savings of moving our Athletics program from Division I to Division II. Yet, the Senior Vice-President for Finance and Administration stated at a university-sponsored budget forum on October 16 that even exploring adjustments of this magnitude to the athletics budget was “not up for consideration.” The lack of a serious discussion about the impact of athletics on the overall financial health of the university when everything else, including people’s jobs, is up for discussion, disappoints us.

Second, your letter claims that unnamed parties are trying “to elicit fear.” We are unaware of fearmongering among any of the hundreds of OHIO faculty we have heard from. Nevertheless, fear is in abundant supply on this campus. OU-AAUP routinely hears the fears of Instructional Faculty who have already lost or may soon lose their jobs. And increasingly, we hear the fears of students who wonder, How will my education suffer if I have fewer professors teaching more classes?

These fears are not unfounded. Your letter states that “Some of the misinformation has claimed that leadership is planning to ‘make up the budget deficit’ by simply eliminating the majority of non-tenure track instructional faculty.” This is not misinformation. This is from OHIO budgeting planning documents. For example, in “Fearlessly First on a Budget,” Dean Plassmann predicts the need for instructional faculty to drop from 95 in fiscal year 2021 to 47 in fiscal year 2022 (table 22). This document plainly indicates that one budget strategy under discussion is to pursue layoffs (referred to as “non-renewals”) of Instructional Faculty and increase the workload for tenured and tenure-track faculty. Similar discussions have taken place in other Colleges as well, in line with the Provost’s directive in an October 28 memorandum entitled “Reimagining the Academic Enterprise: Phase 1 Efficiencies.”
Let us be clear: “Instructional Faculty” are respected professors and community members; many have served this community for decades. They teach the most classes, and they do it for the least pay. OU-AAUP is aware of at least fourteen instructional faculty members in Arts & Sciences alone who were already laid off last year. Referring to these layoffs as “non-renewals” does not lessen their human cost. Nor does it recognize the contributions these professors make to the quality of education at OHIO. Their loss would be OHIO’s loss, educational and reputational. It is a loss that OHIO absolutely cannot afford.

Other statements in your letter are not clear, which only serves to spread the same fear and confusion you claim you want to avoid. OU-AAUP does not know what your letter meant by “targeted voluntary separation agreements for tenured faculty” separate from “strategic retirements.” We ask for clarification on this point.

You have asked the Ohio University community to embrace the philosophy of being Fearlessly First when considering solutions to our budget situation. You also ask in your letter for “constructive engagement” and “real solutions.” In the spirit of our meeting, we want to respond to that invitation.

OU-AAUP believes that to truly be Fearlessly First, we must separate ourselves from the pack by trumpeting our unique strengths. Ohio University offers something no other university in Ohio does: a liberal-arts experience with all the benefits of a large state school: high-impact undergraduate programming and the chance to learn from and participate in cutting-edge research across the disciplines. Our extraordinarily loyal alum are a testimony to the value of the OHIO experience. When they reach out to us as faculty, they voice concern to protect this experience.

OHIO also has an edge when it comes to bringing in students who otherwise would not have gone to college at all. We know how to recruit and support Appalachian students and first-generation college students. Doubling-down on these efforts, as opposed to competing with our peer institutions for the same pool of students, can help us shore up Ohio University’s budget reserves, ensure sustainable growth in our student population, and as your letter states, “increase our impact on communities.” But this is going to take more faculty, not less; more investment in education across the disciplines, not a shrinking of course options. This goal also dovetails with the access and inclusion theme you have articulated in your Strategic Framework for Ohio University: “We will embody the purpose and promise of public higher education as an engine of social and economic mobility.”

As indicated in our mission statement, OU-AAUP is committed to prioritizing the teaching and research mission of this university; we also seek to protect the value of the OHIO experience. In this spirit, we ask that you:

1. Instruct your Deans to cease all plans for Instructional Faculty layoffs
2. Immediately and publicly announce a commitment to retain our Instructional Faculty
3. Publicly commit to the protection of our academic mission by requiring a greater share of budget cuts from units that do not directly support the academic mission of the university.

Sincerely,

OU-AAUP Executive Committee