

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” *George Bernard Shaw, 1944*

Toward a New Otis College Strategic Plan, 2019 - 2023

A Strategic Planning Context Statement

By Bruce W. Ferguson, President

A Fortuitous Intersection

Our newest venture into the discipline of strategic planning for Otis College occurs at the fortuitous intersection of an almost completed working strategic plan, nearly all of the objectives and strategies of which have been achieved or are in good progress a year earlier than expected. (See [Working Strategic Plan for FY 2015-FY2019 Progress Summary - Year Three: Summer of 2017](#)) And it simultaneously occurs at the moment that our yearlong celebrations of our centennial are beginning to take shape. This convenient confluence allows all of Otis College’s constituents an intensified and opportune time to think about our history in relation to our future.

And we have the recent good news that Otis College ranks #4 on the list of the 50 colleges that add the most value by *Money Magazine*, as well as the 10th most diverse student body among colleges in the nation by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Add to those honors the tremendous growth of the creative economy and the growth of the Los Angeles region as a creative capital. The strategic planning process should help us leverage these opportunities and what’s working, while taking the lead on the challenges we face.

What I will outline here is meant to start the conversation in relation to our emerging strategic plan. It is not meant to be prescriptive nor preemptive of the larger discussion and planning process.

As your President and leader in this process, I am going to act here and throughout the process as an interlocutor—someone who asks questions or invokes information to prompt discussion—and later to synthesize broad input and posit answers. Some of the thoughts below, I hope, will provoke other questions; some will be strongly willful and others will remain perplexed, but hopefully relevant. Some are philosophical. Some are practical. Some are ideas offered from my experience and others are glosses of other people’s research and thoughtful opinions. They are articulated here simply to start the conversations that I hope other committed Otis College constituents will add to and extend and expand as we go forward as a community to cohere our sense of a mutual future.

They rely initially on the recommendations already identified recently by the Senior Team, but also raise other issues in the hopes of developing prompts to expand and deepen our offerings in an enhanced and improved environment of learning. Almost all of the thoughts shared here overlap and intertwine, as pedagogy and technology do, for instance.

Overarching Assumptions

Most of the remarks here rest on a few overarching assumptions.

For example, I believe deeply that we are entering a new political and cultural environment that Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, in his book of the same name, calls the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Others refer to it as the Second Machine Age. Regardless of its name, there is general agreement that the analog world (transformation and representation of information to our senses); the digital computerized and electronic virtual world; and the biological worlds are gradually coalescing and disrupting former economies, industries and cultures. Think of an autonomous taxi that uses artificial intelligence, robotics, and nano-technologies all in service of a human being within a new kind of collaborative economy.

In response to such massive cultural evolution, Otis College must anticipate these kinds of changes to the degree we can, to create a different and more sustainable and affordable institutional business model that parallels the developments in culture and meets the swiftly changing culture. Art and design schools have done this historically with each introduction of new technologies of representation and distribution, but today we must do it faster and with more urgency, since developments are rapidly unfolding.

While we compete at a high level, and believe we will continue to be able to do this over time, it's important to recognize that our traditional four-year tuition-based fiscal model is being challenged by numerous pressures and forces that we must understand and counter to every extent possible. These include: diminishing high school populations in the United States (current and anticipated enrollments are therefore declining); a diminishing middle-class and economic base made increasingly of those falling below median income (both of which have dropped significantly since 2004) for whom the cost of college is a greater and greater challenge; an increased national rate of non-traditional students (70% of undergraduate students); a highly public questioning of the value of college degrees despite data to the contrary; and other external pressures such as (rising health care costs, tech firms bypassing colleges to create their own courses, the cost of living index, a steep decrease in international students in an uncertain and volatile environment (down 40% in 2017 in the USA), and a federal government that distrusts higher education (some officials are pressing for an overhaul or even an end to federal support to the Department of Education) and their bias toward for-profit and vocational education, with the intention to perhaps hand off Pell Grant funding to private lenders, and so on.

Thus, managing costs and overseeing operational efficiency of resource allocations and the expenses we have influence over, and at the same time adjusting realistically to those conditions that are beyond our control, are central to a responsible trajectory of best practices for a small art and design institution like ours.

I also believe deeply that some methods of teaching and learning are being legitimately challenged and may need adjustment ranging from curricular tweaks to radical re-thinking in order to provide the next generation of students and other educational participants the appropriate learning necessary to allow them the pathways to full and constructive lives in art and design, including some version of individual economic capacity as a realistic goal.

This suggests much more flexibility and mobility on our part to maintain the success we've enjoyed under past historical conditions. We must change ourselves as well as be a catalyst for change.

Otis College's historical core activities have been focused on offering an evolving array of undergraduate and graduate degrees in art and design. Today, and for tomorrow, it must also become a re-designed, or substantively augmented, home to a much wider variety of both degree and non-degree offerings and experiences that address varying kinds of life-long learning engagements with a wide array of outcomes from possible associate degrees to certificates to other credentials and remedial practices to, simply, a new understanding of what underlies these—skills and knowledge.

Such shifts can help us become a more attractive and attainable center for many different kinds of teaching and learning and are fundamental to thinking about our future as a new model of pedagogical, social, and economic sustainability.

Themes and Priorities

To date, as introduced in [Strategic Planning Memo 1: Looking Forward](#), I, along with the Senior Team, have initially identified four themes and priorities to begin developing a new Strategic Plan. They are:

1. A full review and revision of **Otis College's mission** to maintain a vital and relevant community with shared core values.
2. An **expansion of volunteer leadership** - Trustees, Governors, Fashion Council, Friends of the Gallery, the Group, Alumni, and other friends of the College
3. **Ensure diversity of visible and other minorities**, particularly in faculty and staff ranks, to assist in maintaining cultural sustainability as a relatable pedagogical institution and to provide successful models of

visible leadership for a changed student population in diversely populated local, national and international cultures.

4. Develop **new and more sustainable forms of increased revenue** to relieve tuition dependency ranging from more aggressive philanthropic efforts to a broad range of edupreneurial initiatives.

I would add to this list at least three more to consider.

We need a global presence in arts and design education that will help us be more known in international markets. This can be accomplished by promoting notable **differentiators** that separate our school from so many similar, competitor institutions. Otis College can further its distinguished reputation by expanding further its mission of being “visible and relevant” as one of the strategic objectives from the last strategic plan.

Our differentiators include the many first generation students who attend our college; the diversity of our students, faculty, and staff; actively welcoming lower median economy communities to our college; our active outreach to military veterans; community engaged learning; an emphasis on critical thinking; SAT optionality in applying; the presence of L.A. as a world class arts and design center; and the strong case we make annually for the creative economy in our own Otis Report regarding L.A. and California, etc. The reason for mentioning the latter is that creative occupations captured in our reports often require high levels of education or skills training, with close to 50% of those examined requiring a bachelor’s degree or higher. Otis College is in a prime position to produce the kinds of learners who will continue to grow this vital sector.

And there are more “differentiators,” some still to be identified. In other words, we need to continue to develop our compelling case for support—“the Otis story”—by concentrating on the distinct purposes and other significant impacts through extended public outreach, both physical and virtual.

Another theme that I consider very important is **inter-disciplinarity or inter-institutionality**. Interviews with Alumni show agreement that the real value of an *unrestricted flow between and among fields of creative endeavor* was one of the primary differentiators that their studies at Otis College allowed them to become who they are today. Through cross-cultural work and thinking dynamically and interactively a familiarity is fostered, pedagogically and psychologically, with the kind of future that our students will enter after graduation.

Otis College rightly prides itself on placing graduates at high rates in the workplace through its emphasis on creative solutions to issues and solutions drawing from a combination of academic and applied work plus an ability to articulate sustained analysis. Additional career paths should be opened, defined, and supported as students shift from school to professional practice, and it is our

responsibility to acknowledge this by promoting inter-disciplinarity and inter-institutionality in addition to our traditional but decreasingly understood, relevant, and siloed “disciplines.”

And of course, institutional **sustainability** in all of its manifestations is another. Sustainability in relation to the cost of higher education and the affordability of our degrees, credentials, and experiences goes to revenue generation and resource allocation, particularly, but also to good ethical culture. In California, other aspects of sustainability are dramatically obvious and Otis College should act as a model for the emerging generations and others of examples of how to achieve it in a variety of necessary ways.

Additional Questions

A question for any kind of learner emerged from a recent Stanford University study (2017). It was simply “If you could learn something what would it be? And how would you like to learn it?”

The answers showed a latent but powerful shift toward a *user-based education* as opposed to a curricular and faculty-based one, in which information and knowledge is “handed down.” This means an approach to problem solving that is methods-based, not curricular or specific skills-based; one that emphasizes the development of a complement of intellectual abilities to empower learners to acquire and understand information across a wide range of fields – a tool kit.

To some extent we do this already within our traditional formats and programs. But, if we are to take even more seriously this dramatic swerve from tradition we must profoundly accept the implications which, among others, include an essential re-design of schedules, a concentration on applicable and urgent cultural issues, an understanding of off-campus learners, and alternative and hybrid pathways within traditional disciplines to imagine and guide how we teach—and how students learn—in the future.

How we use search engines and virtual environments are becoming areas of increasing importance to learners in terms of a proactive shift toward online and blended courses, which deliver education to non-traditional students and distance-learners with synchronous and asynchronous experiences, competency-based education, and so on.

A major goal for us would be to give every learner a front-row seat.

Concentrating on these frontiers and continuing to research others will help us develop proposals for how we can, within our mission, establish new and practical educational clients all of whom can respond to community and the civic engagement needs on which we pride ourselves, in addition to professional skills.

In one of the few good news items offered recently by the Federal government, the new PROSPER act going through Congress will allow for more alternative

forms of education to be eligible for financial aid and other Federal funding. We must be vigilant in taking advantage of these changes as we move forward.

Effectively, one of our major questions is how to best serve students and adult learners, emphasizing affordability and yet adding value?

In many ways we are poised to add or integrate new edupreneurial initiatives in both the credit and non-credit granting spheres. In the latter there are literally millions of potential students underserved by current higher education systems of which we represent one niche category.

Conclusion and Call to Action

We have a historic opportunity to work together to seize this moment in Otis College's history. New technologies and advancements in learning sciences can help us rethink the models we're used to, and to evolve and augment those if we can think beyond where we've been and imagine new places to go. Our modest endowment and our traditional tuition model challenges us to create new and more sustainable sources of revenue during this time of great cultural change.

Through the coming strategic planning process, please join the [meetings and events](#) that fit your busy schedules or your role at the College, and share your input and feedback in those venues and through survey instruments that will capture more themes, priorities, and reactions to the above context statement. All stakeholder input will then be synthesized toward a Strategic Plan *Outline* that will guide the next Strategic Plan. I look forward to learning from you as we all work together toward new institutional objectives and strategies for the future. Thank you for reading this statement, and thank you in advance for your participation in the strategic planning process.