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Ouachita trustees adopt 2017-18 budget, five-year enrollment goals



ARKADELPHIA, Ark.—Hearing positive reports about a projected increase in fall enrollment and significant growth in fundraising, Ouachita Baptist University's Board of Trustees also adopted a 2017-18 budget and approved five-year enrollment goals during their June 8 summer meeting on campus.

Noting that "we're continuing to think about the future of Ouachita," President Ben Sells emphasized that "growing and strengthening the university – dreaming a larger dream for Ouachita – requires considerable work by faculty, staff and trustees and significant support by alumni and friends."

Citing Ouachita's "focus on fostering a love of God and a love of learning in our students," he added, "We're focusing on six emerging Strategic Directions for the benefit of the students we're called to serve and to best prepare them to serve the purposes of God in their generation – in their families, careers, communities and churches."

The University Planning Committee, in cooperation with trustees, faculty and staff, has been working toward the completion of a five-year strategic plan scheduled to be considered by the full trustee board later this year. As part of their June meeting, trustees reviewed key priorities related to the Planning Committee's interim report.

The report's six proposed Strategic Directions for the university include: Sustain Christ-centered identity, support committed faculty and staff, grow undergraduate enrollment to capacity, ensure transformative learning experiences, develop graduate and innovative programs and strengthen partnerships with alumni and friends.

According to President Sells, who chairs the Planning Committee, the planning process has included listening sessions with each of Ouachita's academic schools and administrative departments, meeting with several of the university's advisory councils and six workgroups that are developing draft goals for each of the six Strategic Directions.

"The work of drafting goals will culminate in a document that will be discussed in August by all faculty and staff during a back-to-school session," he said. Trustees will further discuss the proposal in their September board meeting as well as advisory groups in their fall meetings.

Affirming the proposal's collaborative process, the interim report states, "We believe the advancement of Ouachita is ultimately God's work, accomplished through His enabling of people who care deeply about our university. ... We find ourselves at a pivotal moment when Ouachita must dream a larger dream. By envisioning and formulating a set of strategic directions, we seek to clarify and advance that larger dream."

Dr. Keldon Henley, vice president for institutional advancement, shared a report about projected fall enrollment. Based on current pre-registration statistics, he said Ouachita is projected to exceed the 12.5 percent increase in new student enrollment proposed by university administrators. He said that trend, combined with a projected increase in current student retention, indicates Ouachita is on track for a strong fall enrollment total.

Noting that a proposed five-year enrollment plan "represents good planning, is connected to the emerging Strategic Direction of 'grow undergraduate enrollment to capacity' and is a requirement of the Higher Learning Commission," Dr. Sells presented five-year enrollment goals for residential student enrollment. The enrollment plan approved by trustees would increase student enrollment by approximately 60 students per year, from 1,500 in 2017-18 to 1,750 by 2021-22.

Emphasizing that "there seems to be unity around the focus to 'grow undergraduate enrollment to capacity,'" Dr. Sells said, "By being a little bigger, we can be better stewards of our campus and make Ouachita better."

President Sells reported that fundraising for the 2016-17 fiscal year totaled \$7.7 million in cash and pledges compared to \$6.8 million the previous year. Additional gifts of \$4.5 million in irrevocable estate-related contributions over the past year bring the university's total fiscal year gifts to approximately \$12.3 million. He also reported that the percentage of alumni making gifts to the university during the 2016-17 fiscal year increased from 19 percent to 20 percent, reversing a 10-year decline in the number of alumni donors.

Trustees also heard a report from Bobby Thomas, president of the Arkansas Baptist Foundation, which helps Ouachita manage its endowment. He said the goal of the endowment is "to provide a stable and growing income stream to the university for the achievement of its purposes." The majority of Ouachita's endowment income provides support for student scholarships with the balance supporting academic programs, faculty and facilities. Thomas reported that as of May 31, Ouachita's total endowment is \$107.5 million, a net increase of \$7 million from the previous year.

Citing the Arkansas Baptist Foundation's partnership with Ouachita and other Arkansas Baptist entities, Thomas told trustees, "We exist purely as a service entity. We exist to serve the churches and other agencies and institutions. ... Our intent is to be faithful and obedient in our role of serving Ouachita and the other entities."

In other budget-related actions, trustees approved a 2017-18 university operating budget of approximately \$36 million, an increase of about \$1.7 million over the previous year. Primary increases are related to providing scholarships for students, health insurance-related benefits for employees and support for academic programs and facilities. Trustees will review and adjust the budget as needed in September after fall enrollment numbers are finalized.

In other board actions, trustees approved a series of new and revised university policies, including adopting a new policy in line with national standards on reporting and counting charitable gifts, updating faculty qualifications and minor adjustments to policies about “Budget Policy and Procedures” and “Gift Acceptance, Recording and Stewardship.”

Dr. Stan Poole, vice president for academic affairs, and Dr. Deborah Root, Ouachita’s director of assessment and chair of the Rogers Department of Communications, gave an update on Ouachita’s Higher Learning Commission reaffirmation of accreditation process. HLC officials will visit campus in December as part of the seven-year process. Dr. Root noted that five key criteria for reaffirmation of accreditation focus on mission, institutional integrity, high quality teaching and learning, assessment, and resources and planning. She also reviewed the components related to the governing board.

Dr. Sells presented an update on the university’s proposed “accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program” in partnership with Baptist Health College Little Rock. This initiative also reflects the strategic focus on starting innovative programs. Dr. Sells, Dr. Poole and Dr. Tim Knight, dean of the Patterson School of Natural Sciences, are coordinating efforts to secure appropriate approvals from the Arkansas State Board of Nursing, the Higher Learning Commission and the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing needed to launch the proposed nursing program.

Trustees also heard a report about a partnership with Hanover Research to support growing undergraduate enrollment and starting graduate and innovative programs. Noting that Hanover was selected after a national search, Dr. Sells said the initial one-year partnership is being supported by a gift from alumni and friends.

“Hanover is recognized in higher education for providing high quality, custom research and analytics to help universities make informed decisions,” Dr. Sells explained. “Hanover’s research will support existing decision-making structures and processes on campus.”

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