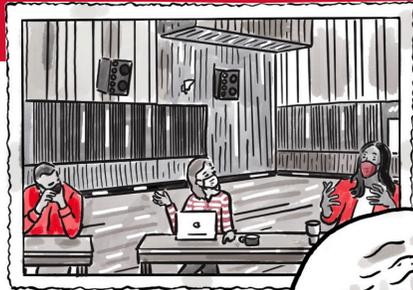


# Oberlin 2020

LEARNING, LEADERSHIP, AND COMMUNITY IN A PANDEMIC

By David Hertz, Chief of Staff, Oberlin College • Illustrations by Beth Wolfensberger Singer P '19



Historians will chronicle the year 2020 for its unusual impacts on the health, safety, and welfare of our society. At no other time in the past century have we been so challenged by disease and social and economic unrest. At Oberlin, we entered the year with an optimism fueled by our progress implementing One Oberlin and the faith in our collective abilities to overcome any hurdle.

As is so often the case, it was the unforeseen that demanded the most from us. This narrative is more than the story of how Oberlin reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, although that tale is important to capture for the historical record. Rather, this is a story written by our chief of staff about how a diverse leadership team at a small liberal arts college worked across the institution to envision, articulate, and implement a strategy to meet remarkable challenges, even while the nation split over its own direction.

Since Oberlin's founding in 1833, the institution has pursued its own path. But it is clear that today's leaders would have been unable to implement our strategy without the groundwork of the Academic and Administrative Program Review process of 2018 and the faculty's overwhelming approval of the One Oberlin report in 2019. Those accomplishments demonstrated what the Oberlin community could achieve through collaboration and common purpose.

To be sure, we committed our share of mistakes this year. And given the benefits of hindsight and the unpredictable course of this pandemic, we may come to view our successes quite differently in the months and years to come. We evaluate events through the lens of our own lived experiences, all of which are colored by COVID-19 this year.

There are far too many people to thank for their hard work in helping Oberlin move forward during the pandemic. Our progress was a direct result of board of trustees support and direction, the collaboration and extraordinary efforts of the faculty and staff, and the encouragement from alumni and parents. But most of all, we thank our students. Without their integrity, resilience, and maturity, all of our efforts would have been for naught.

People often ask me what lessons I have learned from coping with a pandemic in a congregate setting at a small liberal arts college. If anything, the experiences of 2020 have reinforced my faith in Oberlin. The members of our community do not always agree, but when pressed, we unite behind our belief in this great institution and its reason for being—to make a difference in students' lives, so they can change the world for good.

**Carmen Twillie Ambar**  
President

President Carmen Twillie Ambar stood at the head of the dining room table in the residence, waiting for her leadership team to settle. She had worked hard to build this team, and now, at the close of 2019, they needed these kinds of informal interactions in order to gel. She realized their ability to collaborate would be vital to Oberlin College's long-term success. So she encouraged the chatter before beginning the mid-December holiday breakfast.

"You all have had a great year," she began. "We have accomplished a great deal in 2019, and I want to thank you for what you do for this institution."

Many in the group were new to their jobs, if not new to Oberlin. In fact, President Ambar reflected as she looked around the table, she had spent considerable time and energy in her two-plus years at Oberlin assembling a team that she would depend upon to help guide the institution into the future.

Earlier that month, she had named Bill Quillen, who joined Oberlin in 2017, as new dean of the conservatory. Just six days later, she named David Kamitsuka, a 25-year veteran of Oberlin who had been acting dean for 18 months, as the new dean of arts and sciences. The other leaders included:

- Vice President for Finance and Administration Rebecca Vazquez-Skillings and Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary Donica Varner, both of whom had been in their jobs less than two years.
- Vice President and Dean of Students Meredith Raimondo, Vice President for Communications Ben Jones, and Athletic Director Natalie Winkelfoos, who were the veterans of the group, each having served in their positions for at least three years.
- Another veteran, Chief of Staff Ferdinand (Ferd) Protzman, had been by President Ambar's side since she arrived, but he was retiring at the end of the year. Interim Chief of Staff David Hertz was on loan from a local public relations firm.

Dean of Admissions Manuel Carballo, also in the job less than two years, was absent, as his wife was giving birth. Also absent was Michael Grzesiak, hired in November as vice president for advancement. He had not yet moved to Oberlin.

This group had helped guide the college through a challenging year. They had begun implementing One Oberlin, the comprehensive, faculty-led strategy meant to re-establish priorities and place the college on a trajectory

for long-term success. The lawsuit with Gibson's, a local bakery, had been one of the most controversial legal proceedings in higher education that year. The furor over the case had been relentless and had taken its toll, even as the attention it commanded had lessened substantially the past few months.

But President Ambar knew the next year would ask much more of this leadership team.

"We have a lot of hard work ahead of us," she told the group. "And we have to do it without our good friend, Ferd!" she said, turning toward him.

"But I know we are up to the challenge. I've said this often, but it's worth repeating. When we leave Oberlin, we all will do so knowing that we did our best for this institution, that we met the challenges before us and left Oberlin in better shape than when we came."

President Ambar had already identified the top challenges of 2020. Among her priorities: Accelerating the implementation of cost reallocation, investments in new academic programming and career development, and the reorganization articulated in the One Oberlin strategy that would result in the college's first balanced budget in years. The plan called for completing tough and candid negotiations with the United Auto Workers and the more than 100 employees in dining and custodial services. The college also needed to revamp its health benefit plan and resolve long-standing lease disagreements with the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association, known on campus as OSCA. All these measures were sure to be controversial among students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and yet their completion was central to the college's long-term financial stability. Enrollment was an ongoing priority, as was marketing the college and its top-notch faculty. The Gibson's case was on appeal, and a positive resolution was an ever-present priority.

President Ambar knew other challenges not completely unforeseen would crop up, such as the presidential election and issues of gender, racial, and economic disparities. This was Oberlin after all, and that meant academic rigor and robust debate among faculty and students. There was no telling what other issues would arise.

"I hope you all have a pleasant holiday season and can celebrate with your families," President Ambar concluded. "Get some rest and come back in January recharged and ready to go. We are going to have a great year."

# CHAPTER 1

## Redefining the Oberlin Community



**“I think we are going to have to shut it down.”**

—PRESIDENT CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR, MARCH 12, 2020

**T**he job of president of a small liberal arts college has blurred boundaries. In a very real sense, the job never ends. Academics. Budgets. Fundraising. Enrollment. Facilities and campus upkeep. Alumni relations. Relationships with students, faculty, staff, and the city of Oberlin. Athletics.

To bring order to a job that by definition has none, Carmen Twillie Ambar prioritizes challenges according to the year of her tenure. What she calls a “first-year problem” is a task not to be deferred.

When she joined Oberlin late in 2017, she determined she had three years to help her senior leadership team meld into a high-functioning group. Collaboration at the top, she realized, was a key both to her success as president and that of Oberlin, which faced enormous challenges in the near future.

So she reorganized her leadership team. She initiated a long-term strategic planning process that in her second year became widely accepted as “One Oberlin.”

In the first weeks of 2020, as she moved through her third year at Oberlin, President Ambar felt confident that her senior group was growing into a team capable of incredible things. They were gelling just in time. The enrollment cliff facing higher education in 2025 would arrive in no time at all. Budgetary challenges and union contracts had to be addressed. The contract with the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association had to be renegotiated.

That was how 2020 was supposed to progress. But now, sitting behind her desk three weeks into the new year, President Ambar was facing something she had not anticipated.

The headlines were filled with warnings of a dangerous virus spreading from China. President Ambar prided herself on her ability to anticipate problems. Challenges rarely caught her by surprise. To her, this felt different, inescapable...and dangerous.

Eventually, Oberlin, Ohio, was going to have to brace itself for the virus public health officials were calling novel coronavirus-19.

“A pandemic?” she thought. “How do we work with that?”



Whether they realized it or not, for many of the nation’s 5,000 colleges and universities, the first whispers of the impending pandemic heralded an existential threat. Institutions of higher education are not built to withstand unrelenting outbreaks of a highly contagious disease. Student health services are not

staffed to cope with the demand, and the congregate setting of residence halls makes it nearly impossible to quarantine the ill.

At U.S. colleges and universities, the economics of enrollment, tuition, and room and board revenue are based upon the free flow of students. College admissions departments possess few tools to address international and national travel restrictions enacted to prevent the spread of a disease. Similarly, college presidents and their leadership teams, trained to foster an academic village, have few options to protect their campus communities and prevent financial catastrophe.

## **Institutions of higher education are not built to withstand unrelenting outbreaks of a highly contagious disease.**

At Oberlin, these realities became evident in a matter of weeks. Vice President and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Manuel Carballo became concerned earlier than most. As head of admissions, it was his job to anticipate factors that could impact both the size of the incoming class and key financial indicators such as net tuition revenue (the revenue left over after a college subtracts students’ financial aid). For the college to achieve its financial goals, Carballo appreciated more than most, each first-year class had to have a healthy number of international students.

And so it was Carballo, in the leadership meetings and strategy sessions of January 2020, who consistently referenced the potential enrollment threat of a pandemic. In part because of his concerns, the leadership team began the sensitive debate over adding the software application Zoom to the repertoire of an institution that long resisted remote academics.

Meanwhile, word of the new disease COVID-19 spread, much like the virus itself. President Ambar felt Oberlin needed to address the increasingly concerning situation.

The college sent its first official communication about COVID-19 to faculty, staff, students, and their parents on January 27, 2020. Based on federal and state guidance, the note was written to reassure rather than offer significant information.

*Oberlin College is closely monitoring developments in the outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus, known as 2019-nCoV. The respiratory illness caused by 2019-nCoV*

*was first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and continues to expand. However, it is important to note that there have been two confirmed cases in the United States and no known outbreaks in Ohio.*

*This virus is considered a low risk to the American public, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The Ohio Department of Health is providing guidance to state and local health agencies and health care providers.*

President Ambar directed her staff to pursue Oberlin's 2020 priorities, even as she watched the pandemic advance with increasing speed and ferocity. Within days, the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency. Less than six weeks later, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine confirmed the state's first case. Nine days after DeWine's announcement, the state suffered its first coronavirus death.

In late January 2020, very little was clear, but one thing was certain: if Oberlin was to continue serving its 3,500 students, faculty, and staff, then those entrusted with keeping the college functioning would need to spend the next weeks and months considering options that were previously unthinkable and making decisions with a speed that was previously impossible.

Over the next nine months, the battle to keep Oberlin functioning—even as the college eventually closed to in-person education—called upon every corner of the campus and even extended to the city of Oberlin. Dozens of professionals relinquished their own interests, collaborating, arguing, protecting. Seven-day, 70-hour workweeks became commonplace as executives were forced into complex situations, realizing that a poor outcome could hamper the institution for years.

Faculty dedicated themselves to revamping, rewriting, and in some cases recreating classes in a medium that was completely new for many of them. Financial plans were scrapped. The communications and admissions teams created new marketing initiatives and videos, including more than 50 student-submitted "Oberlin Everywhere" videos created practically overnight. Campus carpenters erected hundreds of Plexiglas barriers in offices in a matter of weeks. Software and technology were distributed to keep classes in session. The college offered partial refunds for room and board. Some parents argued the amounts were insufficient, others donated the money back to Oberlin.

Through it all, students struggled to make sense of what was happening to their college experience, to their spring semester. Sports were canceled. Seniors watched helplessly as their college

careers ended with a quiet drive out of town rather than the fanfare they knew they deserved.

The dean of students office mobilized into a crisis response team that would not slow for months. It oversaw the distribution of thousands of storage boxes and the rushed departure of students to their homes across the country. Staff ensured that students who had been abroad made it safely back to the United States.

## **Faculty dedicated themselves to revamping, rewriting, and in some cases recreating classes in a medium that was completely new for many of them.**

Known as a skilled communicator, President Ambar mounted the most ambitious and aggressive communications strategy of her career, hosting webinars, filming videos, sending emails. She became a self-taught expert on public health policy and COVID-19 testing to help her speak on the topic and make informed decisions. She was convinced that without such an effort, the Oberlin community would not hold.

"This is not a storm," she told her leadership team on more than one occasion. "This is winter, and it is going to be a long, cold one."



As general counsel of Oberlin College, Donica Varner knew her top priority for 2020. She was entrusted with preparing the college for its critical negotiations with the United Auto Workers, which represented more than 100 dining services and custodial employees. She appreciated the importance of conducting the talks in a clear and professional manner and was calling upon outside legal counsel as well as Vice President for Finance and Administration Rebecca Vazquez-Skillings, Vice President and Dean of Students Meredith Raimondo, and Chief Human Resources Officer Joe Vitale for help. She entrusted communications strategy to Interim Chief of Staff David Hertz and a valued strategic communications consultant, Steve Kloehn.

President Ambar was insisting that the entire leadership team and other senior directors across campus be prepared for all aspects of the negotiations. Each week, Varner led a noon meeting of 15-20 leaders from across the campus, discussing a variety of potential scenarios. The stakes were high. Without

significant savings, Oberlin would not be able to end its string of annual operating budget deficits, not a good practice for a liberal arts college facing enrollment shortfalls beginning in 2025.

Still, labor relations was a sensitive issue, and it was critical that the college treat the union with respect and integrity. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni demanded it. Just as importantly, Varner knew, Oberlin's values did as well.

As the pandemic closed in, Varner kept her focus and her team's attention on preparations for what they all knew would be a shock to the college.

On February 18, after meetings with key stakeholders and the workers directly affected, the college officially notified the United Auto Workers of its intent to consider contracting with outside vendors for custodial work and dining services. The communications team activated a public relations rollout plan organized in tight sequence. Raimondo met privately with student leaders. The communications team reached out to local media, including the student newspaper, the *Oberlin Review*, which interviewed Vazquez-Skillings. Hertz spoke with local and state officials, and Vice President for Advancement Michael Grzesiak connected with targeted alumni. Finally, the team posted on Oberlin's website a letter from President Ambar to faculty, students, and staff.

On February 20, Editor-in-Chief Nathan Carpenter's article in the *Review* appeared under the headline "College 'Considering' Outsourcing Dining, Custodial Services." The article described in neutral terms the college's intent to negotiate over the issue of outsourcing. But opposition mobilized quickly and accused the college of union busting.

Two days later, several hundred students gathered on campus to protest outside of a General Faculty meeting, where President Ambar discussed the college's need to negotiate a new and effective model for delivering dining and custodial services. With students' chants of "union busting is disgusting" reverberating in King Auditorium, President Ambar and her staff answered questions from faculty, union members, and students. At the conclusion, President Ambar walked through halls lined with chanting students holding signs in support of union workers.

It was a protest in line with others Oberlin students had experience organizing—civil and effective in communicating its points. And it presaged other tactics whose purpose was to pressure the college into reversing course.

In the coming weeks and months, more than 2,000 alumni

expressed their concern about the negotiations by signing a petition. U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown weighed in as well. After a conversation with Hertz, staff from Brown's office revised inaccuracies in a letter written under the senator's name and then submitted it to the college as an official note of concern.

In a normal year, the situation had the potential to become volatile and attract national media attention. Labor negotiations, no matter how well they are conducted, can be emotional triggers, particularly at Oberlin.

But these weren't normal circumstances. COVID-19 was making its presence known as well. In less than a month, the virus would claim its first victim in Ohio, and President Ambar and her team would consider drastic measures to protect the campus community.



In the spring of 2020, it was Michael Rainaldi's job to keep track of the 167 Oberlin students studying off campus, both in international and domestic programs. To do this effectively, the director of international programs had to be able to connect with higher education programs and institutions around the world on a moment's notice.

On Sunday, March 1, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that higher education institutions consider asking their students studying internationally to return to the United States, sending Rainaldi into a frenzy that lasted weeks. Students in South Korea and Italy were the first to need transportation back to Oberlin, after the State Department and the CDC raised travel advisories for those countries to Level 3.

Rainaldi and John Harshbarger, director of student health and counseling services, sent an email to the campus community on March 3, providing an update on the status of Oberlin's off-campus students. In a desire to reassure students, the note also contained a little-noticed reference to a few people on campus beginning to don masks: "Some members of our community have chosen to wear masks in public which, while not necessary, is completely acceptable. If you see someone wearing a mask, please do not be alarmed."

These developments were occurring while the board of trustees conducted its spring meeting on campus on March 3-4.

President Ambar appreciated that events were accelerating, overtaking her and Oberlin even as she had mobilized her leadership team.

- She had asked Hertz to coordinate the college’s response to COVID, to ensure that students, faculty, and staff on campus remained safe and to support Rainaldi in his efforts to help students who remained abroad and in other parts of the United States.
- Raimondo was implementing quick response efforts among her staff, including those in student health, dining, and residential education.
- Carballo and Vazquez-Skillings were recalibrating enrollment and budget projections for the incoming class.
- Hertz, Raimondo, and Harshbarger were meeting regularly with Lorain County Public Health to plan public and campus health responses.
- Meanwhile, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences David Kamitsuka and Dean of the Conservatory of Music Bill Quillen were preparing their staff for the imposing prospect of remote learning for international students, a particular challenge in musical education.

And still, it wasn’t enough. Colleges across the country were preparing to send their students on spring break in the hope that removing them from campus also would remove the public health threat. That logic didn’t make sense to some in higher education, who were more worried about how students would return safely. As President Ambar watched coverage of students on break in Florida and consulted with peers at other colleges, she had a sense that the world of higher education was careening toward a challenge it was unprepared to address.

On Monday, March 9, less than a week after Rainaldi began recalling students from overseas, Governor DeWine declared a state of emergency. Health officials had confirmed three cases of COVID-19 in Cuyahoga County, Oberlin’s neighboring county to the east.

Oberlin’s last day of classes before spring recess was scheduled for March 20, almost two weeks away.

“I think we are going to have to move that up,” President Ambar told her staff. “We may need to get students home.”

Events have a way of building momentum, and this pandemic was headed fully downhill. Monday’s announcement began a whirlwind week such as President Ambar had never experienced. In the next 72 hours, she would witness the more pointed aspects of managing under threat of a pandemic. News of viral spread changed hour to hour, and along with it, the guidance from public health officials. Hard as she tried, it was

impossible for President Ambar to keep the campus informed with up-to-date information. But as she struggled to keep pace, one aspect of this threat became evident: There was no negotiating with this pandemic.

On Tuesday, March 10, Kamitsuka and Quillen met with faculty to provide a pandemic update. Quillen sent the first conservatory announcement about the pandemic to parents, students, faculty, staff, and community members, announcing the closing of Hall Auditorium. The conservatory made plans to leverage newly installed technology and offer Oberlin’s first-ever live-streamed opera.

The same day, Oberlin’s academic and student life deans raised the possibility—unheard of at Oberlin under normal circumstances—of remote learning and announced that spring recess would be moved up two days. Students who had made travel plans months earlier would be allowed to remain until their originally planned departure date.

Athletic competitions over spring recess were canceled. The Student Senate submitted a request for flexibility around mid-semester academic deadlines, and students were told that specific guidance about remote learning would be provided no later than March 25. Classes were to resume in person or remotely five days later.

“(a)ll students should depart campus for Spring Recess by noon Saturday, March 21,” Raimondo wrote in a campus email. “Only students who petition to stay on campus due to exceptional circumstances and receive approval will be allowed to remain in college or OSCA housing.”

Deep within her note, Raimondo included guidance that seemed innocent enough at the time. “Please also remember to pack your personal belongings into boxes before you leave.”

By the next day, the world had changed.

“My sense is that at least through the beginning of spring recess, the college will likely need to send campus messages frequently that reflect new national, state, and local guidance,” President Ambar wrote to the campus community. It was Wednesday, March 11. Faculty were asked to register with the college if they intended to travel.

That same day, the admissions team hosted a program for high school counselors, most of them from Ohio. Although 34 counselors signed up, only about half that number attended. It would be the last large-scale, in-person admissions event on campus for the year.

When President Ambar walked into her office on Thursday, March 12, she knew the steps she had been taking to safeguard the campus would not meet the challenge. Events were accelerating. The pandemic was requiring more. The health and safety of Oberlin's students, faculty, and staff required more. The city of Oberlin required more.

"I think we're going to have to shut it down," she told the president's office staff. "We are going to go fully remote for the year."

The staff fell silent. For days, they had been discussing this possibility and the potential impact on the college, particularly the senior class. The reality of the decision was unforgiving. Athletics were canceled for the rest of the year. But so much else had to be decided. Which academic events would be canceled? Would the college issue refunds? How would faculty convert their courses to online learning in time for classes to resume on March 30? How would the college ensure students had the boxes they needed to pack up their belongings for the semester? How would the college provide students the technology they needed to complete their classes remotely? How would the college recruit a 2024 class? And what about the seniors?

Oberlin still had 70 students in the U.K., Ireland, and Europe. Rainaldi was using every means to contact students and ask them to return home no later than March 18. They, too, would complete their studies remotely.

"Let's get the senior staff together," President Ambar told her assistants, Jennifer Bradfield and Ginny O'Dell. "We've got a lot to do, and we've got to get these students off campus in the next 72 hours."

President Ambar picked up the phone. The burden of this decision had been weighing on her for days. But as she called Board of Trustees Chair Chris Canavan to give him an update, she felt the relief of conviction.

"This is the right thing to do," she thought.



Excerpts from the beginning of President Ambar's letter announcing the campus would go fully remote after spring recess:

*Dear Oberlin College Community,*

*We are drawn to Oberlin because of our community. The dedication of our faculty and staff to the aspirations and dreams of our students establishes life-long bonds. I have been*

*reflecting on the essence of our community for the past few days as we have begun to contemplate the effects of COVID-19 on our academic year.*

*As you might imagine, responding to this global pandemic has been extremely difficult. We are having to make choices that are upending our sense of community, and it can feel overwhelming. It is requiring us to literally change almost everything within days. And of course, there is a sense of loss for all of us, but especially for our seniors for whom this is their last semester on campus.*

*I have tried to have as my guiding principle the health and safety of our community, even as we balance our academic mission. It has become clearer that we need to make firmer decisions about the remainder of the semester, move more expeditiously to support our students' departure from campus earlier than we planned, and to provide more time for our faculty to prepare for remote instruction.*

*We have been in frequent consultation with our local health department to ensure that our decisions are in keeping with their assessment of the impact of COVID-19 in our region. In light of rapidly moving events, we have re-evaluated our timeline for student departures from campus and our views about the remainder of the semester.*

*In-person classes will now end tomorrow, Friday, March 13. Students will be dismissed from in-person classes on Saturday, March 14, a week earlier than planned. We will be moving to remote learning on March 30.*



The decision to close the campus was a systemic earthquake to the college's top academic officers, Deans Kamitsuka and Quillen. There had been signs that it would be necessary, but it was impossible to fully prepare for. The implications for a residential liberal arts college known for its academic and musical quality were enormous.

Could Oberlin provide a quality education through the internet? How could the institution maintain its world class musical instruction? The conservatory had already installed some technology, but clearly more would be needed to serve students remotely.

Kamitsuka had held several meetings with associate deans and had warned the faculty that remote teaching was a possibility. But what he was about to ask of them was daunting: revamping more than 500 classes over spring recess, so they could

resume instruction at the end of the month. In essence, he was giving them 10 days to prepare to teach virtually. In other circumstances, the request would be unthinkable.

Faced with the realities of a once-in-a-century pandemic, the faculty didn't blink. Instead, they got to work.

At the conservatory, faculty had to redesign the curriculum from the ground up and assess, redesign, and create hosts of new academic and course policies.

How could students complete their degree recitals remotely? Their large- and small-ensemble courses? How could high-quality individualized instruction take place given technological limitations? What about juries and committees?

The issues seemed endless.



When he learned the campus was closing, Carballo was shaken, but determined. The immediate challenge shifted his team's full attention to building the Class of 2024. Oberlin's signature event for admitted students—All Roads Lead to Oberlin—was two weeks away. Planning had been underway for months, and now, the campus was being shut down. He realized he would need to replace All Roads with a new content marketing strategy. He approached Hertz, who oversaw communications.

"That will be Communications' top priority," Hertz said. "After the health and safety on campus, that is our top priority."

Before the end of the day, Carballo had connected with Vice President for Communications Ben Jones. Students had to be off campus by noon, Monday, March 16. Jones and his team had less than 72 hours to mobilize an army of student videographers to film feature videos and walking tours of campus. Utilizing students was the only way to create that much content in time.

Friday, March 13, 2020, was a sun-filled early spring day. Under other circumstances, the weather and the fact that it was a Friday would have raised spirits across campus. By mid-afternoon, despite the lingering chill in the air, students congregated on Wilder Bowl, throwing a Frisbee and gathering in small groups to laugh and commiserate. Music filled the grassy area.

Earlier in the day, faculty, staff, and students had gathered in Finney Chapel to hear the year's final performance by the Oberlin Orchestra. Normally, the musicians would have practiced for weeks and put on a semester-ending performance in formal dress for friends, family, and the college community.

## Could Oberlin provide a quality education through the internet? How could the institution maintain its world class musical instruction?

On this day, the last time they would play together, instructor and conductor Raphael Jiménez led an inspired performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony that raised tears among the fewer than 50 people able to attend. Communications' lone video producer Mathias Reed captured the emotional performance, which he placed on social media a few days later.

A few hours after the performance, President Ambar was in her office when two students knocked on the door.

"Can we see you?" one asked.

Before President Ambar could respond, the students started to cry. It was their senior year, they told President Ambar. Leaving campus for good would ruin their final semester at Oberlin and preclude the memories they hoped to build at the end of their college careers. They asked her to reconsider and allow them to remain on campus.

President Ambar invited them into her office and sat them down. Her eyes welled as she acknowledged the impact on their young lives.

"But you know what?" she asked rhetorically. "In the years to come, you will look back on this time and realize that you did OK. That this was tough, but that you reacted well to it. Those who are successful in life understand that events such as these affect people in profound ways. It will be up to you to decide how this will affect you, and how you will turn this into a positive. And you know what? I know you will!"



Raimondo received the call from dining services manager Wayne Wood in the early morning of Sunday, March 15. One of Oberlin's dining services employees had tested positive. Additional information from Lorain County Public Health was expected soon.

Two hours later, President Ambar led a conference call with her senior leadership team. COVID-19 had arrived before Oberlin had been able to clear the campus. The team agreed that the college should be forthcoming before rumors ran rampant. Without breaking privacy rules, President Ambar needed to

provide information with reassurance and prevent excessive worry. After all, most students had not yet had the opportunity to leave. A few hours later, she wrote:

*As we have been preparing to face the challenges associated with COVID-19, one aspect that has become very clear is that this pandemic will continue to impact us in stages.*

*Lorain County Public Health alerted us this evening that one of our employees in College Dining Services has tested positive for the virus. Public health researchers will be contacting individuals with whom this person has been in close contact so health officials can follow up appropriately.*

*This news, while difficult, is not unexpected. All of the readily available information about this virus tells us that many of us have been exposed. As testing becomes more available, we will invariably see the number of cases rise nationally and in our community as well. This is why our efforts at social distancing are so important. We of course will continue to communicate broadly and specifically, when appropriate, with the guidance of Lorain County Public Health.*

*I know that this news might bring additional anxiety as the spread of COVID-19 hits closer to home. Health officials stress that anyone who feels ill should not come to work, or be around other people.*

Chief Human Resources Officer Joe Vitale had been preparing for this moment for weeks. A central figure on the college's negotiating team with the UAW, Vitale had been dividing his time between negotiations and anticipating the health and safety needs of Oberlin's more than 900 employees. He knew this moment required calm communication and transparency, as well as a commitment to helping employees continue to meet the needs of the students still on campus.

The implications of the news that the virus was present on campus were staggering. Hundreds of employees were now wondering whether the campus was safe. Could employees take time off, or did they have to come to work? Would they be paid? Could they work from home? Would the college supply personal protective equipment, which the health care industry called PPE?

Vitale had few answers and was facing a lot of questions. COVID-19 required innovative and quick workplace solutions. This, he knew, was not a good position for HR to be in.

President Ambar's communications to faculty and staff late on March 16 reflected Vitale's dilemma. In it, she shared much of

what the college knew about how it would move forward and the questions that the college and its employees faced. To Vitale, the list of questions was uncomfortably long.

*You have responded to the pandemic with courage and a dedication to our students that should make all of us proud. Now that most of our students are off campus and hopefully safe at their homes, we are turning our attention to reducing the on-campus workforce required to provide the services essential for Oberlin and our remaining on-campus students and our students off campus.*

*It is our goal to implement telecommuting for as many staff as possible, as soon as possible. It also is our goal to preserve the health and safety of those who must come to support our students both here and off campus.*

In the end, Vitale knew that some people would have to come into work each day. These "essential workers," as legal documents label them, would be necessary to safeguard the campus and provide for the roughly 350 students who remained. Vitale's immediate challenge was to ensure that those essential workers were safe while on campus. He would need to secure them a steady supply of masks and gloves.

Lorain County Public Health had determined that the worker on campus who tested positive had worked at Stevenson Hall in dining services. In their estimation, the worker had presented a low risk of exposure. Still, Chief Facilities Officer Kevin Brown and Environmental Health and Safety Manager Claudia Ferrini called a custodial vendor to make sure that "Stevie" was deep cleaned, along with DeCafe, the kitchen and mini-market in the basement of Wilder Hall.

While Vitale had just weeks to consider the pandemic's impact, Chief Information Technology Officer Ben Hockenull had only days. Before students left, his team programmed and distributed 125 computers and 50 mobile hot spots to ensure that all students, faculty, and staff, regardless of circumstance, had the technology to complete their courses and job responsibilities remotely.

And then there was Zoom. The college had determined that this software would support the rigors of distance learning, but practically no one at Oberlin knew how to use it to teach classes or to conduct the business of the college. In a matter of days, Hockenull's team conducted hundreds of Zoom classes and helped arrange for licenses to support the college's use.

President Ambar's now daily emails explained the scope of the undertaking.

*We are attempting in a matter of days to move 500 classes to a remote framework, to provide an academic and student engagement experience for 2,500 students remotely, and to support the 350 students who will remain on campus. All of these students will still need to access us. And let's remember we will begin our newly created academic and student life experience on March 30. It is also true that when we come through this—and we will come through this—we will need to have enrolled a strong entering first-year class.*

*Creating our telecommuting plan involves taking an inventory of staff responsibilities required to operate the campus, as well as evaluating the number of computers and software necessary to field a staff working remotely.*

President Ambar led her team through the last 10 days of March with a combination of endless energy, determination, and frustration. At times, Oberlin seemed to be on its own. Federal and state authorities were still trying to gather information and offer guidance. On March 22, DeWine issued an order for most workers to remain at home.

The leadership team had begun to meet at least once and sometimes twice a day in the conservatory's Clonick Hall, which had remote communication equipment and was large enough for physical distancing. Her leadership team was sharply divided over how many people should still be working on campus. Tempers flared among a team that President Ambar knew was stretched.

"This is going to be difficult," she told her team near the end of a tense meeting in Clonick. "This pandemic is going to threaten a lot of colleges. Some with fewer resources than Oberlin may not survive. But I am convinced that we are going to emerge from this stronger because of the decisions and actions of this group."

If members of the team felt unsafe, they could work remotely, she said. But she was determined to continue working in her office, as Oberlin was asking "essential" workers to do the same. She still had 350 students to consider.

Hertz, whose immune system was compromised, started working from home. As the weeks progressed, others started splitting their time between home and the campus.

Hertz was in regular contact with Lorain County Public Health, as well as the Ohio Department of Health, but both were still gathering information and had little insight applicable to keeping the campus safe.

**"This pandemic is going to threaten a lot of colleges. Some with fewer resources than Oberlin may not survive. But I am convinced that we are going to emerge from this stronger because of the decisions and actions of this group."**

—PRESIDENT AMBAR

In the midst of the debate, admissions workers completed their mailing to the Class of 2024, informing them of their acceptance to Oberlin for the fall 2020.

President Ambar took some comfort knowing that the college had extended its offers of admissions. The conservatory had been able to complete four audition weekends on campus, and early indications from the prospective class were promising.

But would students be willing to come?

Would the pandemic worsen?

How long would this winter last?

## CHAPTER 2

# A Spring of Discontent



**“We’ve got two-and-a-half months to rebuild  
a college from the ground up.”**

—PRESIDENT CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR, JUNE 2020

**T**radition! Institutions of higher learning are steeped in it. The word fits hand-in-glove with claims of academic excellence. At Oberlin, students quickly learn of the college’s founding in 1833, its tradition of gender and racial inclusiveness, and of its refined social justice compass.

But in late March 2020, if Oberlin’s leaders were to survive the storm that was transforming the year, President Ambar knew they would have to fiercely defend some traditions, such as academic excellence—and temporarily leave behind others, such as slow deliberation and incremental change, for which higher education is well known.

“We have too much to do,” she told her leadership team on more than one occasion. “We don’t have time for that.”

Following the students’ rushed exit from campus, time was in ever shorter supply. Oberlin’s leadership team measured progress on a checklist filled with top priorities. (Was there any other kind?) Protecting the health and safety of those on campus was priority 1, but priority 1A was addressing the growing anxieties of thousands: students and their parents, prospective students, the city of Oberlin, state government, community organizations, and faculty and staff.

And they all wanted answers now.

President Ambar set her team to work at a frantic pace, reviewing and addressing every aspect of the college. With the completion and internal legal review of each task, the leadership team sent out critical information that quieted the calls and reduced the emails. But with each decision, Oberlin was knocked further off its traditional path for spring semester.

**ACADEMIC DELIVERY:** Academic administrators and faculty were unable to take their traditional spring recess. President Ambar had discouraged travel, and regardless, a majority of the administrators and faculty were too busy revamping their courses for online learning to spare the time. They revamped curricula for more than 500 courses in arts and sciences alone, transformed their content for Zoom-based lessons, and relaunched their courses via remote learning on March 30.

**ACADEMIC INNOVATIONS:** After the shutdown in March, Quillen, his leadership team, and faculty faced a harsh reality: the conservatory would have to transform virtually overnight from an enterprise oriented toward live, place-based education and events to a digital production company. On April 9, the conservatory announced Stage Left, a digital platform celebrating the artistry, scholarship, and

social-engagement work of the conservatory’s students, faculty, and staff. The inaugural episode on April 14 quickly led to a program running three times a week.

**COMMENCEMENT AND REUNION WEEKEND:** With the help of Vice President for Advancement Mike Grzesiak and his team, President Ambar made the widely expected announcement on March 31 that the weekend and its traditional fanfare would be canceled. The college would try to make it up to the Class of 2020, but it remained unclear exactly how.

**GRADING SYSTEMS:** During the final weeks of March, deans Kamitsuka and Quillen and their academic policy committees considered a Student Senate request to transform graded courses to “universal pass.” The students argued that the circumstances forced upon them because of the pandemic placed some students in unfavorable situations for academic study. This inequity, along with the stress of the pandemic, students said, supported the argument that grading systems should be modified so no student would fail. On April 2, the Educational Plans and Policies Committee (EPPC) in the College of Arts & Sciences and the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) in the Conservatory of Music rejected the request. Instead, the faculty governance bodies approved an extension for students to choose to take individual classes on a pass/fail basis.

## Protecting the health and safety of those on campus was priority 1, but priority 1A was addressing the growing anxieties of thousands.

**WORKPLACE POLICIES AND SAFETY:** Oberlin employs about 900 faculty and staff, and it seemed to Chief Human Resources Officer Joe Vitale as if all of them had questions. Is it safe to come to work? When will I get masks and other PPE? Do I have to come to work? Why am I classified an “essential worker?” Can I use my vacation time? Can I get a computer to work from home? This was uncharted territory for the college, and Vitale had to address it all. He reached out to Varner for legal advice, Hertz for editing help, and Ben Jones to expand the HR website. The team soon had a growing library of guidance and policy for employees to consult.

Finally, he and Hertz coordinated with Claudia Ferrini, environmental health and safety manager, on the purchase of

PPE. In late May, Ferrini completed the purchase of 25,000 masks for faculty, staff, and students on campus. They expected the order to last through the academic year.

**EMPLOYEE PAY:** It quickly became apparent that the financial damage the pandemic was inflicting on the economy, the state public health orders requiring most people to work remotely, and the decision to send students home, would threaten Oberlin employees' jobs. Public and private entities across the country were announcing layoffs and job restructuring. President Ambar and her team were unanimous in their desire to avoid layoffs and to continue paying employees—including those in negotiations—for as long as possible. Varner and Vazquez-Skillings researched the federal CARES Act to ensure the college was accessing all federal funding options. Meanwhile, President Ambar sought to allay widespread anxiety.

"It continues to be our goal to maintain pay and benefits for all regular employees for as long as possible," President Ambar wrote to employees on March 22. "This could mean that a number of employees deemed essential may need to be reassigned. Managers will provide more information in the coming days."

**CAMPUS EVENTS:** Oberlin typically hosts dozens of events on campus that serve hundreds of community organizations. Leadership knew that closing Oberlin to athletic, academic, and cultural events would be a blow to local, regional, and even national organizations. Realizing they had no choice, the leadership team spent hours sending emails with the disappointing news.

**ROOM AND BOARD REFUNDS:** The day they announced the campus' closure, President Ambar and Vazquez-Skillings began receiving emails requesting (and some demanding) refunds for tuition as well as room and board. College presidents and their boards across the country faced the same issues. Did remote learning compare favorably with in-person education and the campus experience? President Ambar and her leadership, with the support of Board Chair Canavan, determined that at Oberlin, remote education would continue at a level comparable to in-classroom education. President Ambar made clear that tuition refunds would not be forthcoming. But room and board adjustments were another matter. Vazquez-Skillings and her team, including April Herner and Nicole Addington, crunched budget numbers and, in consultation with Assistant Attorney Justin Younker, created a policy that reflected Oberlin's values.

"It is our goal to come as close as possible to making whole the families of students who had been in college housing and on a

dining plan," President Ambar wrote April 3. "When Oberlin asked students to depart campus, 60 percent of the semester remained. As a result, Oberlin will reimburse families for 60 percent of their college housing and dining costs prorated in accordance with the institutional scholarship and need-based aid the college provides to reduce students' cost of attendance.

"Oberlin also will ensure that families in need who are Pell Grant eligible receive at least a minimum level of support. The college also will absorb the fixed cost associated with residential and dining facilities staffing and maintenance."

In the same communication, President Ambar sought to tap—and reinforce—the inherent strength of Oberlin's community. She provided an opportunity for parents to help.

"In mid-April you will receive, as a part of our standard billing statement, an indication of your refund and four allocation options:

- maintain the refund on your account to offset next year's charges;
- request refund payment;
- allocate the refund to reduce student loans;
- donate the refund to Oberlin."

Over the next several weeks, nearly 50 families donated their refunds. In the midst of the chaos that was the spring of 2020, the gestures allowed the Oberlin team to pause, breathe, and appreciate a community's embrace.

By late April, the talks with the UAW were becoming more heated. The negotiating team needed to reassure Oberlin's employees, as well as students, faculty, staff, and interested alumni, that both sides were meeting in good faith. On April 21, Vitale and UAW negotiator Chris Freeman issued a joint statement.

"For the past several weeks, Oberlin College and the United Auto Workers have engaged in negotiations regarding the contracts of custodial and dining services workers that expire September 30. These discussions are continuing.

"Meanwhile, no union members have been forced into layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic," the statement began. "It is possible for two parties to disagree on issues and still work constructively to resolve their differences."



David Kamitsuka is known among Oberlin's administrators as one of the hardest working senior executives on campus. Leaders joked that if they left the office and Kamitsuka's car was no longer in its assigned space, they knew they were working late indeed!

"David K." is equally known as a passionate innovator and educator.

So it came as no surprise in mid-March, while all around him was fraught with uncertainty, Kamitsuka had the presence of mind to conceive of and propose a completely new course and engagement strategy for admitted students, who were unable to visit campus as they normally would.

Uncovering COVID-19: Critical Liberal Arts Perspectives was a two-credit, eight-week class team-taught by nine faculty and designed to engage admitted students and demonstrate Oberlin's exciting intellectual life.

"This course offers a holistic understanding of a complex global phenomenon that is reshaping how we work, play, learn, and engage with each other," read the online description. "Oberlin faculty members in biology, mathematics, politics, comparative American studies, cinema studies, economics, psychology, and rhetoric and composition will provide a variety of perspectives on the pandemic, demonstrating the interdisciplinary approach necessary for fully comprehending the current crisis."

The ambitious idea leveraged Oberlin's academic strengths. It also required contributions from already stretched faculty and support from both the Center for Information Technology (CIT) and the Office of Admissions. The timing was impeccable. The class ran from April 7 to May 26; the deadline for prospective students to commit and enter the college's first year class was May 1.

The morning after the first class, Kamitsuka told his colleagues of the progress, crediting the work of the course's lecture moderator, Associate Dean Laura Baudot, and the coordinators of student engagement with the course, Dana Hamdan, director of the Career Development Center, and Nathan Carpenter, director of the Peer Advising Leaders (PAL) program. Hundreds of students had participated. Despite some technical glitches, it appeared that the class had held participants' interest.

The course worked splendidly. In the end, 534 students signed up for the class, with 327 of them matriculating. The approach was so successful that the college repeated it along with six other Zoom courses overseen by associate deans Baudot,

Elizabeth Hamilton, and Daphne John, to retain student interest and engagement over the summer. All in all, 1,083 students enrolled in the summer courses. Others in higher education learned of the Uncovering Covid-19 course and sought to emulate its success.

On May 1, admissions staff in arts and sciences and the conservatory reported a class just shy of the college's target of 810. In a year when higher education was expecting an admissions decline of 20 percent on average, President Ambar considered the results a solid success.

"This is a direct result of all the hard work we are putting in," President Ambar told her team during a remote meeting. "I would stack up our marketing, our communications, and particularly the COVID-19 class against the efforts of anyone in the country."

### **Uncovering COVID-19: Critical Liberal Arts Perspectives was a two-credit, eight-week class team-taught by nine faculty and designed to engage admitted students and demonstrate Oberlin's exciting intellectual life.**

Everyone in the virtual room knew that these numbers would not hold up entirely, due to the stresses prospective students would experience during a summer dominated by pandemic-associated anxieties. But it was a start. The next step was to determine if Oberlin could host students safely in a crowded campus setting in the fall.



"What do you think of the Crazy David Option?" President Ambar asked.

It was late April, and President Ambar and Hertz were alone in the president's office, reviewing the prospects of the new academic year. In a few days, the admissions office would report the initial numbers of the incoming class, but the indicators looked promising.

Kamitsuka had suggested a bold proposal: Expand the academic year for the College of Arts & Sciences to three full semesters and limit student housing to one student per dorm room. This would require dramatic adjustments to every

aspect of the college, from academic planning to curricula to student life. Specific class years would be required to miss the fall semester, which would be a significant sacrifice for those students. Athletics would be hit hard.

President Ambar posed the question again, in a tone that was both question and statement. She clearly was intrigued with the possibilities.

“That is an incredible amount of work,” Hertz replied. “ResEd is scouring the region for more housing to see if we can still provide one room for each student and retain the two-semester plan. And the approach won’t work for the conservatory. It would be really hard on athletics.”

President Ambar was aware of the limitations, but she also knew that if Oberlin could implement such a bold and unique plan, it could once again help the institution protect students and simultaneously provide a quality residential educational experience.

“This would be like rebuilding the college from the ground up in two and a half months,” she agreed. “We need a health care strategy, and we need to evaluate our options. We need a report that we can give to the board at our meeting in early June.

“Form a committee of senior staff,” she continued. “We need a detailed analysis that reviews the three-semester option in all its implications, from financial, housing, academics, legal, human resources. This has to be tight....”

President Ambar paused and looked at her interim chief of staff. “I need it in a month.”



President Ambar, Varner, and Hertz held weekly hour-long calls with Board Chair Canavan and Vice Chair Chesley Maddox-Dorsey. During a call in April, President Ambar mentioned that the college was exploring its options for the fall. Canavan offered one piece of advice.

“Make sure your strategy can be applied to a variety of scenarios,” he said. “There are so many different variables to this that it will be impossible to plan for them all.”

His words were uppermost in Hertz’s mind as the Academic Year Planning Committee he had formed at President Ambar’s request held its initial meeting the first Sunday in May.

Kamitsuka, Quillen, Raimondo, and Vazquez-Skillings were on the call, along with Lori Ebihara, the manager of Kamitsuka’s

arts and sciences division. Kamitsuka had already analyzed data and proposed discussing the implications of enrollment declines of 10 percent, 20 percent, and 30 percent. A three-semester academic year would allow the college more time to adjust to such potential declines and also limit them, he suggested.

Others wanted to start the meeting by discussing the value of reducing the student population on campus, a process that had become known at “de-densification.”

“It is going to be really difficult to find enough off-campus housing to de-densify the campus in a two-semester plan,” Raimondo said. “If we insist on having just one student per room, we will scour the campus, but I doubt we can find enough housing for more than 2,000 students.”

Hertz posed a question. “There are too many variables here to plan for all of them. What if we approached this by identifying the key areas or pillars that pertain to our mission of providing a safe academic experience and planning a strategy for each area? That way, we can maximize our ability to adapt to a variety of factors.”

Hertz then asked the team to name the underpinnings of a safe Oberlin experience. Two hours later, they had identified five areas that cut across all aspects of campus life and function: Academic delivery, de-densification strategies and facilities management, health care, student life/the co-curricular experience, and financial and revenue planning.

Knowing that they faced an urgent deadline, the team agreed to meet three times a week until their report was complete. That meant they only had 11 more meetings, if their schedule held.

The following day, Hertz described the five pillars of Oberlin’s academic year to President Ambar.

“Don’t forget legal/HR,” she suggested. “I think it’s six pillars.”

Within days, the committee had clear definitions and assigned responsibilities for each pillar.

The six pillars of what later became known among some national educators as the Oberlin Plan were organized according to the leaders who would develop them:

- Health Management (Hertz): Public health coordination, campus health strategy, facilities protocols
- De-densification strategies/facilities (Raimondo, Vazquez-Skillings, Kevin Brown, Claudia Ferrini): Student life, classroom protocols, student population, athletics

- Financial and revenue management (Vazquez-Skillings): Enrollment assumptions, tuition, room and board, financial aid, budgeting, endowment impact, CARES Act
- Academic and educational delivery (Kamitsuka, Quillen): Modes of delivery, calendar flexibility, curricular requirements, academic/student retention strategies
- Co-curricular experience/student life (Raimondo): Close contact events, communication, athletics, student travel, student activities fee
- Personnel/employee management/legal issues (Vitale, Varner, Vazquez-Skillings): Staffing requirements and plans, furloughs and job status decisions, UAW negotiations, legal policies, safety issues and precedent



The word “de-densification” does not appear in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, and yet in 2020 it practically became a household term overnight.

President Ambar suggested that any reopening plan include a high degree of campus de-densification. Most colleges and universities publicly discussing their reopening plans were considering the de-densification of their classrooms. President Ambar wanted to go further. After some deliberation, she mandated a limit of one person per room in student housing.

Raimondo and her team were responsible for creating the plan that met that criteria. They also had to plan to de-densify dining halls, common spaces, and cocurricular activity space. But that would have to come later. Housing was the priority.

If people who “peer around corners” anticipate opportunity, Raimondo was becoming an oracle. Her team had been supporting students remotely since the pandemic forced them off campus. They had to maintain the health and safety of the hundreds of students who remained on campus, anticipate the needs of students now at home, and still assess the housing potential for a de-densified Oberlin.

To accomplish this ambitious task, Raimondo and her staff inventoried every square foot of livable space on campus. They only had a matter of days to consider any option.

Could old rooms in Wilder Hall be reconverted into livable space? Would there be adequate plumbing for bathrooms and showers?

They were figuratively and literally peering around corners.

Over the course of several days, Raimondo’s staff adjusted the number of rooms, impacting planning. Each day, staff brought to Raimondo numbers that were changing as new rooms were added or checked off the list. But eventually, the team had their number: 1,836.

If enrollment met projections, that could mean finding enough off-campus housing for about 1,000 students under a two-semester plan.

“If that is what we have to do, we’ll figure it out,” Raimondo told the committee. “But in a normal year, roughly 350 students live off campus. I can tell you the city of Oberlin doesn’t have housing for 1,000 students. If we have to go outside the city, that presents transportation issues. We are exploring hotels, but that creates cost and liability challenges. But we are talking to a number of hotels in the area just in case.”

### **The word “de-densification” does not appear in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, and yet in 2020 it practically became a household term overnight.**

To Kamitsuka, the calculation was a confirmation of the three-semester plan more than a determination about housing. He had been expecting Raimondo’s team to identify roughly 1,850 rooms, and he had been planning for a student population of 2,100 in the fall. To him, if the faculty supported it, developing the three-semester plan was the logical path.

“This means,” he told the group, “we can’t have all our students on campus at the same time. We will have to organize students by class. It will affect sophomores and juniors the most.”

First-year students and seniors needed to be on campus more than the other classes, he reasoned. Freshmen needed the fall and spring to become grounded in the college experience. Similarly, seniors deserved the opportunity for a “normal” final year in college.

“This will be tough, but we will need to tell juniors not to come back to campus in the fall, that they will have to wait until spring. And we will need to tell sophomores that after the fall semester, they will need to wait until the summer.”

Quillen reminded the group that the conservatory's faculty and students used their summers to pursue performance opportunities. For them, a three-semester plan was untenable, he said.

"We can work with that. The numbers still work," Kamitsuka said.

There was still much to do in the de-densification and academic delivery pillars. Dining and custodial services would need to be reconfigured. The labor negotiations only added to the complexity of the situation.

Facilities would need to be measured and adjusted so physical distancing was maintained. Plexiglas had to be installed across campus.

Kamitsuka and Quillen had already begun floating the idea of a three-semester schedule with faculty committees. They needed to move quickly to determine faculty interest in and willingness to pursue the three-semester option before making a final recommendation to President Ambar and the board.

In less than three months, the College of Arts & Sciences would need to:

- be prepared to deliver 1,313 lecture and seminar courses over a 12-month academic year;
- convert and add classrooms with proper public health and remote technology elements;
- develop pandemic appropriate operation protocols for the libraries and the Allen Memorial Art Museum (AMAM);
- redesign the online course registration system and re-register all students;
- redesign winter term, the self-directed education that allows students to pursue projects that can be unrelated to their major;
- hire and re-contract faculty to cover the new summer semester;
- organize and run pedagogy workshops on remote and hybrid teaching;
- oversee the petition process for students wishing to change their assigned semesters on campus;
- field questions and concerns from students and parents;
- design a pandemic-appropriate new faculty and staff orientation week;

- secure approval for the revised curriculum from accrediting bodies;
- communicate with and support staff on all of the developments.

Kamitsuka recognized this work would require intensive coordination among associate deans Baudot, Hamilton, and John along with business and office managers Angela Szunyogh and Ebihara; registrars Trecia Pottinger, Elizabeth Clerkin, AJ McCabe, and Lauren York; and the directors of the AMAM and libraries Andria Derstine and Alexia Hudson-Ward.

In addition, CIT would have to implement massive and comprehensive changes to Banner, the system that tracks student financial aid, registration and scheduling, and more.

On May 28, Kamitsuka received results from an arts and sciences faculty survey supporting changes to the 2020-21 academic calendar. The next day, the EPPC sent a formal letter to Kamitsuka and President Ambar supporting the plan.

The same day, the conservatory faculty held the last of its meetings to consider the three-semester plan before the board voted on the change. The discussion was favorable.

To the surprise of many, the three-semester plan appeared doable.



For nearly a month, while they juggled negotiations with OSCA and the UAW and conducted the business of the college, the committee members also gathered the information they needed to flesh out the other pillars. They analyzed enrollment projections and budget figures, debated employment policies, and questioned the de-densification and residential education plans. Each week, the team moved closer to its goal.

The number of details to be considered appeared endless. Funding from the CARES Act was uncertain, but the potential financial aid had to be explored. Even with a three-semester plan, enrollment projections called for decreases ranging from 10 percent (difficult but doable) to 30 percent (painful to horrific). The registrar's office prepared to adjust the educational plan of each student to accommodate a three-semester plan.

Varner and Vitale reviewed, evaluated, and revised contracts and human resources policies. Insurance coverage, work contracts, workplace policies—all had to be reviewed. The three-semester plan presented potential visa issues for international students.

As the information flowed in, it was Hertz’s job to write the report, request revisions from the team, and then submit it to President Ambar by June 1. He spent the Memorial Day Weekend writing the report and consulting with President Ambar.

In the middle of one conversation, they touched on a national news story that had shaken them both.

“Did you see the story out of Minneapolis?” Hertz asked.

“Heartbreaking,” President Ambar said. “I don’t understand how this continues to happen in the world.”

It was May 26. George Floyd had been killed the previous day.

Two days later, after protests had spread to other cities, including Cincinnati, Hertz revisited the topic. “Do you want to weigh in? I think this is going to spread.”

President Ambar paused. She was repositioning Oberlin for the fall. Did she have the time and emotional energy to take on race as well? As a Black woman and college president, wasn’t she obligated to comment?

“Let me think about it,” she said.

The next day, Hertz’s phone rang. It was President Ambar.

“I just sent you something. See what you think.”

On May 31, in an email full of passion and pain, President Ambar announced the Presidential Initiative.



### **PRESIDENT AMBAR’S EMAIL ANNOUNCING THE PRESIDENTIAL INITIATIVE**

*These last few days I have found myself at a loss. At a loss for words. At a profound loss of self, and at a loss for a community that I love, and of which I am a part.*

*At every turn, it seems, we are watching in anguish a world that views African-Americans as less than human and unworthy of dignity. Not deserving of life itself. The Black community—my community—is in excruciating pain. We are contending with what appears to be an unending well of racism and bigotry.*

*George Floyd’s agony was palpable. It would be natural for some to avert their eyes. To reframe recent events and to make them singular so that they do not seem like a societal ill, but rather a moment in isolation. But I can assure you that these events are not isolated and they are not singular.*

**“This upcoming year I will establish a Presidential Initiative for faculty and students that seeks to address issues of violence, police-community relationships, and racial injustices.”**

—PRESIDENT AMBAR

*We are witnessing an unraveling and a democracy that is now in search of its foundational societal norms. Hatred, anger, illness, and death fill our screens. There is grief at the abandonment of our ideals and a tearing of the heart as we see the impact on our children.*

*Sending young people out into the world to reshape it, and to make it different, is how I have spent my career. Oberlin has had from its founding a commitment to solving racial inequity. We view our institution as a place where students come first to be educated, but where they also translate that education into something more. We seek understanding and creative ways of advocacy. We work so that the marginalized are no longer at the edges but rather at the center.*

*It is clear that we are falling short as a nation. Every George Floyd reminds us of the truth. We wonder if we are standing still, or even worse, if we are retreating.*

*Yet, each day I hope. I hope because I simply refuse to despair, and because I see reason to hope every September. My hope is with the students who grace this campus. Every year we observe a different unending well here at Oberlin. Students arrive in the fall with a seemingly insatiable level of curiosity, a love and appreciation of difference, and an unyielding view that what has always been, does not have to be.*

*My hope is with our students. Hoping that they will have the courage to face the world as it is, and to be unrelenting in their desire to see it change.*

*To that end, this upcoming year I will establish a Presidential Initiative for faculty and students that seeks to address issues of violence, police-community relationships, and racial injustices. One could imagine courses, co-curricular initiatives, community engagements, and internships focused on the very issues that the death of George Floyd invokes. The primary goal of this initiative is not purely for learning, but for learning that demonstrably is applied to our world.*

*This small effort will not change what happened to George*

*Floyd, but it is in keeping with who we are at Oberlin. I believe in our students and their impact on a generation that can place our nation back on the right path.*

*My hope is with our students. I see their passion and commitment and desire to do good in the world, and it moves me. This country needs that hope now more than ever before.*

*President Carmen Twillie Ambar*



On June 1, the Academic Year Planning Committee completed the blueprint for Oberlin’s reopening in the fall and submitted the report, “What is Certain is Oberlin: Positioning the College to Re-Open and Thrive During COVID-19.”

The committee recommended:

- Reopening the campus in the fall on time;
- Shifting the College of Arts & Sciences to a three-semester plan consisting of fall, spring, and summer; the Conservatory of Music would remain on a two-semester calendar;
- Embracing a curriculum that included remote learning as well as a hybrid education, utilizing remote as well as in-person instruction.

“The college has the reputation, leadership, and financial wherewithal to persevere through a moment that will define a generation,” the committee wrote. “In fact, with the proper strategic approach, Oberlin has the opportunity to establish a foundation for growth and prosperity.”

Other recommendations included:

- Initiate a multi-layered approach to campus health care;
- Collaborate with a third-party health care organization, including Lorain County Public Health;
- Create a housing strategy that includes one student per room;
- Adjust class sizes to allow for physical distancing;
- Alter dining services to grab-and-go;
- Adjust facilities to assist with physical distancing;
- Create policies and procedures that reflect the unique rhythms associated with the pandemic;
- Increase communications;

- Establish an ongoing COVID-19 task force to advise President Ambar.

In the report’s conclusion, the committee anticipated problems at colleges across the country.

“In this COVID-19 world, questions abound,” the report read. “It would not be surprising for some campuses to become hot spots in the fall semester.”

President Ambar reviewed the report and accepted its recommendations. On June 5, Oberlin’s board of trustees met via Zoom for the first time, where they debated and accepted the report’s recommendations and emphasized the need to protect the health and safety of faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding community.

The next day, Hertz contacted Oberlin City Manager Rob Hillard and Oberlin City Council President Linda Slocum.

“I want you to know that tomorrow we will announce that the board has approved a new, three-semester plan that will allow Oberlin to be in session year-round, which will allow us to house one student per dorm room,” he said during his call with Hillard.

“That’s significant,” Hillard said. “But that should help our economy, and help the city in the long run.”

“We hope so,” Hertz said.

“That sounds like a lot of work, though, to change the courses.”

“Yes. We have a great deal to do, and students will be here in 10 weeks!”

The next day, President Ambar sent an email to students, faculty, and staff announcing the three-semester plan. It was the first step in a communications strategy involving webinars, emails, websites, and more that would last well into the fall.

“There will be some aspects of the changes we are instituting that require community sacrifices. I believe, however, that we will all be willing to do so with the goal of supporting individuals’ health while having a special residential liberal arts college and conservatory experience,” she wrote.

# CHAPTER 3

## Questions and Reassurance on a College Campus



**“We will need you to be vigilant, monitor your symptoms, agree to regular testing, practice physical distancing, and avoid large gatherings, whether on or off campus.”**

—PRESIDENT CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR, JULY 17, 2020

**F**or President Ambar and her team, life in the summer of 2020 transformed into a full-out, 10-week sprint. Work was conducted over Zoom at all hours. Oberlin's leadership team discovered that rebuilding the college in the midst of an unrelenting pandemic required a sustained level of collaboration, organization, and energy that would have been taxing even under normal circumstances.

Work-life balance disappeared. Pandemic and Zoom fatigue became a common concern.

Meanwhile, email with all manner of questions and demands poured in. Refunds. Housing availability and assignments. Course availability. Employment benefits and work requirements. The team fielded them all.

Regardless of their efforts, the underlying challenge loomed: How would Oberlin keep its faculty, staff, and students safe, even on a de-densified, physically distanced campus?

To President Ambar, this winter storm overwhelmed and isolated the college. There was no national or statewide testing strategy to depend upon. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as the Ohio Department of Health, offered safety guidelines but few specifics on how to run a college safely in the middle of a 100-year public health event.

Lorain County Public Health had become a valued partner, but even as Hertz and President Ambar feverishly consumed articles on everything from community spread to aerosol particles, what kind of health care strategy could a small liberal arts college develop in a matter of weeks?

As the world of higher education wallowed in troubling headlines, President Ambar focused on her true north: supporting Oberlin's student-driven mission and establishing a plan based on the six pillars that would give the college its best chance at reopening safely in August. She knew that such an aggressive and hopeful approach would mean her leadership team—and in many ways the entire campus—would be tested in a manner they had not been completely prepared for.

Deans Kamitsuka and Quillen, along with their teams, would have to work hand-in-glove with faculty to deliver an academic experience that met Oberlin's standards.

They also would need to collaborate with Raimondo to de-densify the campus; provide a safe, residential experience; and support Athletics Director Winkelfoos, who would likely have to navigate a fall without football and other team sports.

New registrar Trecia Pottinger, and her mentor, Elizabeth

Clerkin, who agreed to delay her retirement for a second time, would need to support and track individual students' academic and financial records.

Varner, Vitale, and Vazquez-Skillings would need to coordinate on new financial and workplace policies and guidelines.

Progress in these areas was essential, President Ambar knew. And yet, the work receded into the background when compared to two challenges that seemingly dominated every conversation, every email, every thought President Ambar had. Like any community in crisis in 2020, the college had a desperate need for both constant communication and a proactive health care strategy that would simultaneously protect and reassure.

From June 10, the day she announced the three-semester plan in both a video and email, President Ambar committed to a communications strategy designed to inform, bond, and support Oberlin's community, particularly the parents, students, and prospective students who were weighing fall, in-person attendance.

In the 11 weeks between her key announcement and the start of classes, President Ambar, Hertz, Jones, and others produced 25 videos, emails and webinars. Videographer Mathias Reed worked countless hours shooting and editing video.

## **During one 10-day span in June, President Ambar and her team planned and held five highly targeted webinars, interacting with hundreds of students and parents.**

In previous years, the college had used webinars to communicate important updates to large groups. But what had been a rare tool became a vital connection that the global Oberlin community depended upon.

During one 10-day span in June, President Ambar and her team planned and held five highly targeted webinars, interacting with hundreds of students and parents. On June 15, she, Kamitsuka and other leaders met with juniors and their parents to discuss the ramifications of being off campus in the fall. A few hours later, she, Quillen, and his team addressed all conservatory students and their parents to discuss the impact on their musical education.

As participants submitted hundreds of questions, President Ambar promised that each would be answered online. It took Jones the better part of July, but before students arrived on campus in August, he had organized, answered, and posted more than 500 frequently asked questions, organized in nearly 30 categories ranging from athletics to study abroad, tuition, and housing.

The webinars helped soothe the more difficult news President Ambar announced. On July 8, she and Winkelfoos delivered some distressing but not surprising news.

*We have been working tirelessly to establish the strategies to mitigate the impact of the virus, particularly as it relates to athletics. We have spent countless hours exploring ways in which we could provide you with a competitive experience that is safe, devoid of daily disruption and uncertainty.*

*After consultation with several members of the Board of Trustees, (league) officials, presidents and athletic directors within our conference and beyond, and public health professionals, we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that conducting fall sports safely is just not possible at this time.*

*“We do not believe that we can create a safe framework to conduct fall sports because of the high contact required in almost all of the sports. We found the risk that this would place on our student-athletes to be unacceptable.*

Six days later, they met via webinar with the athletes, coaches, and families affected.

As she participated in this series of online communications like no other she had ever experienced, President Ambar began to detect a change. In these virtual face-to-face communications with hundreds of people desperately seeking answers, she was connecting. With every honest response, with every promise to follow up on an unanswered question, with every reassurance that Oberlin was working nonstop to provide a safe haven, President Ambar, her team, and the Oberlin community were providing something they all sorely needed: stability.



Even as they wrestled with remote work policies and revised vendor contracts, Varner, Vitale, Vazquez-Skillings, and others continued their negotiations with the dining and custodial workers while further exploring outsourcing options. Settling the issue was essential if Oberlin were to reopen.

Talks had been progressing for four months with no resolution,

and the fall semester was approaching swiftly. At the beginning of June, Raimondo had estimated that a new dining services vendor would need at least six weeks to prepare for students' arrival. Chief Facilities Officer Kevin Brown estimated the custodial staff would need at least a month to clean, sanitize, and prepare the residence halls for students.

The issue had been pressing on Varner in the spring; once the three-semester plan was announced, questions around dining and custodial services became more critical.

In mid-June, a dining services vendor submitted a competitive bid that included a \$6 million investment in Oberlin's dining facilities and a commitment to offer the college's current employees the opportunity to interview for a job at comparable pay and benefits. The company also touted its experience operating in a unionized environment.

**With every honest response, with every promise to follow up on an unanswered question, with every reassurance that Oberlin was working nonstop to provide a safe haven, President Ambar, her team, and the Oberlin community were providing something they all sorely needed: stability.**

Varner took the offer to President Ambar. It was clear that the UAW would not be able to make a competitive offer that would complement the college's goals. However, there still seemed to be a narrow path forward to secure a new contract with the current custodial workers. The negotiating team recommended the college move forward with the dining services vendor and try to come to a resolution with the custodial workers, Varner said.

President Ambar knew such a decision would affect more than 50 employees; she also knew it would improve the dining experience on campus and serve the college's long-term interests. At the same time, this was a major turning point that was likely to bring the core issues of outsourcing to a head, after months of uncertainty.

The same day President Ambar led a webinar for athletes and second-year arts and sciences students, she announced a new

dining services vendor. Talks with the UAW to maintain custodial services under college management would continue, she said.

“Oberlin will engage a new dining partner that we believe will help Oberlin create a very robust dining program, while reducing costs to the college and investing in upgraded facilities,” she wrote in an email June 22. “Oberlin has selected AVI Fresh, a family-owned, Ohio-based provider known for its outstanding food and service....AVI employs unionized staff at a number of its client sites, uses locally sourced food options, is skilled at accommodating a variety of dining needs, and has a track record of outstanding service, provided in consultation with students, faculty, and staff at peer institutions we know well.”

With the fall semester approaching and the dining announcement released, the pace of negotiations quickened dramatically. Within days, the bargaining teams pursued a tentative agreement on a contract that would retain the college’s custodial services. The college requested the agreement be placed in front of the UAW members for a vote as quickly as possible. The two sides agreed on a deadline of July 1, which eventually was extended to July 2 to allow the union more time. But to the college’s surprise, the agreement never made it to the members for consideration, and President Ambar came to a difficult realization: the college had run out of time.

“Last night the union provided the disappointing news that it would not take the proposal to a vote of its members,” President Ambar wrote in a July 2 email. “So, with the return of students fast approaching, we must now move forward. Today Oberlin informed the union that the college will exercise its previously negotiated right to engage with a vendor for custodial services.”

In the same email, President Ambar announced that Scioto Services of Columbus, which had expertise in deep cleaning such as that required during a pandemic, would provide custodial services.

President Ambar knew the outcome would feed into a narrative among some students and alumni that the college was implementing an approach damaging to the union presence on campus. She briefed Board Chair Canavan and Vice President for Advancement Michael Grzesiak about the potential impacts. A select group of alumni, U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown, and others were expected to continue to express concern.

But as President Ambar explained to her senior staff on a Zoom call, inaction was “kicking the can down the road. That is not something I am willing to do. That does not serve the college,

and that is not what we were brought here to do.”

It was important to President Ambar that the college support the employees affected as much as possible.

“Our commitment to the path set forth in the One Oberlin plan has been challenging yet necessary. The pandemic has made this more difficult,” she wrote in her July 2 email. “We remain committed to providing the appropriate financial and institutional support necessary to respond to the needs of our community members who face a transition. And we know that, while painful, these changes are critical steps to ensuring Oberlin can adapt to the challenges of the coming year and thrive in for many years to follow.”

The news did indeed generate controversy. The *Oberlin Review* posted competing op-eds from Professor Chris Howell criticizing the college and board member Chuck Birenbaum defending the college’s actions.

A group of alumni established the 1833 Fund, whose goal was to siphon donations from the college and provide it to displaced dining services and custodial workers. The group announced that it had secured \$200,000 in pledges for its cause.

Still, a month later, Oberlin and the UAW Local 2192 issued a joint statement detailing terms for severance pay for those employees who would not continue working on campus for the new vendors. The agreement included three months of salary and nearly a year of health care benefits for workers who otherwise would not have coverage through other employment.

Both Oberlin and the union agreed that the parties had bargained in good faith.



For David Hertz, Oberlin College was like an amusement park ride that never stopped. It was a thrill a minute, but it was impossible to exit and at times overloaded the senses. The former journalist and public relations consultant had been serving as interim chief of staff since November 2019.

By March 2020, as the college closed its campus, it became clear that President Ambar intended to make developing the college’s health care and testing strategy one of his top priorities.

Most urgent was the need to develop a testing strategy if students were ever to return to campus. But how was a small Ohio liberal arts college to develop a reliable system to detect the presence of COVID-19 when the nation was struggling with a strategy of its own?

What techniques were safe and accurate? Were the vendors offering a test that had Federal Drug Administration approval? Would the vendors be reliable, and would they meet their commitment to Oberlin or relegate the college to a lower priority if larger clients demanded attention? How responsive would vendors on the West or East coasts be versus a company in the Midwest or better yet, Ohio?

“We are in the Wild West,” President Ambar told Hertz on more than one occasion. “We are on our own.”

By May, Hertz knew that President Ambar wanted a reliable and reassuring strategy that included testing the entire campus community once a month. Few other colleges across the country were considering this amount of testing, which would be costly and intrusive, if even possible.

Some in the medical community, including public health leaders, were discouraging such an approach, calling it overkill. Better to dedicate scarce testing resources to people with symptoms, they said.

President Ambar was undeterred. She insisted that the dynamics of a congregate community required a comprehensive testing program. It was the only way the college could reconvene safely, she believed. But as always, time was in short supply.

“If we don’t secure a partner, we are going to be frozen out,” she said in May. “I feel as if we are late.”

Hertz had been working the problem for weeks. A report from the American College Health Association had formed the basis for the health care pillar strategy he was writing for the board report. But the organization offered no insights into testing vendors.

A few companies had reached out to Oberlin, and he and President Ambar had interviewed two potential partners. But they were either expensive, geographically challenged, or could not field a test that had earned federal approval.

Hertz connected with the group of liberal arts colleges known as the Ohio 5 (Oberlin, Denison, Kenyon, Ohio Wesleyan, and Wooster), and together they began to evaluate a handful of other vendors.

The search was progressing slowly, when, on a mid-May morning, President Ambar called Hertz. Grinnell College in Iowa had hired a company out of Chicago to do all its testing. “Let’s look into it,” she said.

A few days later, Hertz and President Ambar were talking with a representative from Tempus, a biotech company that had expanded into COVID detection tests. Tempus produced a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test that was highly accurate. The company committed to processing test results within 48 hours of receiving samples. Its pricing was reasonable, and it could handle Oberlin’s volume.

### **President Ambar was undeterred. She insisted that the dynamics of a congregate community required a comprehensive testing program.**

“I think Tempus is our partner,” President Ambar told Hertz after the call. “But testing more than 3,000 people a month is a huge undertaking. That is going to take an incredible amount of infrastructure. I don’t know where we are going to do it. We can’t run that kind of operation out of Student Health. We are going to need some help.”

Administering a testing protocol capable of meeting the health and privacy needs of thousands of people for an extended period is a complicated endeavor. The college simply didn’t have the resources or the expertise to support the effort. The college also needed help finalizing the rest of its health care pillar, which by now included a number of tactics or layers that President Ambar and her team had identified. The strategy called for:

- A system to report daily symptoms. This became the purview of Ben Hockenhull, Center for Information Technology Communications Manager Jacquelynn Gaines, and the rest of the CIT department, which eventually implemented the program Full Measure.
- An ongoing, monthly testing protocol. Hertz eventually identified Mercy Health-Allen Hospital on campus and a sister company, Harness Health Partners in Cincinnati, as vendors to administer the tests.
- Upgrades to all buildings on campus, including inspections to heating and ventilation systems, the creation of Plexiglas barriers, and more. This work was assigned to Kevin Brown and his facilities team. In addition, CIT collaborated on the installation of 1,600 keyless locks in residential and academic buildings to reduce touching of doors and foot traffic and improve security. They also upgraded 49 classrooms with

videoconferencing equipment to support hybrid and fully remote courses.

- De-densification of dining, residence, academic, and cocurricular buildings. Facilities and ResEd oversaw much of this effort. Teams from the deans' offices in the conservatory and arts and sciences scoured academic buildings to implement the required changes.
- Creation of an aggressive marketing communications campaign to create awareness, buy-in, and engagement among students, faculty, and staff. The effort would need to develop a Community Agreement that students would need to sign before they could return to campus. Hertz, Jones, and Raimondo and their teams worked together and developed what became known as ObieSafe. Varner collaborated to develop the Community Agreement.
- Creation of a COVID response team, which would include medical expertise to help coordinate the strategy during the academic year. Hertz had to assemble the team before students arrived on campus in August.

It was vital that the strategy be airtight. All aspects were to meet or exceed standards set by the CDC and the state of Ohio. Hertz knew that in many respects, the plan would only be as effective as the faith Oberlin's community placed in it. He sought public health experts' review and approval and shared the strategy with experts at Mercy-Allen Hospital and Lorain County Public Health. Through the Ohio 5, he sent it to Ohio State University's College of Public Health. All found the strategy sound.

To explain the "layered approach," the college once again relied upon its communications. The first in a series of candid yet informative communications in late July came in a video and email titled "The Twelve Thorniest Questions." In it, President Ambar answered questions from Jones that they believed students and parents were wrestling with.

"Our world is literally swirling with complexity. We calculate measurements 6 feet at a time to maintain physical distance," President Ambar began in the July 17 video. "We wear masks, take tests, and record our temperatures. The effort to keep ourselves and those close to us safe can feel like we are navigating a maze. There is seemingly no clear path, and all our answers end in a question mark.

"But, despite being beset with questions, there is a reasonable path forward. Reasonable, not guaranteed. This is what I am telling those who ask me whether they should come to Oberlin

in a month. We have created a strategy that gives us all the opportunity for a fulfilling semester and academic year. For some students, this could be from a remote location; for others, it could be here on Oberlin's campus."

On July 24, President Ambar discussed the college's "layered" health care strategy and unveiled the testing protocol everyone on campus would need to participate in.

"Our testing strategy is one of the most intensive aspects of our approach to a safe campus. This testing will be ongoing throughout the academic year so that we can monitor and respond to COVID-19," she wrote. "I call our approach 'intensive' because we are committed to applying this strategy to the entire campus community, about 3,500 people every month... The effort to coordinate the logistics, manage the data and databases, and solve the many operational challenges has kept many people on our campus busy for weeks."

**"Our testing strategy is one of the most intensive aspects of our approach to a safe campus. This testing will be ongoing throughout the academic year so that we can monitor and respond to COVID-19."**

—PRESIDENT AMBAR

The college's closing argument came in a webinar. Oberlin board member Stewart Kohl had helped Hertz connect with experts at the Cleveland Clinic, who also reviewed the plan. Not only did they approve of the plan, they agreed to participate in a webinar for students and their parents, as well as faculty and staff.

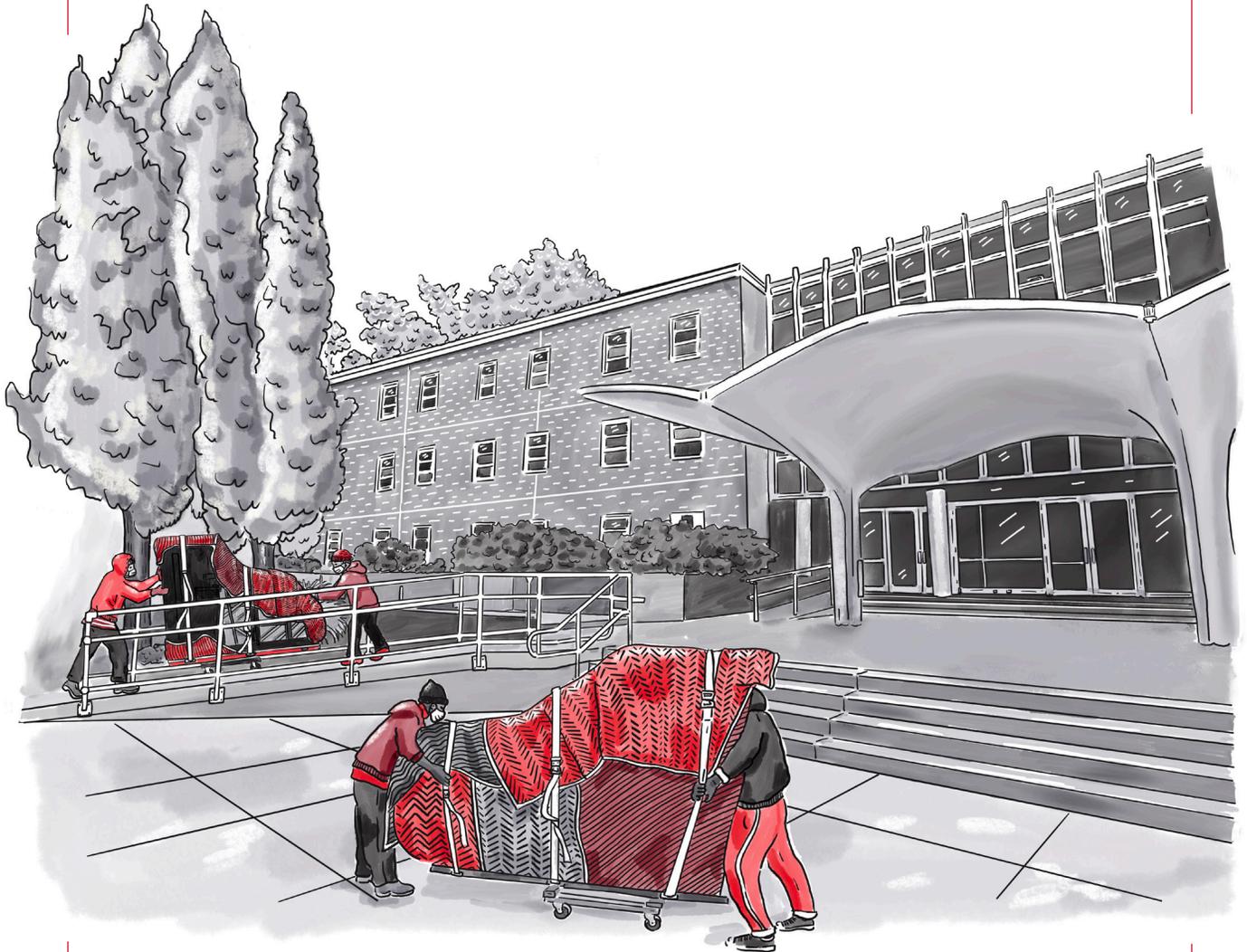
On July 28, more than 400 people signed on to hear President Ambar, her team, and three Cleveland Clinic experts discuss the strategy that would be deployed in less than a month.

After nearly an hour of discussion, Dr. James Young summed up his evaluation of Oberlin's strategy.

"I've seen a lot of these plans recently," he told the group. "I am very impressed with what Oberlin has done. The Community Agreement is excellent. This is as good a plan from a college or university as I have seen."

# CHAPTER 4

## Oberlin's Academic Balance



**“We learned a tremendous amount from our remote learning experience last semester, but we also know students missed being on campus, in class, and practicing their instruments with others.”**

—PRESIDENT CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR, JUNE 10, 2020

**A**t its most fundamental level, Oberlin College and Conservatory represents a remarkable balance. The yin of musical precision and the yang of academic rigor create a liberal arts school of unusual, and some would say, unique quality and culture.

In the same way, new deans Quillen and Kamitsuka complement one another. Fully supportive of the reorganization and academic investments central to the One Oberlin plan, Quillen, Kamitsuka, and their associate deans had quickly learned to work together on innovative programs combining music, arts, science, leadership, and more that would serve Oberlin students well into the future.

From the moment the *novel coronavirus* reached campus, it was clear this new enemy threatened to delay or even derail these plans completely. And though they shared a campus, COVID attacked the “Con” and “A&S” in different but equally invasive ways. The dangers involved in teaching a 100-student ensemble filled with flutists, bassoonists, and violinists were related yet far removed from the challenges the virus presented to a lecture or dance hall, art studio, or biology lab.

The Con was forced to evaluate nearly every aspect of its pedagogy, question and expand its use of technology, and research and create the latest teaching techniques to meet head-on the threats of this new COVID world. Everything from the direction a student faced when singing to the placement of a musician on a stage had to be rethought. It was as if the Con had to re-choreograph its entire approach to providing world-class instruction.

Kamitsuka and his A&S team were able to maintain their fundamental approach to education but had to adjust for the number of students who could sit in hundreds of classrooms. The recalculations required for both remote and in-person instruction represented an unforgiving level of organizational and academic revision. Complicating the challenge in A&S, because of the three-semester plan, administrators had to devise entirely new programs for the juniors who would not be invited to campus in the fall. The college couldn't simply let the junior class sit at home without an academic experience. Students who had to be away for nine months presented a special risk for not returning at all, a loss the college could not afford.

Quillen and Kamitsuka had no time to consider the enormity of the challenges before them. Without rapid reforms, adjustments, and solutions, Oberlin would not be prepared for the fall. None of the plans for a safe campus would matter if the academic deans—in their jobs less than a year—and their teams could not provide a quality education.

They had no standard to follow. Higher education institutions around the world were attempting to solve the challenge, but few had the rare musical and academic combination of Oberlin. They could consult with colleagues in higher education, but ultimately, Quillen and Kamitsuka, the counterweights of Oberlin's unique academic program, were flying blind together.



It was the silence that bothered him most. During the academic year, the Con's halls usually were filled with music and singing. Students emerging from practice rooms. Bulletin boards filled with fliers promoting concerts and theater performances. Hundreds of them. This was the backdrop against which the rhythm of the Con was measured. But as he walked the halls in the waning months of spring 2020, Peter Swendsen, senior associate dean of academic affairs, noticed the absence of it all.

COVID had effectively stopped the music.

The entire conservatory staff and faculty—led by Swendsen, Quillen, and Michael Straus, associate dean of operations—became determined to bring it back.

### **Addressing COVID became a nonstop series of challenges to be analyzed, possibilities to be discussed, and solutions to be implemented.**

Swendsen, Quillen, and Straus in particular worked seven days a week. No task was ignored. No idea was left untouched. It was exhausting and exhilarating work. Like the legs of a three-legged stool, the leaders supported one another with a relationship that was both dependent and complementary. Without one, the abilities of the other two would diminish.

After most of the students were sent home and the academic buildings closed to those students who remained, the communication between the three Con leaders became nearly constant. Emails flew into in-boxes at all hours. Addressing COVID became a nonstop series of challenges to be analyzed, possibilities to be discussed, and solutions to be implemented.

In March, they organized a team to help the Con students forced by circumstance to remain on campus. To these students stuck with little to do, it was a particular hardship not to have access to the campus' numerous pianos, both for enjoyment

and to continue practicing for their eventual recitals and jury evaluations. In a span of two days, Quillen, Swendsen, and Straus organized teams to move 14 Steinway grand pianos into dormitories and the student center to give the musicians an escape from the disruption in their lives.

During the pandemic of 2020, this was how the Con's leaders measured progress—one victory at a time.

In June, the work at the Con shifted into a more frenetic gear. President Ambar had announced that students would be returning in the fall. Because of the demands of the music world, with its summer festivals and musical opportunities, the Con would remain on a two semester calendar, but the deadline for A&S and the Con remained the same. Students would be returning in 10 weeks, and there was too much to do.

Swendsen did not know how they would get it all done. He just knew that they would.



Michael Straus didn't like to look too far ahead in his calendar. It seemed as if his every action was scheduled. From 8 a.m. until 10 p.m., he was in webinars, on Zoom calls, examining facilities, talking with faculty, and addressing operational needs. Of the three Con leaders, he oversaw some of the most challenging problems. How could the Con adopt the technology it needed? How could it alter its facilities for safe practices? What HVAC system adjustments could the Con's buildings accommodate, and which ones were truly needed to slow the spread of this virus?

The questions connected to student safety were endless. How could voice students practice with their teachers safely? How could ensembles play together? How close could musicians be to one another even on a large stage in a large auditorium? How could the Con best use its technology in facilities such as Clonick and the Birenbaum? The best Straus could do was take each question day-by-day and communicate with his two partners via email night by night.

Over the weeks, Straus formed a plan that Quillen, Swendsen, and their colleagues embraced. The Con would invest thousands of dollars in technology, digital keyboards, and other equipment to upgrade facilities and provide students the materials they needed to practice safely in Con buildings and residence halls. Even the Con's most modern facilities would be upgraded with enhanced streaming technology. Residence halls with appropriate acoustics would need to be identified so Con students could practice without disturbing their A&S cousins in other dorms.

To Quillen and Swendsen, the strategy to expand the use of technology was central to their efforts to revise musical education at Oberlin. The elements also attracted the attention of educators around the world, who later contacted the three leaders to discuss various elements of their strategy.

- **Zero latency (real-time) rooms.** Oberlin created five pairs of zero latency rooms, which allowed students and professors to listen to a variety of musical sources simultaneously, capable of transmitting high-definition audio and video without delay between rooms. Straus had long been familiar with the technology, but securing and installing it was critical to the quality of the Con's instruction. The rooms were designed to permit instruction in a wide range of configurations, from one-on-one lessons to chamber music and jazz-combo coachings. Each room was outfitted with a 4K OLED television on a mobile rack, a high-definition video camera with optical zoom and remote-control pan and tilt, a shotgun microphone for audio capture, and digital audio meters, speakers, headphones, and other associated hardware.
- **Technology upgrades to the isolation booth in Clonick Studio.** Similar to the work on the zero latency rooms, the upgrades supported jazz voice students singing in the booth to accompaniment of live musicians in the adjacent studio space.
- **Digital keyboards:** The Con purchased 150 digital keyboards to facilitate practice from dorm rooms. The expansion helped pianists, vocalists, and others in both classical and jazz disciplines.
- **New microphones and other technology.** The Con equipped nearly 50 faculty members with high-quality USB microphones to support remote music instruction. The Con also provided iPads to aid in remote instruction.
- **Live streaming upgrades.** The Con added upgrades to stream high-definition audio and video from nine different campus venues.

Straus also coordinated with ResEd to identify residence halls that would be most suited for Con students and their need to rehearse. Con faculty went from residence hall to residence hall to determine which had the best acoustics. Eventually, they settled on South and East, which were to become "music-making communities."



Music had opened the world to Bill Quillen. An expert in Russian music, he saw sound, melody, and rhythm as channels

through which all people could interact. He brought his passion and vision to Oberlin in August 2017 and became acting dean in the fall of 2018. Just as he was preparing to lead one of the world's top conservatories, COVID struck. Now, he was working harder than ever to protect the hope that his school could simply host students safely.

Quillen understood the extent of the educational revamp Straus and Swendsen were implementing. And though the work exceeded even his expectations, during his darkest, quietest moments, he was not sure it would be enough.

Quillen consulted every study, article, and webinar he could find on musical education and the spread of COVID. He spoke with colleagues around the world about solutions they were trying to implement.

In July, he asked Hertz to arrange a Zoom call with Lorain County Health Commissioner Dave Covell. Quillen was eager for Swendsen and a group of faculty to speak with the local expert.

"How can we have ensembles safely on the same stage when brass musicians are spewing aerosolized particles when they play?" Quillen asked Covell. "How can we teach voice safely?"

"With ensembles, if you have your students 6 and certainly 8 feet away, they should be fine," Covell responded. "I don't have good news for you on voice training. That is a difficult one to figure out."

By August, Quillen, Swendsen, and the faculty had established an elaborate set of parameters they hoped would keep students safe. The standards met or exceeded those from public health experts.

Quillen and his team were like engineers who had tested their designs in the lab and were preparing to launch a new product. Everything had proven out when tested, but they wouldn't really know how effective their product would be until it was tested under real conditions.

Their diligence over the summer had paid off in enrollment numbers that exceeded expectations. Among the students committed to attending the Con in the fall were 138 new undergraduates and three new graduate students. Through a series of six webinars and numerous emails, parents and students were as familiar as possible with how different musical education was going to be in the fall of 2020. There would be no surprises.

After working without a break for months, Quillen, Straus, Swendsen, and their faculty had rebuilt the Con.

They were ready to bring the music back to Oberlin.

Here is an example of special considerations the conservatory implemented for instruction:

For instrumental ensembles and studio classes involving string, keyboard, wind, brass, and percussion in both classical and jazz, the following protocols were required:

- Masking: Masks/face coverings required for all individuals. Wind and brass players may remove masks only when playing their instruments.
- Distance: Physical distancing of 6 feet for individuals who may remain masked consistently (strings, keyboard players, percussionists, conductors/coaches). For individuals who must periodically remove masks (wind and brass players), physical distancing of 12 feet must be maintained.
- Capacity: No more than 20 performers (excluding conductor/coach) in any ensemble, regardless of the normal published capacity of a rehearsal space.
- Room vacancy (for rehearsals or performances involving wind and brass players): For rehearsals or performances involving wind and brass players, rehearsals/performances must be followed by the following minimum room vacancies:
  - Vacancy of at least 30 minutes following rehearsals and performances taking place in Bibbins or Kohl halls (including faculty studios).
  - Vacancy of at least 60 minutes (one hour) following rehearsals and performances taking place in Central or Robertson halls (including Kulas and Warner halls), Finney Chapel, Fairchild Chapel, Cat in the Cream, or any other campus space not identified above.
- General/miscellaneous:
  - Faculty and students are encouraged to use Plexiglas shields and other barriers as desired. Doing so does not replace mask use as outlined above.
  - Brass players should be mindful when emptying their instruments' water keys (or "spit valves") or emptying condensation from their instruments. Collect condensation in a disposable paper towel, or in a reusable towel that's disinfected after each use.
  - Flute players are strongly encouraged to use a "Win-D-Fender," provided by school, in lessons and ensemble rehearsals/performances.

- Faculty and students are responsible for wiping down music stands, chairs, and other shared surfaces with disinfectant wipes before and after each lesson.
- Only students who are formally studying on campus (and who are participating in the campus' full suite of health and safety provisions, including testing) may participate in ensembles and studio classes in person. Neither students who have elected to study remotely nor community members may participate in the ensembles program in person during fall 2020; remote students and community members may participate in the ensembles program virtually, as appropriate, with approval from the instructor.



Dana Hamdan was confused. Kamitsuka was known for his passion and innovations, but what was this notion he was describing on the phone? What was the “Crazy David Option?” Three FULL semesters at Oberlin? No juniors on campus in the fall?

But the longer he spoke, the more the potential benefits of his plan came into focus. Equally apparent to Hamdan was the glaring risk in his plan: If the juniors did not return to Oberlin in the fall, what would they do? How could the college provide an experience that furthered their education and challenged them in a safe environment?

As executive director of the Career Development Center (CDC), Hamdan had wrestled with the critique that a liberal arts education failed to prepare students for their careers. Kamitsuka was describing a challenge Hamdan had been working to address since assuming her job the previous fall.

As she hung up, Hamdan realized the enormity of the task. She had roughly nine weeks to create a program entirely unique to Oberlin, one that built upon the One Oberlin report's focus on career readiness, yet was relevant to world events. The experience had to motivate hundreds of juniors who were being told they could not return to Oberlin—until January!

As Hamdan's colleagues in the dean of students office prepared the campus for the safe arrival of nearly 2,000 students, Hamdan saw a train coming down the tracks toward her. How would she produce a summit filled with “Tier 1” speakers and career skills development sessions, followed by hundreds of micro-internships to provide virtual, real-life learning experiences?

Hamdan needed help. Pulling off sessions on how to write resumes or grant applications was not the issue. She and

Associate Director Dustin Evatt-Young could do that in a matter of days, but under these circumstances, such sessions would not be enough. Not even close. She and Evatt-Young knew they needed nationally recognized leaders who could motivate, enthuse, and teach students who wanted to be anywhere other than where they were.

She turned to Oberlin Board Chair Chris Canavan, Vice Chair Chesley Maddox-Dorsey, and board member and well-known actor Ed Helms. Together, the three secured eight of the summit's 11 keynote speakers. Soon, luminaries such as Alexis McGill Johnson, president of Planned Parenthood; Rhiannon Giddens, a Grammy winner and MacArthur “genius;” and April Ryan, White House correspondent and CNN contributor, had agreed to appear. President Ambar pledged to provide the opening keynote address.

VP for Advancement Mike Grzesiak and his staff connected with Oberlin alumni to get their support. There was no time for a campaign. This required direct, urgent conversations.

## **Was it possible that the Junior Practicum was tapping into a passion for career development that would help students for years to come?**

The work went quickly, as most of the alumni and professionals were eager to help, to be part of a groundbreaking solution for Oberlin. In nine weeks, Hamdan, key board members, and Grzesiak's team secured over 50 speakers for the 19-day summit. Oberlin's juniors heard keynotes in fields such as climate change, refugee protection, politics and the media, gentrification, and political polarization.

Hamdan had the growing sense that she and the CDC were developing something significant. Was it possible that the Junior Practicum was tapping into a passion for career development that would help students for years to come? It was clear to Hamdan that the Junior Practicum was generating an unexpected level of excitement.

Next, she needed micro-internships. Hundreds of them.

As if on cue, other board members helped Hamdan secure the internships she needed. Eric Katzman, Leanne Wagner, David Krischer, Lillie Edwards, and Sean Gavin were among

the many alumni who provided assistance. Before she had finished, Hamdan and her team had secured more than 400 micro-internships.

In the end, 300 students took on a micro-internship or participated in faculty-led research projects. On the last day of the program, student Rowan Smith wrote to Hamdan. “You granted me an opportunity to take on an internship, something I don’t think I would’ve been doing for a little while if it wasn’t for you creating this program.”

Student Kate Raphaely told Hamdan that the program “made waiting for school to start in January worth it.” More than eight out of 10 participants—students who had been told to stay home in the fall—said the experience positively impacted their connection with Oberlin.

For President Ambar, the Junior Practicum was an example of devising an innovative solution with widespread application.

“This is definitely something we will continue to do after the pandemic,” she told her senior staff.

Hamdan presented her findings to the board during its October meeting.

“It gives you a sense of how much untapped potential there is for programs like this,” she said. “We KNOW that the Junior Practicum left students less anxious and more excited about life after Oberlin. This is what career development services should look like today.”



David Kamitsuka solidified his vision for the “Crazy David Option” over the first weekend in May.

“This will be a lot of work. But it is the best way to uphold our academic excellence, maintain public safety, and minimize the financial impact on the college,” Kamitsuka thought.

His life hadn’t been the same since.

It seemed that nearly every waking hour after that May morning was consumed with evaluating the “CDO,” convincing others of its value or figuring out how to smooth out its implementation.

He realized that the toll on faculty would be immense. They already had been teaching remotely. Now they were going to have to prepare for hybrid teaching to both remote and on-campus students who remained in their rooms in the fall, while juniors

would not return to campus until the following semester, when sophomores would leave. Teaching would need to continue in the summer. Faculty research would be impacted.

Kamitsuka had been at Oberlin since 1994. He thought he knew every nuance of the college. He estimated privately that up to a quarter of the faculty and staff would struggle with the pace of change and that academic standards could be impacted.

But reality proved him wrong. It would be overstating the transformation to say it was easy. But the college’s more than 900 faculty and staff embraced the change and the charge associated with implementing what became known as the three-semester plan.

Kamitsuka watched the transformation begin in March with Zoom training from Leslie Joseph, Heather Spellman, others in the Center for Information Technology department, and Associate Dean John. It continued with the total reinvention of classes to be taught for the rest of the spring and the following academic year, with pedagogy workshops and a novel new faculty orientation overseen by Associate Deans Baudot and Hamilton.

**It would be overstating the transformation to say it was easy. But the college’s more than 900 faculty and staff embraced the change and the charge associated with implementing what became known as the three-semester plan.**

Managing the change became more than a full-time job. The implications from adjustments to student schedules and billing to ensuring that course capacity matched enrollment totals were massive. After President Ambar’s announcement of the three-semester plan, Kamitsuka had to reconfigure the entire A&S course catalog before students could make informed decisions on whether they wished to pause their education and take a leave of absence for a year or semester, or attend Oberlin either in person or remotely.

Faculty, many of whom were in high-risk groups for COVID, were given a choice. They could teach remotely if they felt unsafe on campus or they could plan to be in a classroom setting. Kamitsuka had to have all of their answers before he

could complete the catalog. Among the new material he had to include was whether each class was available as a hybrid, in-person, or remote-only class.

Baudot, who often teamed with the conservatory's Swendsen on collaborative programs, kept in touch with progress in the Con. The rest of the A&S team worked on everything from ensuring socially distanced classroom seating to revised contracts for faculty teaching during the summer. John kept the Higher Learning Commission, an academic accrediting association, apprised of the academic plans.

On July 15, Kamitsuka, Quillen, Dean Raimondo, and Registrar Pottinger collaborated on a critical email in which they described the reconfigured catalog for both A&S and the Con and the new academic calendar. They told students that before they could return and remain on campus, they had to sign a new Community Agreement that described how each student would be required to act.

Just as the Oberlin administrators had been on a tight timetable, students were given a small window for consideration. They had until July 20—five days—to make their decision.

“An Oberlin education has never been more important to help you understand the historic challenges we face and make an impact on the world around you,” the deans wrote. “With your commitment and engagement, we will come together this year as a community of students, scholars, and artists in a way that is both responsible and inspiring.”

How students responded in the next five days would provide Kamitsuka, Quillen, and Raimondo their best insight yet into whether, after all their labor, students actually wanted to be on campus.

The first students were scheduled to arrive in three weeks!



President Ambar guided Oberlin's campus through the sprint of summer much like a coach driving her team to better performance. Even in the midst of its frenetic activity, the campus fell into a pandemic-dominated rhythm. Each section of campus demanded its own attention. Some needed to pace themselves, others needed more energy and urgency. She quieted and coaxed, and sometimes strongly motivated, as the campus worked toward its much anticipated re-opening.

Teams from across the campus, from the deans' offices to faculty, facilities, CIT, and other staff requested the campus

carpenters outfit classrooms with Plexiglass and other barriers to slow the spread of COVID. All manner of measuring devices were employed to ensure that the appropriate 6-foot increments were labeled for physical distancing.

And yet, the world outside Oberlin intruded. In early July, the Trump administration announced plans to strip international college students of their visas if they did not attend at least some classes in person. The policy could have led to the deportation of students and threatened the opportunity for international students to attend colleges and universities in the United States.

### **They told students that before they could return and remain on campus, they had to sign a new Community Agreement that described how each student would be required to act.**

President Ambar was consumed with campus preparations, but she also felt compelled to support her students and address a policy she found objectionable. On July 13, she addressed the issue in an email.

*I am sure you have read about the federal government's most recent effort to curtail the presence of international students in the United States. The decision would require international students to leave this country if their college shifts fully to online study because of COVID-19. We view this decision as capricious, arbitrary, and harmful to our students and our community.*

*There is no justifiable reason for this approach. Students who need to complete a program remotely should be able to do so without jeopardizing their active and lawful status either within or outside the United States. International students bring diverse perspectives and experiences and contribute to our commitment to prepare all students for a global society.*

She wanted to be clear to Oberlin's international students, as well as their advocates on campus. She had their backs.

The very next day, Vitale issued an announcement preparing staff to return to work and demonstrating the leadership team's collaboration. He timed the note so it was issued the day before Deans Kamitsuka, Quillen, and Raimondo sent their important information about fall semester.

“Oberlin College’s faculty and staff have been exemplary in recent months, supporting students, each other, and the institution itself. We all have adhered to guidelines from Governor Mike DeWine and the Ohio Department of Health,” Vitale wrote.

“As we move forward to reopen campus, I am writing to remind everyone of the steps involved....Faculty and staff may now return on a staggered or rotational basis in shared workspaces....Signs are going up across campus. Some work spaces have been reconfigured with Plexiglass or other safety precautions to minimize spread of the virus. This effort will be ongoing throughout the phased reopening of campus.”

Exactly one week later, on July 21, a cross-divisional team debuted a new marketing communication strategy that would soon dominate campus.

They called it “ObieSafe.”

# CHAPTER 5

## The Campus Finds a Temporary Rhythm



**“What we are trying to do is difficult. We are on a knife’s edge. If we are successful, it will be because of our students.”**

—PRESIDENT CARMEN TWILLIE AMBAR, AUGUST 2020

President Ambar approached Williams Field House the morning of August 5 to be swabbed. Among those participating in Oberlin College's first on-site COVID-19 tests, she had a rare combination of emotions: pride at what her team had accomplished, excitement at the prospect of students' imminent return, and a gnawing anxiety.

What level of disease were we about to admit to campus, she wondered. Our health care team was still being assembled. Would the strategy hold up? Could we keep everyone safe?

Dedicating the college's largest indoor space to testing rather than athletics certainly was a statement.

From the outside, Williams appeared largely untouched. The screening tent at the building's entrance was benign enough. It could have served as an event check-in, if it weren't for the nurses armed with thermometers and medical release forms.

Upon entering the vast building, however, the facility's transformation became evident, and the import of what Oberlin was about to attempt commanded her attention.

Stanchions were strategically positioned to line up Oberlin's campus community, guiding them back and forth to encourage physical distancing. Signs marking 6 feet of distance were placed along the path. Mercy employees who were prepared to check in students, faculty, and staff sat at tables along one side of the field. Kevin Brown's facilities staff had erected pipe and drape barriers to create several testing bays at what would have been mid-field.

President Ambar paused to take in the sheer size of the testing infrastructure the college—mostly the facilities team and Ben Hockenhull and his CIT colleagues—had built. Oberlin's community would never fully appreciate how quickly the team had secured scanners to record the tests, set up computers for patient information entry, and tested and integrated new secure scheduling software. Not to mention how Hertz and others had established protocols with Tempus and Mercy.

She nodded. It was not important that the community fully understand the effort. People would be comforted by this, she thought. *That* was important.

President Ambar resumed her walk through the maze, the artificial turf springing beneath her feet. She was one of only 25 people to be tested that first day, "to work out the kinks," as Hertz had explained.

That made sense. In less than three weeks, more than 400 students a day would file through this space. It was essential

that the system work smoothly by then. There were too many people who would be anxious while awaiting the results, not to mention the students who would be in quarantine during move-in until they were cleared to roam the campus.

President Ambar knew some members of the campus community doubted the value of mandatory testing. Others doubted the wisdom of allowing students from around the world to come to Oberlin. That was why she had arranged for a video to be taken of her going through the process. She needed to engender confidence in the layered health care strategy. It was important the community see her getting tested, and that she demonstrate the ease with which everyone could complete the process. One less thing to worry about.

Lord knows, there was enough to keep her occupied. As she walked toward check-in, she reflected upon all the Oberlin team had accomplished that summer, as well as all that still had to be done.

- Enrollment remained strong, particularly considering the estimates within higher education of year-over-year declines of up to 30 percent. Carballo and his counterpart at the conservatory, Beth Weiss, estimated that Oberlin's fall enrollment would be down about 14 percent. That's a victory under these circumstances, President Ambar thought.
- Hockenhull and CIT were still working seven days a week, as they had for much of the summer. They were trying to coordinate testing with the move-in schedule that Director of Residential Education Andy Sadowskas had created; it was essential that students be tested immediately upon move-in.
- The college had launched ObieSafe on July 21. The marketing and communications strategy was critical to the semester. Strong communications was one of the most important tools the college had to fight the spread of disease. Assistant Dean Jessica Bayer-Crissman, Hillary Hempstead in the Office of Communications, consultant Steve Kloehn, and others understood that ObieSafe needed to inform, engage, and motivate the entire campus community. ObieSafe signs and logos promoting mask-wearing, physical distancing, handwashing, the Community Agreement, and much more already were appearing all over campus. The ObieSafe Weekly email newsletter was reaching students, faculty, staff, parents, and Oberlin city officials.

"We need to change behaviors," President Ambar thought, continuing her walk toward the testing registration desk. "ObieSafe has got to work."

- The Cleveland Clinic webinar on July 28 had helped reassure much of the community. The timing had been effective. Less than a week later, Nathan Carpenter, director of the Peer Advising Leaders program (PAL), had launched an academic transition program for first-year students that was integrated into the new student virtual orientation program, the first of its kind at Oberlin. Programming was to extend throughout the entire month and help first-year students adjust to the rigors of college at Oberlin.

That adjustment is hard enough during normal times, President Ambar thought. What would it be like for them during a pandemic?

President Ambar's thoughts returned to her "to-do" checklist. Hertz was struggling to hire a campus health care coordinator to work with Harshbarger at Student Health Services and help implement the health care pillar. The CIT team was still days away from introducing the campus to Full Measure, the daily symptoms monitoring system that would help people remember to take their temperature before mixing with the campus community. And she and Hertz were giving a presentation to Oberlin City Council on August 17 to describe the college's strategy to prevent the spread of COVID.

Then there was the "other" stuff, as she thought of it. The actual running of the college.

- The onboarding of AVI and Sciotto was well underway. Yet another thing that absolutely had to go smoothly once students arrived!
- Negotiations with OSCA were continuing, but moving slowly. The college had made clear that the pandemic precluded OSCA from operating either housing or dining services this semester, but that was about all the two sides seemed able to agree upon.
- She had announced the Presidential Initiative way back on May 31. Other areas of the college such as athletics, the conservatory, and arts and sciences had moved forward with their own diversity and social responsibility initiatives, but President Ambar had not yet fully defined the initiative.
- The One Oberlin goals for academic investment and integration were ongoing.
- Vazquez-Skillings was developing an ambitious multimillion dollar comprehensive plan that included a new heating and cooling system for the college, as well as new student housing.

- The college was in the midst of updating its Title IX diversity, equity, and inclusion regulations and requirements to meet federal standards. Online training across the campus needed to be completed.

So much to accomplish, and yet it was difficult to divert her attention away from testing.

President Ambar knew that the more than \$1 million invested in the program, along with the efforts of hundreds of faculty and staff across campus, would be for naught if students came to Oberlin ill and contagious. Health experts had told her to expect up to 10 percent of the students to arrive with COVID. More than 150 students could need to be quarantined for two weeks. That number would overwhelm the entire hotel and its 75 rooms, as well as the two residence halls—Fairchild and Keep—that had been set aside for quarantine. The thought made President Ambar shudder.

### **Health experts had told her to expect up to 10 percent of the students to arrive with COVID. More than 150 students could need to be quarantined for two weeks.**

She planned to send a video to students asking them to take extra care in the weeks before traveling to campus, but it was unclear if they would listen. Would they want to be back on campus enough to take the extra precautions?

President Ambar sat down for her first COVID-19 test. The ever-present Mathias Reed was nearby, pointing his video camera at her.

So much was riding on the students. But that is as it should be at Oberlin, President Ambar thought.

She removed her mask as the nurse presented the testing swab. President Ambar smiled.



Katie Gravens was looking for the right organization, the right fit, where she could help others cope with COVID-19. The retired educator and nurse understood better than most that the world faced an intractable, nondiscriminating, and aggressive enemy that would not let up. Most organizations

would not know what to do when confronted with the novel coronavirus.

Gravens had retired nearly a year ago, but she knew an unstructured life would not suit her. Too much to do and too many people to help in the middle of a pandemic.

Her second interview with the chief of staff at Oberlin College was to begin in a few minutes. She reviewed their first conversation in her head.

The college was trying to hire someone with public health experience to oversee its response to COVID. As a former program director and nursing faculty member at Lakeland Community College, she certainly knew her way around higher education. And she agreed that Oberlin needed help desperately. The layered healthcare approach Hertz had described seemed feasible, but the school needed to hire a COVID-19 campus health coordinator quickly. It already was mid-August and students would be arriving for the fall semester in a few days. During her Zoom interview with President Ambar, Oberlin's leader had made it clear that the job was critical to the college's safe operation.

"I want to help. And Oberlin is a great institution," Gravens told Hertz when the Zoom call started. "But I am worried that this job will be overwhelming, with more work than one person can manage. I was primarily interested in a part-time role at this stage of my career."

Hertz was clearly feeling the urgency.

"Katie, we need you. I am forming a team and am hiring someone from the advancement office to join us. We are coordinating with student health and the local hospital," he explained. "I am going to oversee and coordinate the entire effort, but you are going to be a central figure in implementing our layered strategy."

Hertz described the move-in strategy Oberlin was finalizing after weeks of meetings. Students would drop off their luggage and go to the field house for testing. After testing, students would check in with ResEd, while family members received a symptoms screening. Then both would go to the assigned residence hall. Families would leave as quickly as possible after the move, and students would quarantine for as many as five days or until their test result came back clear.

The plan appeared sound to Gravens, but the numerous variables were a concern.

"What if a student doesn't want to be tested?" she asked.

"It is mandatory," Hertz said.

"What if they show up with symptoms?"

"We will test them separately and then send them to the hotel, where they will be isolated."

With each answer, Gravens felt herself increasingly drawn to the job.

"I feel as if I will be on my own," she said finally. "I can't handle this entire job myself. How about answering all the email? President Ambar said that would be a large part of my job. And what about contact tracing? I will need to build a team. And then there is COVID. I am in a high-risk group because of my age. I don't want to get it."

"I promise you, Katie," Hertz said. "We will be a team. I will be there with you. And I will help you build the contact tracing team. As far as getting COVID, I'm with you. I'm in a high-risk group too. I'm immune-suppressed. I really don't want to get it either."

Hertz concluded with a plea. "Katie, I don't have a medical background. We need you."

Gravens smiled. A few minutes later, she hung up. She was to start August 12. She had just five days to prepare. Well, she told herself, you wanted to help where you were needed. But she remained skeptical.

"This is never going to work," she thought.



In her more than 25 years in higher education, Carmen Twillie Ambar had never experienced the depth of connection she felt developing with students and parents since spring.

It began when Oberlin made it possible for parents to donate their room and board refunds. And it continued as President Ambar sent emails and videos and conducted webinars updating and reassuring the Oberlin community.

A well of emotion and support was building.

Emails. Calls. Letters. They all came to the president's office, advancement, and to the academic deans. To be sure, a portion of the outreach was critical of Oberlin. Some parents were dissatisfied with the size of their refund. Others were concerned about whether students would be safe on campus in the fall. Some alumni were unhappy with the course of the negotiations with the UAW or OSCA.

But of those who wrote, the vast majority were parents who praised the clarity of the college's communications and the evident effort President Ambar and the faculty and staff were making to resume classes safely on August 31.

President Ambar noted the beginning of the groundswell in the spring, after students were abruptly sent home. The college had sought emergency funds to help students in need cover costs related to COVID-19, including moving expenses, groceries, and internet access. Advancement received more than \$50,000 in 72 hours, and eventually raised \$66,500.

About the same time, the staff was struggling to process refunds to parents for 60 percent of their room and board fees from the spring semester. One option the college offered was for parents to donate the refund back to the college, in a sign of support. Parents offered a touching response.

"Please do not refund me for the unused portion of my son's residential and dining charges. Consider it a donation towards the financial health of this beloved institution," Mary Rees wrote on April 3.

"I appreciate these messages, and I encourage you all to do whatever is necessary to ensure Oberlin's survival," Doug Rubin wrote on April 20. "Even though our income is not large and we are paying for our son's (partially discounted, but still sizable) expenses to attend Oberlin, I was pleased to make my first donation to you all last week. More to come as we can afford. In so many ways, I believe in what you are doing."

In all, 49 families donated all or part of their refunds, totaling \$95,616.84.

As August progressed toward September and students began to arrive back on campus, the notes of support shifted. They began to acknowledge the communication President Ambar and the college had sustained for months. But one of President Ambar's personal videos triggered some of the most fervent notes.

On August 19, President Ambar sent the Oberlin community a video of encouragement. She had wanted to address the students who were due to return to campus in four days.

"We're excited to see many of you on campus in just a few short days," she wrote in the email introducing the video. "We've all seen the recent reports from other colleges and universities, where student behavior has triggered outbreaks of COVID-19 and forced the schools to alter their well-laid plans to reopen in person. I have confidence that we can avoid a similar outcome.

However, it depends on you."

The response from parents was immediate.

"We need this sort of faith and leadership everywhere. You are an inspiration," Charles Newcomb wrote the same day.

"Many thanks to you and the entire staff at Oberlin for the labor of love you have dedicated to ensuring a safe start to school. This will be my son's freshman year, and as nervous as I am to have him far from home during a pandemic, I feel confident that he is joining a community that cares about his and all students' well-being," wrote Kristen Rudella, also that same day. "We greatly appreciate your empathy, leadership, and compassion during this challenging time, and we are excited to be a part of the Oberlin family!"

**"Many thanks to you and the entire staff at Oberlin for the labor of love you have dedicated to ensuring a safe start to school. This will be my son's freshman year and as nervous as I am to have him far from home during a pandemic, I feel confident that he is joining a community that cares about his and all students' well-being."**

—KRISTEN RUDELLA, OBERLIN PARENT

Some families added donations.

"We are so impressed with your leadership—especially during this pandemic. For that reason, coupled with the fact that we love and believe in the mission of Oberlin, we send along our contribution," Sara and Dave Coffey wrote on September 7. "We know many colleges were struggling before COVID hit, and we want to be sure that Oberlin makes it.... Thank you for all you have and will continue to do as Oberlin's president."

President Ambar's communications also attracted the attention of other higher education leaders.

"One of my colleagues sent me a copy of your welcome back to Oberlin video, which I thought was so well done, so truthful

and heartfelt that I was compelled to send you a message of support and congratulations,” E. Gordon Gee, former president of The Ohio State University and current president of West Virginia University, wrote on August 21. “The time for leadership has never been clearer among university presidents.”



Monday, August 24, was warm and sunny. It would be a stretch to say campus was crowded. But as President Ambar looked toward the Science Building, she could feel the difference. The energy. Students were beginning to return.

Residential Advisors (RAs), Peer Advising Leaders (PALs), and international students had already arrived, but now move-in week was underway. The first of about 1,800 freshmen, sophomores, and seniors had arrived the previous day. They had checked in, gone through testing, and entered their rooms to be quarantined pending their test results. A remarkable number of parents opted to take off from work so they could drive their sons and daughters to Oberlin rather than risk exposure on planes and in airports.

President Ambar and Hertz decided to walk the campus to experience move-in firsthand. They hadn’t gone far when students and parents began to approach.

“President Ambar!” said one parent. “Thank you so much for your videos and emails. The communication has been excellent. So different from the college my other son attends.”

By the time President Ambar and Hertz arrived at the Williams Field House, about a dozen students and parents had stopped them with similar comments.

Outside the Field House, a freshman student and his parents approached President Ambar.

“Can we get our picture taken with you?” they asked. “Thank you so much for all you are doing.”

An hour later, as they returned to the President’s Office, President Ambar felt something she hadn’t realized had been missing until that moment. Campus is always better with students, she thought.



Unfortunately for Meredith Raimondo, Jessica Bayer-Crissman, Thom Julian, and others on the student life team, energy was not the only thing students brought with them to Oberlin.

When moving onto campus for an entire semester or year, they also brought what seemed to the Oberlin staff to be a life’s worth of belongings, which they had to cram into residence hall rooms.

To facilitate the move-in, many families had shipped packages of essential items such as bedding or even medications to Oberlin ahead of time. Normally, students would pick up those boxes after arrival, but because of quarantine, staff recognized the urgency of delivering the packages directly to students.

This approach met the urgent needs of many students and allowed them to unpack during their three or four days of quarantine, but it placed an impressive burden on the mailroom and the Oberlin staff, which had the responsibility of processing and delivering thousands of packages in a matter of days.

**“The time for leadership has never been clearer among university presidents.”**

—E. GORDON GEE, PRESIDENT, WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

In addition, Kevin Brown’s facilities team had emptied the dorm rooms of all the belongings 2,800 students had left behind when they were forced to vacate with little notice last spring. By August, the Heisman Field House was filled with thousands of boxes, loose items, and various pieces of furniture, all of which had to be delivered to students on campus or shipped home to their owners.

For Raimondo, Bayer-Crissman, and Julian, it was a bit like the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty— only they had to put the various pieces back together under deadline pressure.

Raimondo watched a staff already depleted from months of nonstop work rally to muster the energy for the task.

While Bayer-Crissman tackled the daunting task of coordinating a team to distribute the boxes in the Field House to students’ fall housing assignments, Julian created a delivery system to bring packages from the mailroom to quarantined students’ rooms. Both reached across campus asking for help sorting and delivering packages. Coaches, athletes, and others logged hours to help the mailroom and student life plow through the work. The record for most deliveries to one room: 27 boxes!

It was not unusual for Julian and his colleagues, armed with boxes, to start knocking on doors early in the morning, and to work well past midnight.

“I’m seeing boxes in my sleep,” Crissman remarked during a strategy meeting.

“We can’t do this again,” Raimondo told Hertz. “We need to find a better way.”



ObieSafe reported the fall semester’s first COVID cases on campus on August 25. Out of 1,083 PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests—the most accurate tests available—only two people had registered positive. The 0.185 percent positivity rate was astounding. By comparison, Ohio’s Public Health Advisory System listed Lorain County at Level 3, for very high exposure and spread.

By now, Gravens had joined the president’s office and COVID team. Emily Speerbrecher, a longtime Oberlin employee, had transferred from the advancement office to assist the team and coordinate its response during what promised to be a hectic academic year. The team was thrilled with the initial results from the tests. Equally important, the test results were coming back 48 to 72 hours after the lab had received them. That had been Tempus’ goal.

So far, so good, Hertz thought.

As if to reinforce their good fortune, ObieSafe released a video of a Zoom call with President Ambar, Lorain County Public Health Commissioner Covell, and Oberlin City Manager Rob Hillard answering questions about how to remain safe during the pandemic.

By the September 1 ObieSafe Weekly email, the team had tested the entire campus community. Most results were back. Out of 2,640 tests conducted, only six had registered positive. President Ambar had feared the college would begin the semester with a positivity rate above 5 percent; the college was registering a rate of 0.23 percent.

The communications had worked. The students, faculty, and staff had listened.



Since her personal expression of anguish over the killing of George Floyd in May, President Ambar had been considering

the concept of her Presidential Initiative.

The college community was eager to take its next steps in addressing the racial disparities and tensions increasingly evident across the country, as well as on Oberlin’s campus.

Already, as the summer had progressed, Athletic Director Winkelfoos and Deans Kamitsuka and Quillen had accelerated or initiated their own aggressive, in-depth measures to examine and improve understanding of race issues on campus.

“(R)ecent events have compelled us to build upon a tradition of leadership in social justice,” the college explained on a web page listing the work. “Our efforts are designed to support, to teach, and to lay the foundations for lasting change at Oberlin and across the nation.”

**President Ambar had feared the college would begin the semester with a positivity rate above 5 percent; the college was registering a rate of 0.23 percent.**

President Ambar applauded their efforts, even as she took the summer to think about how she wanted to build the initiative.

On August 28, before classes started for the fall semester, she announced the Presidential Initiative on Racial Equity and Diversity and the formation of a 21-member commission of faculty, staff, and students.

“The Presidential Initiative will elevate and advance Oberlin’s more than 180-year commitment to the education and rights of Blacks in America and will provide the framework for faculty and students to address issues of violence, police-community relationships, and racial injustices,” the announcement said.

In her charge to the commission, President Ambar wrote: “The work of dismantling the vestiges of white supremacy, anti-Black policies, and gender inequality has long been embedded in the promise of Oberlin College.”

She also announced a partnership with Shaun Harper of the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center and one of the nation’s foremost experts on racial culture on college

campuses, who would help Oberlin understand and improve upon its approach to race on campus.

President Ambar named Meredith Gadsby, associate professor of Africana studies and comparative American studies, and Dean Quillen as cochairs of the commission.

“There are national moments that call upon all of us to gather our energies and take hold of moral missions, and this is one of those moments,” President Ambar said in the announcement. “Once again, we should assess ourselves and the role we play in educating our students to go out into the world to act upon the change that we want to see manifested in it.”



### MEMBERS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION

- **Carmen Twillie Ambar**, President, ex officio
- **Meredith Gadsby**, Special Assistant to the President on Racial Equity and Diversity; Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Comparative American Studies; President, Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars; and Commission Cochair
- **Bill Quillen**, Dean of the Conservatory and Commission Cochair
- **Corey Barnes '98**, Robert S. Danforth Associate Professor of Religion and Chair of Religion
- **Manuel Carballo**, Vice President and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid
- **André Douglas**, Area Coordinator for Multicultural and Identity-Based Communities
- **Justin Emeka '95**, Associate Professor of Theater and Africana Studies
- **Jenny Garcia**, Assistant Professor of Politics and Comparative American Studies
- **Dana Hamdan**, Executive Director of the Career Development Center and Associate Dean of Students
- **Henry Hicks '21**
- **Chris Jenkins**, Associate Dean for Academic Support and Liaison to the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Deputy Title IX and Equity Coordinator
- **David Kamitsuka**, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences
- **Gunnar Kwakye**, Associate Professor of Neuroscience
- **Kristina Mani**, Associate Professor of Politics and Chair of Latin American Studies
- **Jasmine Mitchell '21**
- **Jan Miyake '96**, Associate Professor of Music Theory and Division Director, Music Theory
- **Rebecca Mosely**, Director for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and Title IX Coordinator
- **Katelyn Poetker '23**
- **Meredith Raimondo**, Vice President and Dean of Students
- **Alexa Still**, NEA Conservatory Associate Professor of Flute
- **Natalie Winkelfoos**, Delta Lodge Director of Athletics and Physical Education and Associate Vice President for Athletics Advancement



How long can an institution collectively hold its breath?

President Ambar watched the headlines as colleges struggled to contain the pandemic. Some succeeded in limiting the health risks and quarantined students in their dorms. Others decided to send students home. Stories spread of colleges neglecting their students or worse, putting them in harm's way. Among those with COVID-related challenges:

- New York University: students complained of poor food or no food in dorm rooms where they were quarantined.
- University of Michigan: faculty approved a vote of no confidence in its president, Mark Schlissel, in September.
- Miami (Ohio) University: thousands of students came down with COVID. One student even held a “COVID Party” after testing positive.
- University of Notre Dame: students were outraged by President Rev. John Jenkins’ decision not to wear a mask when meeting with President Trump.

The list was chilling and long.

President Ambar took special note of the College of Wooster, a peer institution that sent most of its students home after a severe outbreak in October.

That could happen to anyone. That could happen to us, she thought.



President Ambar did not think it possible, but within weeks, Oberlin's community actually settled into a kind of rhythm. Students and faculty focused on academic delivery, albeit through masks and at a distance of at least 6 feet.

Testing continued in Williams Field House. The nurses also administered thousands of flu shots, which were mandatory this year for students and recommended for faculty and staff. Student activities were regulated, but a social life evolved that was safe and for the most part adhered to the Community Agreement.

Every Friday and Saturday in the fall, conservatory jazz students performed a concert at the Clark Bandstand on Tappan Square. The crowd that gathered wore masks and remained physically distant.

New vendor AVI received praise for the quality of its grab-and-go meals. Students eager to take advantage of the good weather during an extended fall season ate their meals outside, many gathering on Wilder Bowl and Tappan Square.

There were the occasional violations of the Community Agreement. A small minority of students held parties in dorm rooms or engaged in other behavior that was unsafe in the midst of pandemic. A handful were sent home and asked to complete the semester remotely.

Some students neglected or declined to get flu shots; at times employees objected to being tested or wearing their masks.

Each week, one or two people tested positive for COVID, triggering the attention of Gravens and her contact tracing team of 16 people, all of whom she had trained.

But overall, incidents were few.

The presidential election regularly penetrated the campus conversation. Raimondo, Assistant Vice President of Student Life Adrian Bautista, Director of Student Life Special Projects Wayne Wood, Director of Print and Publications Kelly Viancourt, and others launched a program in October to help students understand the political tensions gripping the country. "OC Votes: Engaging in Democracy" expanded the college's get-out-the-vote effort to promote new forms of civic engagement.

"In keeping with Oberlin's commitment to the role of education in fostering vibrant democracy, OC Votes promotes student engagement with this election season using the academic and creative skills of a liberal arts and conservatory education," the effort's web page read. OC Votes sponsored discussions on self-care, voter registration, and participation education and held outdoor, physically spaced watch parties on Wilder Bowl for the presidential and vice presidential debates as well as for election night. After the election, a faculty panel addressed more than 50 participants on a Zoom call to discuss the ramifications of the vote.

By October, ObieSafe had developed a following and grown into the most popular feature on Oberlin's website. Illustrations by Beth Wolfensberger had become a favorite feature on campus.

## **President Ambar did not think it possible, but within weeks, Oberlin's community actually settled into a kind of rhythm.**

In one stretch of October, ObieSafe reported three straight weeks when no tests returned as positive. Even as the state of Ohio and Northeast Ohio overall struggled with keeping the virus at bay, it appeared the Oberlin community had figured out how to keep itself safe.

The community was calm until the afternoon of October 20, when Hertz received some worrisome news: six people had tested positive. Gravens' team was beginning its contact tracing work and would coordinate with Lorain County Public Health.

Many campuses were coping with dozens if not hundreds of cases at a time. But Hertz knew that to many in Oberlin, the news was going to feel like an outbreak. He wanted to get the information out quickly, before word leaked and rumors began to spread.

President Ambar distributed a statement by 7 p.m.

"This afternoon we received the results of 47 recent tests indicating that six people had a positive result; four of those people are students, one is a faculty member, and one is a staff member. We are following our established procedures, including notifying those who tested positive, transporting the students to isolation at the hotel, and providing appropriate

support for the faculty and staff members. Our contact tracing team has been notified and is beginning to reach out to people who may have been exposed.

This is not unexpected. As the cold and flu season began, and our state's cases rose in number, the possibilities increased that we would have cases on campus. But, there are things we can do to prevent matters from progressing and we need your support."

Before she went home that evening, President Ambar notified Canavan. We won't know for about two weeks whether we caught this in time, she told him. She didn't know if this would be the outbreak that would add Oberlin to "the list."

Gravens' team worked overtime to determine the potential extent of the exposure. Within 24 hours, Gravens called Hertz with good news.

"We think we have contained it," Gravens said. "We have put two students into quarantine. We don't think we have any other exposure. I've confirmed it with Lorain County Public Health. Now we wait and see."

Hertz hung up, relieved. But he was still dealing with rumors, which were spreading quickly. Despite efforts to protect people's privacy, students had been calling one another. Names had been shared. Word was out on campus, and students as well as faculty were concerned about exposure. Some faculty canceled classes.

"For privacy reasons, the contact tracers will only notify you if you were exposed or your students were exposed," Hertz told one faculty member who called to discuss his COVID fears. "I understand your concern, but it does appear we have very limited exposure."

Hertz finished the call. What would it have been like if we had a real outbreak? he thought.



Ohio was limping toward the holidays. Governor DeWine's daily warning of COVID's spread grew increasingly plaintive. The campus appeared to President Ambar to be an island of calm amid choppy waters.

In early November, as the nation gathered for the election, Gravens started to notice troubling signs. Faculty and staff were being exposed to COVID off campus, and then bringing the virus back to Oberlin.

The timing was problematic. On November 3, thousands of registered voters were expected on campus to cast their ballots

at the polling location the college hosted every year. Hertz and Senior Associate Director of Athletics Creg Jantz had worked with the Lorain County Board of Elections to relocate the polls from Philips Gymnasium to the Heisman Field House to reduce students' exposure, but the threat remained. In addition, OC Votes was hosting a watch party on Wilder Bowl on election night. That could be a bad combination, coming just weeks before students were to leave campus on November 25.

Gravens was concerned that if the campus experienced an outbreak, some number of students could spend Thanksgiving in isolation in the hotel. Others could unknowingly travel home with the virus and expose their families. Neither scenario was appealing.

"We just need to get past the election and get the students home safely," Gravens thought.



Have we really made it through the semester?

President Ambar was reading the headline of ObieSafe Weekly's November 10 issue: "Keep up the good work to avoid quarantine before Thanksgiving."

Students were leaving campus in about two weeks. Two weeks! Where had the semester gone?

**"We think we have contained it. We have put two students into quarantine. We don't think we have any other exposure. I've confirmed it with Lorain County Public Health. Now we wait and see."**

—KATIE GRAVENS, COVID-19 CAMPUS HEALTH COORDINATOR

Classes would be remote after Thanksgiving, and students would take their finals from home. Only international students and those who couldn't leave for personal reasons were to remain on campus. That was for the best, President Ambar thought. The staff needed the rest before the spring semester resumed January 7.

The Oberlin community had held, she thought. She wasn't

quite ready to declare the semester a success. Too much could happen in the remaining days. But in many ways, the community, and the institution itself, had performed beyond her expectations. We actually may emerge from the pandemic stronger and more resilient, she thought.

As she had throughout the past several weeks, she reviewed her mental checklist of Oberlin's progress.

- Enrollment remained relatively strong. It appeared that Oberlin would have such demand for space in the spring that ResEd would struggle to find a room on campus for each student who wanted to attend. Sure, sophomores were leaving for a semester, but the juniors—those poor juniors hadn't been on campus since March!—were returning. Initial application numbers for the fall were promising, with many categories surpassing pre-Covid numbers.
- Staff had continued to implement the One Oberlin plan, although the pandemic had knocked the budgeting way out of whack. But instead of a pandemic-fueled fiscal year loss of \$30 million, Vazquez-Skillings was now anticipating a \$20 million loss. President Ambar felt a sense of accomplishment that she had yet to lay off a single employee because of the pandemic. "Any other year, a deficit like that would trigger job losses," she thought. "This year, I'll take it."
- Despite some alumni concerns about the negotiations with the UAW, support had remained strong. The college's main fundraising effort, All In for Oberlin, had raised \$932,000 (a new record, and roughly \$117,000 more than the previous year).
- The Junior Practicum had been a resounding success. Alumni and board engagement had enhanced the program's value for students as well as the institution. Hamdan and Tania Boster, executive director of the Center for the Engaged Liberal Arts, had indicated that SOAR had similar promise. Extraordinary work! President Ambar thought.
- Talks with OSCA had accelerated recently, and there was hope that an agreement would be reached before the end of the semester. We may end up with a stronger, more stable coop association, she thought.
- The layered health care strategy had exceeded expectations. Testing had been expensive, but the partnership with Mercy and Tempus had served the campus well. Hockenhull and his group had seen to that! A new testing strategy was ready to begin in January.
- Athletics remained a challenge. Testing was moving out of the Williams Field House so athletes could train there during the spring semester. Hertz had arranged to shift testing to Hales Gym. Still, parents and athletes were upset at restrictions on their sports, and it did not appear that a spring season for any sport was likely.
- Faculty and staff were preparing for the second semester of the three-semester plan. Students were to begin returning January 2, and classes were to resume January 7. ResEd was nearly done with move-in preparations and assignments. President Ambar chuckled to herself. "We called this the Crazy David Option. Was that only seven months ago?"
- The Presidential Initiative was well underway. Gadsby and Quillen were focused and moving forward. The work with Harper already had paid off. Oberlin had collaborated with USC and four other liberal arts colleges to create the Liberal Arts College Racial Equity Leadership Alliance (LACRELA), a national coalition of liberal arts institutions to examine race and equity on campuses. President Ambar's aggressive agenda to lead the examination of social responsibility was moving forward.
- And despite the disruption of the pandemic, President Ambar was reassured that Kamitsuka and Vazquez-Skillings remained focused on the challenges posed by the sharp demographic downturn of college-bound students anticipated in 2025.

President Ambar was almost ready to exhale. Almost. Her leadership team had come together in both expected and unexpected ways.

- Deans Kamitsuka and Quillen had demonstrated the academic vision and considerable organizational skills the year had required.
- Varner, Raimondo, Vazquez-Skillings, Jones, and Hertz had worked together to strengthen the strategic impact of the college's policies and communications. Vazquez-Skillings was in the midst of developing the multimillion dollar comprehensive and capital improvement plan tied to One Oberlin that would forever change the college.
- Alumni relations remained strong under Grzesiak, even though travel and face-to-face meetings—the staples of the advancement team—had been canceled for the year.
- Carballo and Weiss continued to provide strong enrollment projections for both arts and sciences and the conservatory.

- Under horrendous circumstances for athletics, Winkelfoos had held together her coaching staff and still provided hope to an athletics program that had been impacted more than any other area at Oberlin.

Is this long winter nearly over? President Ambar thought. She longed to focus less on the business of COVID and more on the business of higher education, to tackle the “fourth-year” problems in her five-year plan.

She realized that Governor DeWine had called a press conference for the next day. The higher education community network in Ohio was quiet. No one seemed to think he was going to announce anything that would dramatically impact Ohio’s colleges and universities.

But the governor had to address the COVID spread, which continued to worsen. Potentially, he could shut down the economy once again.

By the time DeWine began his press conference in the late afternoon of November 11, President Ambar and Hertz were the only people in the president’s office. Each watched the live-streamed press conference on their computer, alone in their office so they could sit without wearing masks.

DeWine announced new health orders due to rising COVID spread and warned that if trends didn’t improve, he would have to consider closing restaurants and other businesses.

We need to get this under control, President Ambar agreed privately.

DeWine then praised Ohio’s colleges and universities for sending students home at Thanksgiving and asking them to finish the fall semester remotely.

“I also want to thank them for reducing the number of students on campus. That has made a significant difference in helping keep the cases lower, and our campuses safer,” DeWine said. “But unless we dramatically slow the community’s spread of this virus, our higher educational institutions in Ohio may have to remain virtual when school opens in January.”

DeWine continued his press conference, but President Ambar paid scant attention. She heard nothing from Hertz’s office. After DeWine concluded, President Ambar put on her mask. She rose from her desk and made her way to the adjacent office of her chief of staff.

As she walked into his office, she saw he was expecting her. His mask was already on.

“Oh shit!” they said together. “Oh shit!”



***Coming in winter 2021: How Oberlin went the distance and reopened campus.***

Six days after she announced that Oberlin would host students in the fall and initiate a three-semester academic calendar, President Ambar led a retreat over Zoom for her leadership team.

The guest speaker was Peter Rea, vice president of integrity and ethics at Parker Hannifin Corporation and a coauthor of *Exception to the Rule: The Surprising Science of Character-Based Culture, Engagement, and Performance*.

In his book, Rea and coauthors James K. Stoller of the Cleveland Clinic and Alan Kolp of Baldwin Wallace College speak of virtue-based, highly effective leadership in a world filled with uncertainty. They propose that effective leaders learn to focus on what they can control in “a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Since turbulence is the new normal, the choice to adapt to instability is not really a choice after all. Instability is our future, though adapting to this new norm is anything but easy.”

Rea’s call to action was precisely what Oberlin’s leaders needed to hear in the summer of 2020, as they embarked on the greatest collective challenge of their careers.

The *novel coronavirus* pandemic presented an unimaginable degree of uncertainty, tumult, and tragedy in 2020. VUCA dominated every aspect of our lives this year, and it promises to remain omnipresent in 2021.

Oberlin’s attempt to fulfill its mission in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic is an ongoing effort with an uncertain conclusion. Much has gone right in the work to host students on campus and maintain academic excellence, while keeping Oberlin’s constituents safe and healthy. But much can still go awry. It would be rash, even irresponsible, to declare victory in the midst of this unrelenting challenge.

As of this writing, in the final weeks of 2020, the pandemic rages across Ohio and most of the United States. Promising vaccines are expected in a matter of weeks, but the monumental challenges of distribution and public acceptance inject uncertainty into even this degree of hope.

Since Governor Mike DeWine’s November 11 press conference, President Ambar announced a nearly month-long delay of spring semester. Students are to return in late January, with classes beginning the first week of February. The hope is that the delay will slow the spread of COVID after the holidays.

Meanwhile, so many questions remain, eliminating any illusions of control.

Will vaccinations be required of the campus community, and how will people respond? When, if ever, will we be able to declare a “post-pandemic” life? How will students, faculty, and staff react as the pandemic enters its second year?

And what will be forever changed? What will the long-term financial impact be, on Oberlin and all of higher education? What academic innovations, piloted as emergency measures, will live on after the virus has receded? How will student expectations and attitudes be impacted?

VUCA.

Board Chair Chris Canavan often says that absent students, Oberlin has no reason to exist.

What is certain is the innovations of 2020 that served students will remain and make Oberlin stronger. The Junior Practicum. The Presidential Initiative on Racial Equity and Diversity. The conservatory’s increased use of technology. Stage Left.

It also is clear that the experiences of 2020 impacted Oberlin’s leadership team in significant and lasting ways. Members speak of a more developed collaboration, increased courage to move quickly and decisively, and an enhanced sense of camaraderie and understanding. Equally important, they mention a candid honesty, a sense of humor, and a disregard for hierarchy. Upon reviewing the text of this narrative, all cited amazement at the number of challenges Oberlin faced and the amount of work required to maintain a small liberal arts campus even as the federal response faltered.

When asked what they learned from the experiences of 2020, leaders responded with the following observations:

- It was this team’s great cheer and steady perspective that made the long days and many months without a day off not only bearable but often enjoyable.
- People are not focused on meaningless criteria such as degrees or position in the institution. There is robust discussion about each strategy.
- The president is strong and confident. When she disagrees with an idea, she gives her rationale but frequently says, “I’m willing to have you convince me to change my mind.”

- The leadership team is confident about their area of expertise, but they regularly seek input from those who have a different knowledge-base and perspective.
- The team deeply cares for students and wants them to have a robust academic experience.
- Direct, thoughtful, communication and decisive leadership is key in a crisis. At a time when all of our various constituents were fearful for so many reasons, there was no doubt that this institution—and its president and senior staff—had a plan and was determined to execute it.
- Some people will complain no matter what you do. Don't take it personally and move on.
- Sometimes leadership must act as a speedboat when higher education traditionally wants to be a barge.
- There are threats on the horizon, such as the well-documented demographic shift expected to hit higher education in 2025. Hopefully, what we learned from this experience will help us address those challenges.
- Our students really came through—not only should we be proud, but I wish the world knew that these are the types of students that come to Oberlin.

Given that Oberlin exists for its students, they should have the last word in the tale of Oberlin in 2020.

In a September 4 editorial in the *Oberlin Review* headlined “Keeping Faith in Obies,” the newspaper’s editors praised Oberlin’s leadership for their efforts to bring students back to campus safely. Yet they acknowledged the uncertainty—the VUCA nature—of the situation.

“There may be a world in which you can put roughly 1,900 students on a college campus in Oberlin, Ohio, during the COVID-19 pandemic and it works. There also may not be. There are too many variables this year to trust in guarantees,” the editorial read. “We don’t yet know if this grand experiment can work anywhere, but we believe that if anyone can make it happen, it’s Obies. Our care for our community and our commitment to accountability makes us strong.”

The editorial board concluded: “We hold each other accountable to be better people, to fight for a more equitable world, and to put our money where our mouths are. It’s one of the reasons a lot of us came to Oberlin in the first place: to grow and learn in an environment where we are constantly challenged to be better and make the world better. That commitment might be just what it takes to save us if we do it right.”

—David Hertz, December 2020